

# Alternative Realities: Myths, Lies, Truths, and Half-Truths

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Abbes Maazaoui, Editor

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**Alternative Realities  
Myths, Lies, Truths, and Half-  
Truths**

**Abbes Maazaoui, *Editor***

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## ***The Lincoln Humanities Journal***

**(LHJ)**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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### **Introduction**

ABBES MAAZAOUI, Editor 1

### **PART ONE. FACTS AND/OR FICTION 20**

Conspiracy Theories, Storytelling and Forgers:  
Towards a Paradoxical Ethics of Truth in  
Contemporary European Fiction  
LOÏSE LELEVÉ  
Université Rennes 2 (univ-rennes), France 21

A Writer's Avatar: Self-Fictionalization in James Frey's  
*A Million Little Pieces*  
OUASSILA KORICHI  
Ecole Normale Supérieure of Laghouat, Algeria 46

Mythe et vérité, vérité du mythe: Le problème de la  
forme de la vérité dans la discussion de Cassirer par  
Merleau-Ponty  
LAURENT BALAGUÉ  
Université Paris-Est, France 60

### **Two: ARTS OF ILLUSION 75**

Evolution of a Myth Live: the Poppy Project Example  
CAMILLE DUPLAA  
University Paris-Nanterre, France 76

Mythologie du féminisme et du socialisme  
accoquinés sur les écrans en République  
populaire de Chine: 古為今用  
RAYMOND DELAMBRE  
AIR architecture, Paris  
Paris XI, France 91

Leurre littéraire et mensonge romanesque ABBES MAAZAOUI Lincoln University, Pennsylvania	109
<b>PART THREE. WOMEN: MASTERS OF DECEIT?</b>	<b>124</b>
Tue-moi, belle tentatrice! Femmes médiévales et femmes fatales dans la littérature moderne OLIVIER WICKY University of Lausanne, Switzerland	125
De la traîtresse à la sorcière: imaginaire et représentations de l'héroïne rusée condamnée au bûcher dans la littérature courtoise médiévale MARCO J. PROST University of Lausanne, Switzerland	142
<b>PART FOUR: FINDING/DISGUIISING THE TRUTH</b>	<b>163</b>
Mining the Riches of Sylvia Plath's Manuscripts: "Finisterre" as a Case Study IKRAM HILI University of Monastir, Tunisia	164
Men of Ice and Steel: Richard Kuklinski, Clark Kent, and the Fortress of Identity DAVID AMADIO Lincoln University, Pennsylvania	177
The Gaze: Deception and Revelation of Hidden Truth in Ferdinand Oyono's <i>Une vie de boy</i> , and Alain Robbe-Grillet's <i>La Jalousie</i> EMMA CHEBINOU Florida State University, Florida	191
Réalité et transculturalité dans <i>La Pharaone</i> de Hédi Bouraoui SAMIRA ETOUIL Moulay Ismail University, Morocco	207

<b>PART FIVE: ALTERNATIVE ARTS FOR ALTERNATIVE TRUTHS</b>	<b>221</b>
Alternative Realities in the Arts or the Impossible Proof of Aesthetic Perception BILIANA VASSILEVA University of Lille, France	222
Stand-up Comedy as an Alternative Theatre Reality in Nigeria EDWARD EGBO IMO University Of Port Harcourt, Nigeria	233
Crossing Over the <i>come-no-go</i> Divide: A Historical Discourse on Relations between the English-Speaking Regions of Cameroon, 1996- 2017 JULIUS BONGKOROG University of Yaounde I, Cameroon	250
<b>ABSTRACTS</b>	<b>268</b>
<b>NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS</b>	<b>279</b>
<b>CALL FOR ARTICLES FOR 2019</b>	<b>285</b>
<b>SUBMISSION GUIDELINES</b>	<b>287</b>
<b>PUBLICATIONS OF <i>THE LINCOLN HUMANITIES JOURNAL</i></b>	<b>289</b>
<b>SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION</b>	<b>290</b>

## *Introduction*

ABBES MAAZAOU  
Editor

According to philosopher Lee McIntyre, we are living in a “post-truth” world, in which “alternatives facts”<sup>1</sup> replace actual facts, and infotainment, wishful thinking and feelings have more weight than objective evidence. It was not surprising that in 2016, the *Oxford Dictionaries* selected “post-truth” as the international word of the year “due to its prevalence in the context of that year’s Brexit referendum and media coverage of the U.S. presidential election” (“Post-truth politics”). In the post-truth era, observes Ralph Keyes “borders blur between truth and lies, honesty and dishonesty, fiction and non-fiction. Deceiving others becomes a challenge, a game, and ultimately a habit.” In a recent speech at a rally held at a north-side high school in Milwaukee, Barack Obama recognized this change: “Throughout human history, certainly throughout American history, politicians have exaggerated. But what we have not seen before in our recent public life is politicians just blatantly, repeatedly, baldly, shamelessly lying. Making stuff up” (Herndon n.pag.). In fact, according to Ralph Keyes, “In the post-truth era we don’t just have truth and lies, but a third category of ambiguous statements that are not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie. *Enhanced truth* it might be called. *Neo-truth*. *Soft truth*. *Faux truth*. *Truth lite*” (15). Furthermore, “deception has become commonplace at all levels of contemporary life” (5).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The word is coined by Kellyanne Conway, Counselor to U.S. President Donald Trump.

<sup>2</sup> This rise in lying has been accompanied by an increase in “avoidance mechanisms” and euphemisms: “We no longer tell lies. Instead we



Labeling our epoch as a post-truth era would suggest that there had been, before now, a ‘truth era,’ a period in which truth was well defined, agreed-upon and universally embraced, but the concept of truth has never been free from endless discussions and debates in several disciplines and contexts, including philosophy, art, religion, politics, and science.<sup>3</sup> The age-old questions—What does truth mean? and Is this true?—have for millennia occupied truth-seekers everywhere, not only within the sciences but also in everyday life.<sup>4</sup> The past itself has not been immune to debates about the validity of its own facts: for some, the past is a cohesive repository of truths; for others, it is a contested period of conflicting memories and competing truth claims.<sup>5</sup> Today is no different.<sup>6</sup>

In this introduction to the special issue on *Alternatives Realities*, I will briefly discuss the fragile nature of truth, the predominance of deceptive practices, the dialectics of truths and lies within the context of the self-deceived human brain, as well as ways to remedy the “trouble with reality” and truth, to use the title of a recent book by Brooke Gladstone.

### Knowing the Truth

“Truth” is a neutral term, in that it distinguishes between the normal (unmarked) behavior and the supposedly less common variants such as untruths, lies, half-truths, and falsehoods. In everyday life, truth is a given; its lack is not.

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‘misspeak.’ We ‘exaggerate.’ We ‘exercise poor judgment’ . . .” (13). For a detailed list of similar colorful words, see Keyes (15-16).

<sup>3</sup> Just to cite few recent books: *A Short History of Truth: Consolations for a Post-Truth World* by Julian Baggini; *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World* by James Ball; *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* by Michiko Kakutani; *The Trouble with Reality: A Ruminations on Moral Panic in Our Time* by Brooke Gladstone.

<sup>4</sup> About the reality of lying in everyday life, see Robert Feldman’s book *The Liar in Your Life*.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Maazaoui, *The Arts of Memory*, xii-xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Keyes admits that “Even if more lies are being told today than ever, I don’t think there’s any greater human propensity to tell lies. What I do believe is that an age-old willingness to deceive others is being facilitated in new ways” (18).

While it remains elusive, it shines by its absence: “Many human activities depend upon the concept [of truth], where its nature as a concept is assumed rather than being a subject of discussion” (Wikipedia, “Truth”). Richard Feynman writes of this paradox: “We never are definitely right, we can only be sure we are wrong.”<sup>7</sup>

Dictionaries define the word “truth” as “that which is true or in accordance with fact or reality” (*OED*). This definition is problematic for many reasons.<sup>8</sup> It is not just that a fact may be untrue, but that things are not always what they seem. To illustrate the multi-layered perception of the truth, two examples from world literature will be used. The first is “The Story of Abou Hassan, or the Sleeper Awakened” in *The Arabian Nights*. Abou Hassan is the victim of a practical joke by the caliph, Haroon al Rasheed. After being taken in his sleep to the palace, and being treated for one day as the caliph, he is taken back to his home the next evening after he falls asleep. Once awake, he struggles mentally and legally for weeks, for he does not know who he is or how to act: the sultan or just Abou Hassan. Reality and truth remain multilayered and illusory for him: which truth or reality is truer or more real than the other? His, his mother’s, or the prankster’s? The reader is led to wonder whether the truth is a mental, subjective phenomenon or a reality shaped by multiple interpretations. Torn between conflicting situations equally (un)real and (un>true, Abou Hassan reckons: “I have been deceived by a dream; but by so extraordinary a one, and so like to truth, that I venture to affirm any other person, to whom such a thing might have happened, would have been guilty of as great or greater extravagancies” (“The story of Abou Hassan” n.pag.).

Marcel Proust recasts this same story in his masterpiece *La Recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*). The opening paragraphs of the novel play on the merging of fact and fiction, past and present, truth and falsehood. Marcel, the hero/narrator, is an insomniac, and because his sleep is often intermittent, he can never tell

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Wikipedia*. Cf. “Truth.”

<sup>8</sup> In general, there are four philosophical definitions of truth: correspondence theory, coherence theory, pragmatism and subjectivity. Here, we are interested in the first type of definition.

where he is, or who he is. And, for an unsettling moment, he experiences, similar to Abou Hassan, a loss of identity and locus: “When I wake up, my mind, in a state of agitation, would try, without succeeding, to figure out where I was. Everything would be turning around me in the dark, things, countries, the years ... [My body and memory would] hesitate at the threshold of time and form” (I.6<sup>9</sup>; my translation<sup>10</sup>). Not knowing where he is, he gets lost in time, forgets his age, and cannot tell what time of day it is, or which bedroom or city he is in. This major theme in Proust’s work is recast at every major turning point in the novel<sup>11</sup> and testifies not only to Proust’s fear of amnesia, but also to his belief in the fragility of our memory and ultimately of the truth, which can be lost or altered as quickly as a fitful night’s sleep.<sup>12</sup>

These examples illustrate the fragility of the truth and hammer home the idea that “all truths are contextual”: they involve many objective as well as subjective layers and suggest that there are as many shades of truth as there are shades of reality (Bost 624). To appreciate the full complexity of the truth, it may be useful to point out that truth can be expressed only within a communicative context. In other words, truth is meaningful only in relation with other people and is essentially a linguistic phenomenon. As such, it is thus the object of constant re-writing and re-telling: after all, ‘telling the truth’ is what everyone is expected to do. Truth is also self-explanatory and self-contained, a sort of “being-in-itself,” an all-or-nothing proposition: one is either truthful or lying.<sup>13</sup> Typical of this is “the ancient ‘liar paradox,’ attributed to the Greek philosopher Epimenides, in which a sentence says of itself

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<sup>9</sup> To refer to the three volumes of Proust’s novel, the Roman numeral is used to indicate the volume number, while the Arabic numeral is used to refer to the page number.

<sup>10</sup> All translations of Proust are mine. “Mon esprit s’agitait pour chercher, sans y réussir à savoir où j’étais. Tout tournait autour de moi dans l’obscurité, les choses, les pays, les années.... Ma pensée... hésitait au seuil des temps et des formes ...”

<sup>11</sup> See Maazaoui, *Proust et la clausturation*, p. 14-16.

<sup>12</sup> Proust felt the urgent need to write as a means to memorialize the past, and to preserve loved memories of places and peoples, for fear all would be lost forever.

<sup>13</sup> Half-truths, soft truths, enhanced truths, etc. are forms of lies and do not qualify as the ‘truth.’

that it is false, thereby apparently being true if it is false and false if it is true" (*Britannica*, "Truth").<sup>14</sup> All these contextual constraints make truth labile and vulnerable to manipulation, disguise, memory limitation, emotions or simply ignorance.

Furthermore, while truth may set truth-sayers free, it makes them vulnerable to others according to the authors of *The Art of Strategy*: telling the truth "might be against their [people's] interests . . . The greater the conflict, the less the message can be trusted" (Dixit & Nalebuff 236). Consequently, the authors conclude that it may not be wise to rely always on others to tell the truth. Truth may fall victim to exogenous factors such as self-interest and desire to manipulate and exert power. In fact, truth is intimately tied to deception. As Harry Frankfurt writes, "it is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth" (n. pag.).

### **Deceptive Realities**

We all learn at a young age to be truthful and honest. Yet, "to ignore deception, warns Victor Niederhoffer, is a sure ticket to disaster" (217). "Deceit is ubiquitous" as well as "concealing, decoys, distraction, playing dead, Trojan horses. They're key to winning or surviving . . ." (225, 218).<sup>15</sup> As it is often said, truth is the first casualty of war. It is also the casualty of any encounter, no matter how casual it is. Noelle Rodriguez and Alan Rygrave speculate that during any conversation, "lying is not only a possible action, but a preferred one" (qtd. in Keyes 5).

This seems to be true not only for men, but for all other living creatures: they all "practice[d] deception as a regular survival technique" (225):

Viruses use it to invade bodies. Ants use it to enslave other ants. Moths use it to evade hungry birds. Generals use it to defeat brilliant generals. Soldiers use it to live another day. Girls and boys use it to attract each other. Con men use it to profit from

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/truth-philosophy-and-logic>.

<sup>15</sup> For those who watch World Cup (soccer), tennis tournaments and American football, it is easy to recognize some of these strategies.

others' labor. Magicians deceive audiences who know that the illusion is a trick. Great financiers use it to break suckers they don't even remember the next day. Poker players use it to bluff. Economists use it as the key variable in explaining the organization of the firm. Speculators use it to shake weak hands out of a position at just the wrong time. (Niederhoffer 225)

Niederhoffer reminds us that scientists concluded long ago that "the main evolutionary reason for the development of the large primate brain was engagement in deceptive activities that enhanced the primates' ability to find and hold onto a mate . . . [and] to defeat one ruse with another" (223).

Fundamentally, deception is the act of creating an alternate truth with a disguised intention.<sup>16</sup> Niederhoffer gives the example of the Virginia admirer from *The Life of Stonewall Jackson*:

A favorite device with him was to institute inquiries in the presence of the crowd around him as to roads and watercourses in a direction which he did not intend to take; even to order maps to be prepared, and roads laid down, as though for instant use. Having thus set every gossip talking and predicting his intentions, he would calmly march directly in the opposite direction.

"Mystery, mystery, is the secret of success!"  
(217)

As a widespread phenomenon and prevalent practice in many fields, it is no surprise that deception takes various forms: inverting and perverting the truth; blurring the difference between truths and lies; fusing fact and fiction; injecting or concealing misleading details; or simply inventing an alternate fictional world. It also uses non-verbal strategies such as "camouflage," "disruptive behavior," "change in tempo," "mimicry," and "playing dead"

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<sup>16</sup> Or, as chess Grand Master Znosko-Borovsky puts it, deception is the art of "creating the belief, logically, that our intentions are otherwise than they seem" (cited by Niederhoffer 220).

(Niederhoffer 241).<sup>17</sup> Today's media present endless examples of such deceptive practices, from "conspiracism"<sup>18</sup> and false rumors to insidious attempts at compelling others to believe "alternative facts," regardless of the evidence.<sup>19</sup> It will be beyond the scope of this introduction to explore the details of these strategies.<sup>20</sup>

### **Art and the Dialectic of Truth and Lies**

In the human realm, deception is not limited to sports games, religions, mythologies, pseudoscience, or politics; "art itself may be defined as making a thing of one kind appear to be something of another kind" (Niederhoffer 226). It is not surprising that writers and artists are fascinated with the endless shades of truth and deception. We will focus briefly on two French writers who, among many, have grappled with the elusive intersection of lies and truth: Michel de Montaigne and Marcel Proust.

In his essay, "On Liars," Montaigne, the 16<sup>th</sup> century French essayist, describes the advantage all liars have over truth-tellers: "If, like the truth, a lie had only one face, we would be in better terms: for we would take for certain the opposite of what the liar would say. But the reverse of the truth has a hundred thousand figures and an indefinite field"

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<sup>17</sup> Niederhoffer provides an excellent analysis of these various deceptive strategies (217-241).

<sup>18</sup> cf. "Post-truth Politics" in *Wikipedia*.

<sup>19</sup> A timely example was published in *The Daily Beast* as I was final editing this introduction: "LINEAR THINKING: Inside the Flat Earth Conference, Where the World's Oldest Conspiracy Theory Is Hot Again" by Kelly Weill, documenting how "die-hards, grifters and trolls" have their own convention.

<sup>20</sup> In addition to Niederhoffer and Dixit & Nalebuff, see Bruce McComiskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* who analyzes a number of instances of "bullshit, fake news, feigned ethos, hyperbole, and other forms of post-truth rhetoric employed in recent political discourse"; Ryan Skinnell, ed. *Faking the News: What Rhetoric Can Teach Us About Donald J. Trump*; Moore, Alfred. "Imagining Conspiracies: Science under Suspicion"; Christopher Thresher-Andrews, "An Introduction into the World of Conspiracy"; Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*; and Lavocat, Françoise, *Fait et fiction : pour une frontière*.

(I, IX 58).<sup>21</sup> To account for these complexities, Montaigne recognizes the need to be proficient on how “to say only half, to say confusedly, [and] to say discordantly.”<sup>22</sup> Proust will make these themes the subject of *Remembrance of Things Past*. Fascinated by what Gerard Genette calls the “indirect language,” the Proustian narrator analyzes at length the tortuous relationships between language and lying, and gradually learns how to decipher the complex connections that truths establish with lies, look-alike truths, look-alike lies, and the many shades of sincerity (III 179-181, 189-191, 699-700). For Proust, truth has as many shades as lies.

Both Montaigne and Proust are particularly attentive to the deep reasons behind most lies: the desire to pretend to be someone else and dissimulate a socially-compromising trait (vice for Montaigne; forbidden sexual orientations, love and snobbery for Proust).

Because, says Montaigne, “we are . . . double in ourselves, which makes that what we believe, we do not believe it: and we cannot get rid of what we condemn” (II XVI 657).<sup>23</sup> Proust makes a similar observation, regarding the “[bad habit] of denouncing in others [those] defects that are precisely similar to those we have. But it is always about these defects that we [infallibly] talk” (I 743).<sup>24</sup> Montaigne says the same thing in his own way: “Those who conceal [their vice] to others, usually conceal it to themselves . . .

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<sup>21</sup> “Si comme la vérité, le mensonge n’avait qu’un visage, nous serions en meilleurs termes: car nous prendrions pour certain l’opposé de ce que dirait le menteur. Mais le revers de la vérité a cent mille figures et un champ indéfini” (I. IX. 37). All translations of Montaigne from French into English are mine.

<sup>22</sup> “Joint qu’à l’aventure ai-je quelque obligation particulière à ne dire qu’à demi, à dire confusément, à dire discordamment.” Cited by Mathieu-Castellani, 12 & 22. For a comprehensive study of these terms, see Mathieu-Castellani, *Montaigne ou la vérité du mensonge*. To refer to all these types of ambiguous yet prevalent distortions, we use terms such as “half-truths” or “alternative realities.”

<sup>23</sup> “Nous sommes [...] doubles en nous-mêmes, qui fait que ce que nous croyons, nous ne le croyons pas: et ne nous pouvons défaire de ce que nous condamnons” (*Montaigne* II, XVI 657).

<sup>24</sup> “Cette mauvaise habitude de dénoncer chez les autres les défauts précisément analogues à ceux qu’on a. Or, c’est toujours de ces défauts-là qu’on parle” (I, 743).

They withdraw it and disguise it to their own conscience “(III, V 887)<sup>25</sup>. In lying, we mostly lie to ourselves.

Both authors reflect on the ability of lies and truth to exchange places in an almost carnivalesque process. This is the case of “lies that become truth over time,” (Proust III 461)<sup>26</sup> truths that become lies, particularly those lies “made in good faith” (Montaigne’s “mentir de bonne foi”), or those truths that lose their value and need no longer be told (Proust III 461).<sup>27</sup> Montaigne acquiesces: “As much can make the fool who says truth as he who says falsity” (II, XVII 686).<sup>28</sup> He insists: “It is not always necessary to say everything, because that would be foolishness,” adding that “he who says everything, he saturates and disgusts us” (III, V 923).<sup>29</sup> However, as he acknowledges, the opposite is also true: “he who is afraid of expressing himself leads us to think that there is much more [than meets the eye]” (III, V 923).<sup>30</sup> The hero-narrator of *Remembrance of Things Past* will quickly learn this same rhetoric of truth: “One must refrain from expressing feelings that are too natural not to be implied” (I 767).<sup>31</sup> In short, truth does not always need to be told. It is, as linguists would say, an unmarked term.

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<sup>25</sup> “Ceux qui cèlent [leur vice] à autrui, le cèlent ordinairement à eux-mêmes... Ils le soustraient et déguisent à leur propre conscience” (Montaigne III, V 887).

<sup>26</sup> Another timely example was published in *The Washington Post* as I was finishing this introduction: “Nothing on this page is real”: How lies become truth in online America” by Eli Saslow, who shows that despite the blogger’s 14 disclaimers including “Nothing on this page is real,” “[Christopher] Blair’s site and his stories had become real, reinforcing people’s biases ... [and] amassing an audience of as many 6 million visitors each month who thought his posts were factual.” As for Proust, anticipating our times, he emphasizes on many occasions how lies prophetically become reality. See for example Vol. III 507.

<sup>27</sup> Proust emphasizes on many occasions how lying words become prophetic truths. See for example Vol. III 507.

<sup>28</sup> “Autant peut faire le sot celui qui dit vrai que celui qui dit faux” (Montaigne, II, XVII, p. 686).

<sup>29</sup> “Celui qui dit tout nous, il nous saoule et nous dégoûte; celui qui craint à s’exprimer nous achemine à en penser plus qu’il n’en y a” (Montaigne III, V, p. 923).

<sup>30</sup> “Celui qui craint à s’exprimer nous achemine à en penser plus qu’il n’en y a” (Montaigne III, V 923).

<sup>31</sup> “Il faut s’abstenir d’exprimer des sentiments trop naturels pour n’être pas sous-entendus” (I 767 ; see also III 742).



This complexity leads Proust to believe that lies, not truth, enrich the universe of the sensible intellectual (III 616). The rehabilitation of lying or “truth of the lie” to use the title of a book by Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani, stems from the fact that truth, like a treasure, is always hidden in daily life, disguised and inaccessible to the layperson. For Proust, masks are everywhere. Truth is never given; it is always an object of constant pursuit and continuous search. The artist’s function is therefore to dis-cover the truth, reveal it by interpreting ambiguous signs, deciphering enigmatic symbols, and seeing through the opaque glass of lies and half-truths. Examples in his novel include the concealed message of the hawthorns; the deep-buried snobbism of Legrandin; the raging subterranean homo-sado-masochistic tendencies of Charlus; and the falsely-glorified banal life of The Guermantes.<sup>32</sup> For Proust then, the art of lying is the preferred language of literature. Genette puts it thus: “If the first language was truthful, the second degree language would not have to exist” that is to say, no literature will be needed if people’s primary linguistic communication is truthful and transparent (294).<sup>33</sup>

### **The Self-deceived and Deceitful Human Brain**

Montaigne, perceptibly, ties the act of lying to that of remembering. Because of the complexity of lying, Montaigne agrees that “he who does not feel firm [about his own] memory, must not be involved with lying” (I, IX 57).<sup>34</sup> At the same time, he acknowledges that the defects of memory are too powerful to overcome. Not without some unease, he resigns himself to the fact that humans are destined to alter the truth and misrepresent the facts. Worse, they are condemned to fail miserably at lying, because, to borrow the

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<sup>32</sup> Like Jorge Luis Borges, Proust’s narrator seems to revel and “delight in the descriptive ironies of concealment and disclosures, where truth and fiction coincide” (Kennedy 210). For a modern version of this troubled reality/fiction, see *Les Falsificateurs*, a novel by Antoine Bello.

<sup>33</sup> “Si le langage premier était véridique, le langage second n’aurait pas lieu d’être” (*Figures II* 294).

<sup>34</sup> “Ce n’est pas sans raison, qu’on dit que ce qui ne se sent point assez ferme de mémoire, ne se doit pas mêler d’estre menteur.”

words of Abraham Lincoln, “No man has a good enough memory to be a successful” truth teller.

Psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist Daniel Schacter analyzed the “seven sins” that, based on his research, afflict memory, each of which is an obstacle to reaching and/or telling the truth: transience, absent-mindedness, persistence, bias, misattribution, blocking, and suggestibility: “The first three sins involve different types of forgetting, the next three refer to different types of distortions, and the final sin concerns intrusive recollections that are difficult to forget” (182). Other scholars have gone one step further by demonstrating that the human brain is often unable to handle the truth and is easily tricked to believe in obvious untruths. “Our wired-in cognitive biases make us feel that our conclusions are based on good reasoning even when they are not” (Keyes). In *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us*, Sara Gorman and Jack Gorman demonstrate that facts do not necessarily change people’s mind. They were particularly concerned “with those persistent beliefs which are not just demonstrably false but also potentially deadly, like the conviction that vaccines are hazardous” (Kolbert n.pag.).<sup>35</sup> This irrational persistence is attributable to human brain physiology. The Gormans observe that “we are rewarded for using confirmation bias by the powerful actions of dopamine in the pleasure centers of our brains. In other words, it feels good to ‘stick to our guns’ even if we are wrong” (135).

Based on observations like these, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio came to the conclusion that what we decide to be true or false, right or wrong, good or bad is mostly based on emotions and feelings. In other words, what we choose to regard as truth, reality, fact, evidence, rational thinking is simply based on a purely emotional decision.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Kolber’s excellent article “Why Facts Don’t Change Our Minds” is a review of *The Enigma of Reason*, *The Knowledge Illusion*, and *Denying to the Grave*. All three groundbreaking books were written before the 2016 presidential election in the US. Thanks to her contribution, these books are referenced in this section of the introduction.

<sup>36</sup> Damasio has described his discoveries in several books including *Descartes’ Error*, *The Feeling of What Happens*, *Looking for Spinoza*, and *Self Comes to Mind*.

While painful to hear, it is not farfetched to state that when all is said and done, each of us is nothing more than a “self-deceived animal,” one that also happens to engage in deceiving others (Paul 9). Mercier and Sperber brutally sum up this observation: “When we listen to others, what we want is honest information. When we speak to others, it is often in our interest to mislead them, not necessarily through straightforward lies but by at least distorting, omitting, or exaggerating information so as to better influence them in their opinion and in their action” (8). This lopsidedness “reflects the task that reason evolved to perform, which is to prevent us from getting screwed by the other members of our group . . . It’s no wonder, then, that today reason often seems to fail us” (Kolbert). As Mercier and Sperber observe, reason has not evolved fast enough to deal with some “modern environments”; for example:

Nowadays we are inundated with the opinions of people we will never meet: editorialists, anchormen, bloggers. We are also expected to have an opinion on many different topics—from politics to music to food—and to be able to defend this opinion when challenged. (249)

These are some “of [the] many cases in which the environment changed too quickly for natural selection to catch up” (249). Magicians are still able to use our mind’s own weaknesses to convince us of the reality of their tricks. Clever politicians, marketers, conspiracy theorists, and con men continue to prosper in spreading fake news, hyped-up harmful substances, misleading alternative facts, and selling to people, repeatedly and profitably, the Brooklyn Bridge, so to speak.<sup>37</sup>

One of the most pressing challenges that humanity faces today, mostly due to the Internet and social media, is

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<sup>37</sup> “George C. Parker (March 16, 1860–1936) was an American con man best known for his surprisingly successful attempts to ‘sell’ the Brooklyn Bridge. He made his living conducting illegal sales of property he did not own, often New York’s public landmarks, to unwary immigrants... His methods have passed into popular culture, giving rise to phrases such as ‘and if you believe that, I have a bridge to sell you,’ a popular way of expressing a belief that someone is gullible” (Wikipedia).

the alarming tendency to skirt the truth and embrace lies and false beliefs. McIntyre suggests that we must fight back against post-truth logic and understand its nihilistic underpinnings. Others suggest offering college courses on “Bullshit” and training students to recognize it, not only in others but also in themselves, thus inoculating them against its harmful effects (Bergstrom & West).

Along the same line, Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach observe that bias, “knowledge illusion,” faulty beliefs, and errors of judgment are due to the fact that people do not realize how clueless they are: “Individual knowledge is remarkably shallow, only scratching the surface of true complexity of the world” (4). So, nudging people to realize that “they are more ignorant than they think they are . . . may be the only form of thinking that will shatter the illusion of explanatory depth and change people’s attitudes” (8, 179). Others disagree. “Providing people with accurate information doesn’t seem to help; they simply discount it” (Kolbert).

Furthermore, considering the emotional nature of what is dubbed “truth” and “reality,” Sara Gorman and her father suggest using emotions instead of reason as both a tool of persuasion and a means of resisting post-truth muddied logic. This may not be the most rational or scientific method, but is probably the only effective strategy of establishing a new-not-yet-born world of truth. Because it is difficult to fight “La forza del falso,” Umberto Eco and others have reached a similar conclusion; as Loïse Lelevé writes in this collection:

A more subtle approach would be to fight fiction with fiction. If what makes both forgeries and conspiracy theories so powerful is their intrinsic narrativity, then a narrative demystification of their biased claims is more likely to affect the reader than another logical demonstration.

The key to promoting the truth is to share a story rather than an argument. As she advises us on “How to Have a Conversation With Your Angry Uncle Over Thanksgiving,” former psychiatrist Karin Tamerius writes:

In the words of Jonathan Haidt, “The human mind is a story processor, not a logic processor.” Stories are powerful because they capture attention, transmit information, provoke strong emotions, elicit empathy and improve recall.” (n.pag.)

Both science and literature seem to agree on the solution ahead.

## Structure

The essays in this collection<sup>38</sup> are grouped into five sections. In part I, “Facts and/or Fiction,” three authors deal with the issue of the blurring of borders between fact and fiction. Using Antoine Bello’s fictional forgers trilogy (*Les Falsificateurs*), and Umberto Eco’s *The Prague Cemetery*, **Loïse Lelevé** analyzes the popularity of conspiracy theories in Europe and their persuasive use of narration as the vehicle for fabricating forgeries and erasing the boundaries between fact and fiction. **Ouassila Korichi** examines the well-publicized debate that followed the discovery that James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* was not a memoir as it was first presented, but a product of the imagination; the polemic about the fraudulent use of fiction served to trigger a larger debate around the issue of genre. **Laurent Balagué** brings a philosophical approach to this tumultuous relationship between truth, fact, and fiction. Using Merleau-Ponty’s analysis and critique of Cassirer, he shows how mythical truth as compared to scientific truth is not a half-truth, or a truncated truth, but a highly valorized truth.

In part II, “Arts of Illusion,” three authors analyze the role of various media in promoting deception, disguising the truth and/or bending the facts. **Camille Duplaa** traces the evolution of a myth live, the Poppy Project. Poppy, an American singer who publishes videos on her YouTube channel embodies a range of fabulous representations,

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<sup>38</sup> On behalf of all the authors in this collection, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of all the reviewers and thank them for their due diligence, detailed feedback, thoughtful comments and endless generosity. I also wish my mentor and my friend Jean Levasseur peace and a prompt recovery. May you beat what doctors believe is a terminal decease!

including Illuminati, androids, religious cults, etc. The use of multiple references blurs the real identity of Poppy, between Illuminati's doll, fembot and real performer. **Raymond Delambre** examines how the People's Republic of China manages to re-write the present and the past using alternatives facts, lies, half-truths, and fake feminism through propaganda movies. **Abbes Maazaoui** deals with a similar convergence between entertainment, illusionism, and manipulation but on a smaller scale: using *Les Gommages*, a novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet, he examines the various—and at the time of the novel's publication, revolutionary—grammatical, rhetorical and narrative strategies that the narrator adopts in order to blur the reader's interpretation of what is fact or fiction, real or imagined, truth or untruth.

The third section—titled “Women: Masters of Deceit?”—continues with the motif of trickery and discusses more specifically women connection to deception in medieval and modern literature. **Olivier Wicky** analyses how Charles Maurras, Maurice Barrès and Pierre Benoit portray la *femme fatale*'s use of lies, illusions and betrayal to lure her male victims and push them toward sin, madness and even death. **Marco J. Prost** explores a similar topic. He traces the evolution of treatment of women in medieval literature and the origin of various punishments inflicted on them throughout the centuries: from burning them at the stake to condemning them for witchcraft.

Part Four, “Finding / Disguising the Truth,” examines examples of ambivalence and cases of conflict between the known and the unknown. Basing her observations on the rough drafts of “Finisterre,” **Ikram Hili** argues that Plath's poetry may not simply be considered a dark confessional activity or a substitute for religion, but a joyous and creative, life-sustaining force. **David Amadio**, through close readings of Philip Carlo's *The Ice Man*, John Byrne's *The Man of Steel*, and Richard Donner's *Superman: The Movie*, interprets the hidden double identity of the main characters as being driven by both a fear of disclosure and a desperate attempt at protecting their private life. **Eimma Chebinou's** essay analyzes the gaze as both a deceptive device and a means of revealing the untold truths about the main characters of Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*. **Samira Etouil** examines the

multi-layered reality in *La Pharaone* by Hédi Bouraoui; this complexification is exemplified by the author's infusion of Egyptian mythology and his transcultural approach to fiction.

The last section of the *Journal* deals with "Alternative Arts for Alternative Truths." **Biliana Vassileva**, following the steps of Le Boulba in *Watching Dance, Dancing Its Perception*, argues for a new conception of the artistic truth, and calls for a new paradigm: since artistic truth cannot be reached by rational thinking, she advises of the need to use different art forms as a means to figure out the truth of any artistic performance. **Edward Egbo Imo** demonstrates how stand-up comedy is conceived in Nigeria not just as an entertainment variety, but as an alternative for the declining live theatre. **Julius Bongkorog** analyses the old manufactured Northwest-Southwest divide between the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon through the invention of the *come-no-go*, and how that invention has suddenly lost its manipulative charm in the current crisis engulfing the Anglophone minority.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> On behalf of all the authors in this collection, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of all the reviewers (David Amadio, Ezra S. Engling, Kirsten C. Kunkle, Hédi Jaouad, Jean Levasseur, Erik Liddell, and Kenneth Van Dover) and thank them for their diligence, thoughtful comments and feedback, and endless generosity. I also would like to wish my mentor and friend Jean Levasseur peace and a prompt recovery. May he beat and survive what his doctors believe is an incurable disease!

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**PART ONE**  
**FACTS AND/OR FICTION**

## **Conspiracy Theories, Storytelling and Forgers: Towards a Paradoxical Ethics of Truth in Contemporary European Fiction**

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*“It was prodigious enough that history had mimicked history; but for history to mimic literature, that is unconceivable.”* Thus begins, by a Borgesian quotation, French sociologist Luc Boltanski’s study on enigmas and conspiracy (Boltanski 11). Strikingly, Antoine Bello’s fictional forgers trilogy (*Les Falsificateurs*), staging a secret international organization (the “CFR”) in charge of rewriting reality through a process of systematized falsification akin to a gigantic conspiracy, ends on a very similar note: “The CFR had always mimicked reality; what if, in return, reality was plagiarizing our best ideas<sup>40</sup>?” (Bello, *Les Producteurs* 381) The Borgesian rejection of a reality so infused with fiction that it ends up being potentially more fictional than fiction itself seems to have become possible in postmodern Europe, often seen as particularly prone to the diffusion and banalization of conspiracy theories (Taguieff 13). From the 90s onwards, two phenomena, partially thanks to their success in the US and the diffusion of northern American culture in Europe (Kreis 297–298), seem to converge to create new worries about so complex an entanglement of fiction and reality that any sense of history might be lost.

First, as ironically illustrated in Bello’s novels, conspiracy theories, the influence of which was notably reduced in post WWII Europe, make a remarkable comeback (Kreis 298–299). Second, managerial and political uses of

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<sup>40</sup> Unless specified otherwise, all translations are mine.

storytelling techniques, imported from the US, find themselves sharply criticized—in France, for example, in the works of Christian Salmon or Yves Citton. Both appear, more or less, as forms of “scenarization” (Citton 84–88), i.e. a misleading narrative designed to manipulate one’s perception of reality (Salmon 130–131). The new popularity of topics such as conspiracy theories and storytelling increase preoccupations stemming on the one hand from the so-called “linguistic” or “narrative” turns in Humanities and postmodern academic writings; and on the other hand, from new theories of fiction regarding its relationship with truth and reality.<sup>41</sup> New concerns about a “post-truth era” lead writers and scholars to reevaluate nonfiction to expose and share truth rather than fiction. In contrast, conspiracy theories have been analyzed to provide coherence and legibility in answer to the distressing perception of a chaotic contemporary reality and therefore to cater to what Arendt describes as a “thirst for fiction” (Arendt 671) on their followers’ part: the reassurance comes at the price of a closed interpretative system substituting itself for reality. The new craving for a factual literature appears to appease contemporary readers’ “reality hunger” (Shields): the defiance against attractive narrative distortions of truth is said to lead readers to turn factual literary accounts of asserted events. Fiction seems contaminated by new suspicions regarding the very possibility of a truthful and ethical writing of reality.

But a new fictional trend of falsification novels emerges in contemporary literature: narratives dealing with forgers, their forgeries, and their capacity to rewrite history and politics through fakes. Such novels seem to argue that nonfiction is not the only ethical horizon for contemporary literature in a modern environment made unreadable by its sheer complexity, which seems to debunk any perception of cause and effect in recent social evolutions<sup>42</sup> (Taguieff 33). Consequently, I would like to put the emphasis on novels

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<sup>41</sup> A recent discussion of a necessary boundary between fiction and fact can be found in Lavocat.

<sup>42</sup> Such as, to quote Taguieff, “the individualization of traditional religious beliefs” or the “weakened adhesion” to great national or cultural narratives in the postmodern era.

from the 2010s centered on the figure of a superlative forger, plotting a whole conspiracy or rather resorting to a conspiracy narrative to reshape the reality of his world according to his views, and practicing a true art of storytelling to substantiate his falsification. I will thus take into account the aforementioned trilogy by Bello, and a recent novel by Umberto Eco, *The Prague Cemetery (Il cimitero di Praga)*. Those two works will enable me to tie up the three European contemporary concerns aforesaid (the conspiracy theories revival, the worry regarding the success of storytelling in multiple fields of human activity as well as “post-truth” anxieties) to theories about the intrinsic narrativity of forgery, as analyzed in the academic works of Eco himself (‘La forza del falso’). Contemporary European falsification novels, I would like to argue, are a prime example of the drive of contemporary fiction to put its relationship to truth back into play, and most of all its ability to represent, comment and shape reality. In this paper, I suggest that, by representing the fabrication of a forgery resorting to storytelling techniques to elaborate a conspiracy theory, contemporary writers challenge their readers to a playful fictive inquiry—and that the very ironic form of veridicity the unraveling of such an inquiry implies is precisely what may confer to recent fiction a new ethical dimension.

### **Scenario and “scenarizarion”: storytelling as the end of truth**

The main issue scholars can have with both storytelling and conspiracy theories is their use of a narrative pattern as a cognitive tool. Storytelling, for instance, is seen as an especially pervasive discursive form touching every area of society, to the point that some have evoked a new “narrative age” (Salmon 8–9). In such an era, “story” becomes the predominant knowledge vehicle, but the fear remains that a compelling story will always be more seducing than hard facts, and that the power of stories to shape reality is dangerously minimized by storytelling practitioners and recipients (Smith). But in the suspicions cast upon storytelling, there seems to be a confusion between *story* and *fiction* (and, implicitly, between *fiction* and *lie* (Lavocat 43)):

storytelling appears potentially dangerous because it is indirectly accused of fictionalizing facts, as if the mere configuring of facts into a narrative was the first step into turning them into fictions. As it is, narration is simply a form of discourse; there is no reason why it should be less veridictive than a logical dissertation; but compelling narrations—those that may seem effective enough to *persuade* their readers, rather than *convince* them—are somehow seen as luring the reader into the realm of the false or the unascertained. In this light, storytelling soon takes the aspect of a form of witchcraft, able to turn fiction into fact and fact into fiction, by exploiting the reader’s narrative pleasure.

Storytelling becomes a synonymous for disinformation, a tool of deception to influence ratios of power and manipulate the masses. Salmon thus evokes the “fictionalization” of work relationships forcing employees’ adherence to their company narrative and masquerading power relationships as a collective production effort (Salmon 82–88). Storytelling imposes artificial narratives<sup>43</sup> that pretend to transmit knowledge but instead serve as behavioral modeling and protocols (Salmon 16). Simultaneously, Citton suggests that we constantly elaborate *scenarios* through which we try to predict the evolution of a given situation in which we project ourselves; we are both the authors and the characters of such scenarios that, owing to their simple existence, are already shaping our reality. “*Scenarization is metaleptic* precisely because it articulates a (fictive) scenario, turned towards the future, with the actual facilitation of the (real) concretization of that fiction” (Citton 86). The scenario is always already shaping reality; and

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<sup>43</sup> Instead of defining a written set of rules that leaves transparent the power balance and the hierarchy system in the company, storytelling management postulates that it is more effective to make the employees adhere to the company goals by making them part of a collective narrative of the company success. Instructions and orders are therefore not delivered as such but conveyed through compelling success stories in the first person, narrating the individual feats of coworkers completing tasks – stories that are in fact nothing more than instruction manuals in disguise and smokescreens to the reality of the repartition of authority and power within the company.

fiction is an encouragement to action: hearing or elaborating a fiction is always akin to projecting oneself into action.

Storytelling is therefore supposed to have two effects: a magical narrativization of facts that curbs reality in favor of an aggravation or a reversing of the power balance, while blinding its addressees to the reality of the ratio of power; and a reshaping of reality through the confection of perlocutionary fictions that affect the behavior and/or beliefs of their recipients. This is where concerns for the damaging effect of storytelling merge with worries caused by the vogue of conspiracy theories since the 90s. 9/11 can be considered as a paradigmatic example inasmuch as it has led to a deep renewal of conspiracy theories<sup>44</sup> and is also a prime instance of the use of storytelling by authorities, media and other fonts of power. A title such as Franck Rich's *The Greatest Story Ever Sold. The Decline and Fall of Truth from 9/11 to Katrina* is a perfect illustration for the growing fear of the dissolution of truth when public opinion is confronted with massive, complex events notoriously difficult to apprehend through a single linear prism. Salmon himself was not far from conflating storytelling and conspiracy theory when he wrote that "the art of narration . . . has become, under the influence of storytelling, a State instrument of deceit and of opinion control . . . The Empire has confiscated the narrative" (Salmon 20).

It all gets worse of course when storytelling is used by conspirators or forgers to achieve their obscure goals. This is exactly what is going on within Bello's CFR, whose agents are mandated to imagine forgeries to influence the course of events and re-shape reality. In the first volume, Sliv, the first-person narrator and protagonist and a CFR "agent,"

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<sup>44</sup> Taguieff suggests several clusters of conspiracy theories typical of the post 9/11 era: theories regarding the 2003 Iraqi war and its "true" causes; the renewal of the suspicions of an international Jewish financial conspiracy in the wake of the 2008 crisis, focusing notably on the figure of B. Madoff or on banks founded by Jewish migrants in the US, such as Goldman Sachs or Lehmann Brothers; the supposed role played by groups such as the Bilderberg Group, the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, etc., all somehow perceived as secret societies, in said crisis; the H1N1 pandemic (see below); Bin Laden's death (its causes, its reality); and the D. Strauss-Khan scandal (Taguieff 142–157).



learns that there was never any dog sent into orbit in 1957; Laika was a pure invention on the CFR's part to push the US government into catching up with the Soviet program. All the favorite ingredients of CFR's machinations appear in this example: a careful forging of false evidence, and a good story (a dog in space!). Indeed, CFR "agents" are divided into two kinds: the forgers per se, genius creators of false archive, vestiges or records; and the "scenarists," the providers of compelling stories allowing forgeries to be embedded into an alluring narrative guaranteeing their diffusion and their persuasive power. The narrator's nemesis, Lena, is the most talented forger of her generation; but even she is required to call on Sliv's talents for scenarization when she obtains the CFR's authorization to create *ex nihilo* a whole new lost civilization: to Sliv's remark "Who needs a scenario when she can grow Maya relics on volcanoes slopes?", the CFR executives only answer "One always needs a good scenario" (Bello, *Les Producteurs* 223).

At the heart of a successful forgery in service of a successful conspiracy (here, the creation of a new ancient society, the 'Chupacs', to help promote a culture based on the democratic practice of concord, as an innovative incitation to peacekeeping), lies the art of storytelling. As Citton argued, the fictional scenario, by inciting its audience to metaleptically project themselves into the characters and situations it develops, is supposed to have a perlocutionary effect: convincing people that a concord-centered society is a viable form of democratic *polis*, as the Chupacs illustrate, might also be manipulating them into abandoning agonistic political practices. A writer and a liberal-minded CEO, Bello seems to suggest here that the management of a political community should be based on corporate culture and its emphasis on negotiation. Rather than the committed participation to political conflicts by the promotion or the aggravation of any form of dissent that—at least according to Sliv, here the spokesperson for the author—can only lead to a counterproductive radicalization of the differing actors and their positions (strikes, protests, demonstrations, heated debates, etc.), the model illustrated by the Chupac society postulates a consensus that must be achieved by every party through a preliminary negotiation each time a political decision has to be reached. Such a story aims at shaping

political behaviors, as Salmon analyzed, by suggesting democracy lies in its actors' capacity to cultivate conciliation, rather than conflict—be it racial or related to the division of society into classes. For instance, readers are strongly invited to put their convictions into perspective, rather than cultivating their differing viewpoints and promoting them in an agonistic way.

For Salmon, the embodiment of the link between the art of fiction and management or political manipulation might be Robert McKee, “a famous Hollywood scenarist who became . . . a storytelling management guru” (Salmon 72). This is strikingly reminiscent of one of Bello’s character, Ignacio Vargas, another former Hollywood writer, who left the CFR to make money as a business storytelling consultant—from scenarist to storytelling advisor, a career history not unlike McKee’s one, though Vargas never taught at university—instead, he went on writing scenarios for wealthy clients needing to sell products through narratives. Vargas matches perfectly the ruthless narration businessman described by Salmon, all too ready to play with his audience’s emotions through his stories in order to strengthen their loyalty to their employer. To the cynical Vargas, the ones truly responsible for the success of storytelling manipulations are the deceived: “Let’s be clear, Sliv: I don’t take advantage of anyone’s credulity. We fool ourselves well enough on our own . . . All stories coexist; each chooses the one that fits him best according to criteria that have nothing to do with reason” (Bello, *Les Producteurs* 136). To Vargas, everyone is a storyteller: we constantly falsify our own memories to shape them into better, more alluring narrations, even the most dramatic and intimate ones (Bello, *Les Producteurs* 137). Vargas’s lack of ethics is grounded on an empirical mantra: “there is no such thing as truth” (Bello, *Les Producteurs* 148). The storyteller lives in an entirely fictional world, one made only of concurrent stories. Therefore, all manipulations are acceptable. In Vargas’s hands, storytelling does not only threaten to blur facts and fictions: it has entirely dissolved facts.

## **Fiction as an Inquiry: Conspiracy Theories, the Indiciary Paradigm and the Production of Truth**

This is why Vargas, unlike Sliv, can no longer be part of the CFR. The organization activities rely on its audience believing in a difference between fact and fiction and the existence of truth, even if hidden behind veils of some sort. Their forgeries aim at turning their targets into unwitting conspiracists, by inciting them to elaborate stories challenging previous official narratives from the fakes they disseminate. Conspiracy theories are a method of explanation of an unacceptable reality through a narrative relying on over-rationalization and biased causality and intentionality<sup>45</sup> (Taguieff 15–17; Brotherton and French).

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<sup>45</sup> The conspiracist interpretation of the 2008 crisis may provide an illuminating example of such a method. A complex set of events that can hardly be reduced to a simple causes-to-effects explanation, or to a linear chain of actions and responsibilities, it is also a scandalous setback involving the ruin of thousands of people. The unacceptability of the crisis therefore lies both in the damages it has done to actors perceived to be disconnected from its causes and therefore innocent, and in the lack of an explanation behind such damages likely to point out culprits and so to restore justice. Such a feeling of unaccountability lays the basis for the restorative narrative of conspiracy theory. By negating the possibility of random events and presuming that every element of the crisis is the result of an actual intention, be it hidden, it reads the crisis as the premeditated consequence of a set of decisions. Unraveling the crisis thus means attributing responsibilities to a set of designated actors; it means sorting out of a complex continuum of loosely related or unrelated events connected and meaningful actions. There is no such thing as an accident, the conspiracists say, either because of their own political agenda, or because they sincerely believe in the theories they receive and diffuse; thus they over-rationalize every aspect of a given reality that scandalizes them into a rational action. When others see only chance or too complex an imbrication of actors and events to be untangled, the conspiracist treats every aspect of the crisis as a clue to be interpreted and inserted into a comprehensive, simplifying plot, entirely headed towards a pseudo rational cognitive resolution of the mystery the crisis constitutes. The solution is given in advance, the culprit pre-designated; and the conspiracist presents himself as the detective able to unmask him. As Taguieff reminds us (see above), biased causality and intentionality are the tools through which B. Madoff, who happens to be a Jew, becomes the clear responsible for a crisis whose roots are supposedly traceable back to a plot involving Jewish international finance, embodied by banks such as Goldman Sachs. The theory is not irrational *per se*; but, under the pretext of reporting the pernicious

Such a—supposedly—cognitive method of reading and decrypting historical and political events allows for a carefully crafted, coherent, irrefutable narrative. The specifics of modern conspiracy theories lie in their critical dimension: the unveiling of the true nature of reality is not only a process of integration of clues within a causal effective narrative, it is also dependent on a systematized demystification (Taguieff 38). Since everything can be reduced to, and introduced in, a plot, conspiracy theories, by claiming that there is no such thing as an accident (Bègue et al.) and that everything is tied in together, strongly imply a deciphering of the world based on the model of the police investigation: every sign can be turned into a clue (Kreis 10).

The conspiracist is thus to be understood as a hyper-rational, hyper-aware detective; and the logical consequence of his worldview is misappropriation of the indicial paradigm (Taguieff 43–44). As an investigation tool, based on the selection, arrangement and confrontation of traces of an event in order to establish a heuristic narrative explaining how a fact occurred, how an object was produced, it is advantageously used in several scientific disciplines (Ginzburg). Art historians resort to it to identify the author of a painting when they look for physical or stylistic traces left by the painter's production process on its surface (for instance, specific brushstrokes or even, in some cases, fingerprints). Psychiatrists may treat symptoms of mental illness as traces of a hidden trauma which origins must be reconstituted within a narrative. Detectives are looking for clues to reconstruct a narrative aiming at answering the key questions: what happened, how the crime was committed, and by whom? In appearance, conspiracy theories mobilize the indicial paradigm as efficiently as the psychologist or the connoisseur, but the systematic assumption of an underlying and all-encompassing plot drives them not to

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activity of secret social groups, it resorts to biased rational tools and criticism – it pretends for instance to demystify the true powers at play in globalized capitalist society – to indict scapegoats. Thus conspiracy theories are devices that, relying on the presumption of a hidden meaning behind all things, transform chaos into order, and failure (of the international finance institutions) into success (of supposed conjurers such as Madoff) to reinstate meaning where there was only confusion before.

discern, in the continuum of reality, relevant facts or traces likely to be reliable evidence of a past event, but to indiscriminately consider anything and everything as a proof of their presupposed theory. For the enlightened reader that the conspiracist affirms to be, the relationship between truth and lie is reversed: everything that is apparent is but a lie waiting to be denounced.

What particularly interests me, however, in contemporary literature, is not so much the *mimesis* of conspiracy theories as the reworking of their methods into the fabrication of a clever forgery. Indeed, in recent novels, the forgers operate a second hijacking of the indiciary paradigm: they produce fake clues to incite spectators of their forgeries to reconstruct by themselves the explanatory narrative giving the (fake) object its whole historical significance. Where the conspiracist was using the paradigm as some sort of lens through which decoding reality beyond the surface of deceptive appearances, the forger exploits his victim's tendency to apply the paradigm to everything resembling a clue to mislead him. When Sliv offers artificial vestiges and compelling stories, he fully expects his audience to practice the narrative activity of collecting his clues into an alternative narrative challenging previous perceptions of reality; they end up producing for him the conspiracy theories the narrative foundations of which he has carefully laid<sup>46</sup>.

An all-encompassing explanation, conspiracy theory can quickly take a mythical dimension: in an 1998 interview,

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<sup>46</sup> An particularly striking example of such a strategy can in found in the first volume: to protect the Bushmen tribes from the plundering of their lands by diamond merchants, Sliv forges a letter from ethnologist G. Chemineau to C. Levi-Strauss evoking another tribe (but a fake one) finding a significant diamonds deposit in the Kalahari desert and denouncing international companies such as De Beers's efforts to get hold of said diamonds. He plans on De Beers actively exploring that desert to find the diamonds for themselves, all the while ignoring that neither tribe nor deposit actually exist. Thus De Beers themselves might actualize Sliv's claim: their very presence in the Kalahari desert will serve as proof of their pillaging intentions – and make them all the more likely to be caught red-handed at ransacking by the NGOs Sliv himself has warned. Those deceived by the manipulation are the one to give it substance: Sliv only lays the clues for them to turn them into a new reality (Bello, *Les Falsificateurs* 120).

Eco underlined that conspiracy theory could be interpreted as a “mythological version of a causal explanation of chance” (David et al. 308). It is exactly what he shows at work when Simonini, his protagonist who, in *The Prague Cemetery*, forges the early version of the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, elaborates his fake. Imagining a global scheme perpetrated by Jewish leaders, he recreates a whole new mythology, complete with a Manichean vision of the world revolving around a perpetual fight between the evil Jews and the forces of Christianity and Enlightenment; an etiological discourse—the decline of civilization is the result of Jewish subversion—; archetypal characters and dramatized primal scenes (the plotting in the cemetery).

The inaugural scene in the *Prague cemetery*, cited, transformed and widespread by a variety of writers after Simonini to elaborate what has become a collective imagery of the Jewish conspiracy as depicted in the *Protocols*, draws from the dramatic opening of the serial *Joseph Balsamo* by Alexandre Dumas (Eco, *Il cimitero di Praga* 76). It shows, as Simonini reminds his reader, during the night of May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1770, in the Mont Tonnerre, on the left bank of the Rhine, a Stranger being caught by masked men and led into a clearing before three hundreds “ghosts” armed with swords who submit him to a close interrogation, including questions commanding pre-determined answers and several trials such as firing a (secretly unloaded) pistol to his head to prove his obedience—all questions and rituals typical of masonic clichés well-appreciated by Dumas’s readers. But the Stranger cuts the ritual short by revealing that not only does he know all the society’s secrets, he is the very head by divine right of the universal masonic congregation. He proceeds to explain the reason behind this gathering of “ghosts”—in fact, under the masks, all the important members of various national lodges all over the world: to crush the altar and the throne in France, the fall of the French monarchy necessarily triggering that of all the other European ones and the Church with them. The Stranger—the eponymous Joseph Balsamo, of course—then exposes the details of his subversive plan (Eco, *Il cimitero di Praga* 93–94). And Simonini to conclude:

“Forget the Mont Tonnerre, the left bank of the Rhine, the time—I thought. Let’s imagine conjurors from every part of the world, representing the tentacles of their sect extended in every country, let’s gather them in a clearing, in a cave, in a castle, in a cemetery, in a crypt, as long as it’s sufficiently dark, let’s have one of them deliver a speech that unveils their plots, and their will to conquer the world . . . Here’s a form to fill *ad libitum*; each to his own conspiracy.” (Eco, *Il cimitero di Praga* 95)

The forger’s stroke of genius lies in his analysis of Dumas’ scene as a detachable and reproducible narrative matrix “liable to give form to each and every kind of conspiracy”: “the Poet had . . . discovered, through the telling of a unique conspiracy, the Universal Form of any possible conspiracy” (Eco, *Il cimitero di Praga* 95). All that remains for Simonini is to transpose Dumas’ plotting scene in the eponymous Hebraic cemetery and change the initial conspirators into Jewish leaders. Eco’s pseudo-historical account of the fabrication of a famous forgery turns then into a striking *mise en abyme* of the narrative functioning of the false. Derived from a suspense novel, the forged conspiracy is convincing because it adheres to an easily identifiable scheming form that anyone can relate to: “Dumas had not invented anything . . . People only believe what they already know, and that was the beauty of the Universal Form of Conspiracy” (Eco, *Il cimitero di Praga* 96). As in genre writings where half of the reading pleasure comes from the recognition of a series of tropes, the seduction of the conspiracy theory—as well as of the forgery—is due to an effective confirmation bias (Thresher-Andrews 7).

The second stroke of genius is to turn what is at first nothing more than an anti-Semite pastiche of a conspiracy scene into a false archive. Simonini’s commandeering of Dumas’ art of storytelling is crowned by his transformation of his gripping narrative into the minutes of a—supposed—historical reunion, that is into the tangible trace of a secret past event accounting for the unexplainable chaos of fast-changing 19<sup>th</sup> century society. The alternative narrative becomes a clue ready to be treated, according to

conspiracists' twisted use of the indicary paradigm, as an evidence of Jewish malevolence. Thus functions Eco's demonstration of the "power of the false", to quote his article: the efficiency of the false is tightly correlated to its narrative seduction. "Narrated forgeries are first and foremost narrations, and narrations, like myths, are always persuasive" (Eco, 'La forza del falso' 320). One effective narrative matrix is enough to format any form of ungrounded hatred or fear into the shape of a conspiracy, all the more appealing as it offers a compelling *story*. The Universal Form of Conspiracy is therefore an available narrative configuration all the more effective as it relies on the seduction power both of conspiracy theory as a so-called heuristic account of reality and of dramatic serial-inspired storytelling. The mythical dimension of the conspiracy guarantees its cognitive power (it can virtually explain everything) while its narrative aspect makes it easily understandable and spreadable. Conspiracy theory as a myth can thus aspire to a metaphysical insight on the reality of the world: "The essence of conspiracy beliefs lies in attempts to delineate and explain evil." (Barkun 3) Of course, that very mythical dimension is what confers conspiracy theory all its damaging effect: by postulating a Manichean struggle with an all-powerful archenemy, it allows or encourages the destruction of the scapegoat it stigmatizes; hence the key role of the Protocols in the Nazis elaboration of the Final Solution (Taguieff 56).

What appears to me as particularly relevant to the question of the ethics of contemporary fiction, however, is that Eco choses to expose this pernicious efficiency not in an academic paper – what he did, as it happens, in "La forza del falso" – but in a novel. The irrefutability of conspiracy theories often lies in the logical circle in which their contradictors may find themselves trapped: combatting pseudo-critical examination with critical examination, their arguments regularly fall short of convincing conspiracists all too ready to read them as further proofs of the existence of conspiracy (Taguieff 40). A more subtle approach, seems to suggest Eco, would be to fight fiction with fiction. If what makes both forgeries and conspiracy theories so powerful is their intrinsic narrativity, then a narrative demystification of their biased claims is more likely to affect the reader than



another logical demonstration. What is at stake here, ultimately, is a passionate defense of fiction: the problem of the fake lies not in the circulation of fictions per se, but in the dangerous and morally condemnable uses of conspiracy fictions in service of political maneuvers aiming at targeting scapegoats. In *Il cimitero di Praga*, fiction is elevated as a powerful tool both to reestablish the origins and therefore the truth of a still active and threatening false, and to deconstruct the rhetorical and cognitive mechanisms through which conspiracy theories achieve their political goals. In an era where dangerous fake accusations are born from fictional pastiches—in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as now; the fiction supported by the Protocols is still widespread nowadays—the best answer seems to strive to elaborate new ethical forms of fiction liable to take back the investigation process so appreciated by conspiracists and forgers and make it, rather than a twisted tool of production of fake truths, the basis of a new indiciary poetics.

### **Ironical Ethics of Truth**

Recent falsification novels seem determined to avoid two symmetrical pitfalls. Firstly, the idea that there exist rigid boundaries between facts and fiction, and therefore that fiction is unreliable to provide a true account of History. All fictionalizations of the past are not deceiving: that Eco's protagonist, the supposed forger of the *Protocols*, is entirely fictional does not undermine the careful genesis of the forgery or the in-depth analysis of its damaging power. Secondly, they distance themselves from a potentially dangerous relativism that reduces reality to the mere sum of concurrent narratives, with no solid truth to be found anywhere. On the contrary, they blur facts and fictions in order to offer their novels to the reader as minefields requiring a careful investigation process to be deciphered properly. The conspiracists' mechanisms of trickery find themselves reversed in turn: the indiciary paradigm, proven to be insufficient per se to establish the veridicity of a given narrative, can be used as an optical instrument—in a

Proustian way<sup>47</sup>—to be given to the reader so he can construct his own interpretation of the text; storytelling as a seducing narrative machinery can be put to the service of a criticism of textual manipulations.

The *Protocols* may draw from Dumas; but Eco's novel is a compelling time-travel into 19<sup>th</sup> century suspense serials: there can be found spies, secret services, doppelgangers, mysterious diaries, suspect or unfrocked abbots, abducted young women, strange occultists, bombings, etc. And yet, as the author reminds us in a final note, Simonini excepted, all the events and characters depicted are true, even the most implausible ones (Eco, *Il cimitero di Praga* 515). That ending note, notwithstanding the lightness of its tone, is an incisive invitation to re-read the whole novel under the light of that last revelation. All that the reader has dismissed as too unlikely to pertain to something else than fiction—say, the whole Boullan and Diana storyline, full of black masses and satanic sexual rituals—turns out to be historical after all. The reader's beliefs in his capacity to discriminate fact from fiction are thus seriously shaken. The usual criteria for establishing fictionality: plausibility, genre (a novel), enunciation (the narrator, amnesiac and insincere, is avowedly unreliable), do not allow to discern which events belong to the imaginary and which to historical facts. Given the plot subject matter, however, ascertaining the historical is crucial: faced with the reminder that the astounding story he has just read is but the genesis of one of the most perilous forgeries of recent history (Eco, *Il cimitero di Praga* 521), it becomes important for the reader not to treat as mere fictions facts that have contributed to shape the ghastly history of European anti-Semitism until WWII and beyond. The reader thus faces a conundrum: he cannot establish with the narrator a simple fictionality contract thanks to which he could read the whole book as a mere clever postmodern rewriting of Dumasian serials, nor can he rely on a referentiality pact guaranteeing him that everything is true—since the main character, a delusional forger (!), is invented.

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<sup>47</sup> One remembers the famous assertion of the *Temps retrouvé*: “The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself” (Proust 283).

Hence the renewal of the investigation process, but this time the reader himself has to assemble clues into a convincing narrative.

Eco's art of storytelling was the first step of the laying out of the inquiry: thanks to his narrative technique, the reader is waded through such an amount of historical facts and digressions that the implied author has felt the need to add in appendix a recap chart distinguishing plot from story and summarizing the main plotlines. The whole complexity of 19<sup>th</sup> century politics, philosophical and esoteric movements, unfolds before his bemused eyes in a 500-page novel, and it's obviously impossible to reduce it to a linear, all-encompassing clarifying theory. Any attempt at coherence relies not on the abductive—and abusive—reconstruction of a simple and accusatory causality, but on the origination of the account of the *Protocols* fabrication in a (apparently) single point of view. Simonini's focalization gives the narrative its unity, but that very focalization is problematic: the forger suffers from a split personality. Every attempt at univocity is therefore doomed to fail; the reader cannot expect to be able to determine a single origin story for the *Protocols*.

*The Prague cemetery* is not a detective novel: it does not ask its reader to find a single culprit and a single possible account of the committing of the crime. Instead, the investigation process that is required of him demands that, firstly, he identifies the rhetorical and narrative misleading tropes thanks to which he has been presented with a complex set of facts he has to classify and analyze; and secondly, that he renounces the satisfaction of a closed conclusion in favor of a prudent acknowledgement of the complexity of historical evolutions.<sup>48</sup> That is not to say, of course, that truth is forever out of reach: it is possible to reconstruct the story of the elaboration of the *Protocols*; Eco has done it after all in this novel and he had already done it elsewhere, in more academic contexts (Eco, 'La forza del falso'; Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*). But it cannot be achieved through an over-simplification of past events. Thus the very narrative construction of the fiction functions as a refutation of

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<sup>48</sup> Of course, one can see a perceptible echo with Eco's theories on reading and the open or closed work (Eco, *Lector in fabula*).

conspiracy theories pseudo-rational mechanism: it proves impossible to read Eco's story through their lens. The investigation is diverted from its initial purpose: it must not aim at providing an effective causal explanation, but at bringing to light the inherent plurivocity of truth, without succumbing to the temptation of a relativism that would eclipse the vivid necessity of disarming the *Protocols* noxiousness.

### **Parodies of Conspiracism: Truth as Fiction**

Another means of denouncing conspiracy theories as sham rational exposures of reality is to undermine the very principles on which they are based. Taguieff discerns four axioms for conspiracist narratives: 1) "there is no such thing as an accident", and therefore nothing escapes the conspirators' programming of events; 2) everything happening is the result of a hidden—and malevolent—intentionality; 3) to uncover the truth, one only needs to establish who benefits from the conspiracy; 4) everything is connected, but the links remain hidden; in the end, there is only one enemy, and every force, including those appearing to oppose him, is a masked accomplice of its actions (Taguieff 87–91). Strikingly, the more Sliv enters the arcana of the CFR, the more he is led to understand that none of those principles can truly be applied to the CFR activities, even those that resemble the most an elaborated conspiracy. Take for instance the creation of al-Qaeda by Angoua Djibo, one of the CFR's executives. At the beginning, Djibo only aims to create a convincing story to alert the US on the growing discontent caused by their politics in the Arab world. He hopes to substantiate political theories such as Huntington's clash of civilizations and exacerbate tensions between the Western and Arab worlds to frighten the authorities into avoiding an actual war. Exaggerating the threat was supposed to be the best way to drive Western states to preventive and restorative action before a serious conflict arose. The result is the involuntary reinforcement of a then barely existing entity that Djibo names "Al-Qaeda" and that progressively escapes him to become the organization we know.

There seems to be a conspiracy: Djibo, a powerful member of a secret and wealthy organization, lies and commits forgeries in order to manipulate whole populations and institutions into believing in his own version of reality. But what happens in the novel belies every principle of conspiracists: the creation of Al-Qaeda is very much an accident, the terrible and unwanted result of Djibo's tendency to play with fire. His intentions are therefore far from being as omnipotent as conspiracists claim conspirators to be, and they certainly aren't malevolent: the ultimate goal, after all, was to preserve peace in the world. The CFR and Djibo certainly do not benefit from his falsification: once his manipulation uncovered, an ethical crisis shakes up the CFR's "executive committee", half of its members asking for the dissolution of the organization in the light of its (involuntary) participation in 9/11. Djibo's very problem is the disconnection between his action—creating a false threat—and its results: conspiracists' abductive usual reasoning would here be powerless to explain the "true" causes of the formation of Al-Qaeda—that is, those presented by the novel as such. One cannot not deduce from the result—the development of the terrorist organization—the initial decision—preserving peace by agitating threats—with an abductive reasoning, since the link between those two elements has been randomly established. Bello thus ironically stages in his novel a conspiracy that could by no means be accounted for thanks to a traditional conspiracy theory: the very form of conspiracist reasoning is here denounced as inoperative.

The CFR is a conspirator organization: it creates schemes and forgeries to influence the course of events. But its conspiracies could as well be seen as anti-conspiracies: they do not derive from a coherent will to dominate the world. Throughout the first volume, Sliv is haunted with the question of the true finality of the CFR: what all-encompassing secret project do serve his scenarios and forgeries? The answer might at first prove disappointing: the CFR has no finality at all. The perpetuation of the CFR throughout the centuries relies on its lack of definite purpose: no one can challenge the relevance of the organization and therefore threaten its existence if there is concretely nothing to oppose. The only encompassing value

of the CFR is a concord born of the practice of relativism; every member is free to pursue his own fights<sup>49</sup> provided that they do not directly clash with others'; the balance between differing aspirations and endeavors being the sole ferment of unity for the Consortium. Whereas, in Eco's narrative, the Universal Form of Conspiracy was an adaptable matrix ready to shape each and every accusatory historical explanation, in Bello's the conspiracy is reduced to a pure form, a mere conspiracy matrix aiming at nothing in particular and everything in general. Conspiracy thus becomes a practice amongst others; a paid activity that might find itself temporary purposes but has no set aim.

In a sarcastic way, this is a radicalization of a traditional conspiracy theories postulation: the *reductio ad unum* principle that govern them implies that every structured conspiracy is to be subsumed under a more global one—Barkun's "superconspiracy" (Barkun 6). Already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, anti-Semitic conspiracists had theorized that every secret society was, in the end, a mere "copy" of the "Hebraic society" (Gougenot des Mousseaux 503; Taguieff 91). At the end of the day, most of the conspiracies are ontologically void, they only reproduce a larger plot unknown to them. The CFR, in that respect, seems to embody that fundamental emptiness of the conspiracy structure, merely duplicating processes of fabrication of lies and forgeries as a well-oiled machine functioning *ad libitum*. The difference is that there is no original conspiracy for the CFR to mimic; in a very postmodern way, it is a copy without an original, a sign referring to nothing but its own shallowness. At the very opposite of conspiracy theories meant to separate good from evil and heroes from villains, the CFR treats concord—the converging of differing viewpoints—as a conspiracy, a flexible plot where every opinion can be balanced with others. Secret does not conceal malevolent intentions but the vacuity of the encompassing matrix, the disappointing nature of the deception. One again,

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<sup>49</sup> For instance, in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the first part of *Les Falsificateurs*, Sliv's meets Magawati and Youssef, two CFR agents who soon become his closest friends, in a contest to reward the best first forgery by a new agent: Sliv defends the Bushmen's people rights, Youssef focuses on individual liberties and deforestation and Magawati, an avowed feminist, presents an biodiversity protection project.

fiction proves to be the best possible demystification for conspiracists' manipulations: by exposing the nature of conspiracy as a mere rhetorical and narrative matrix, it denies it any inherent ability to produce truth and veridicity.

Conspiracy theory is therefore emptied from its cognitive dimension: the only truth about reality is that it is the shape one gives to concurrent narratives. It can be influenced and curved, but it cannot be trapped into a single account. It is a liquid set of interpretations none of which is true per se, but some of which are ethically preferable to others. As such, fiction appears as the best environment to stage the fluidity and ever-changing nature of reality. It is particularly apparent in Bello's use of another event having given rise to numerous conspiracy theories: the Pandemic H1N1/09 virus. An ill-managed massive prevention and vaccination campaign in several states had created the condition of an international panic; but the discrepancy between the frightening presentation of the threat by the media and political authorities (a potentially mortal flu) and the reality of the disease (limited contamination, low mortality) had been received as a form of cognitive dissonance in public opinion that conspiracy theories offered to resolve. The claim that "the true responsible party for the pandemic are pharmaceutical laboratories aiming to massively sell vaccines to panicked states by creating a false mortal flu" is a powerful explanation capitalizing on the distrust in international companies and state institutions and effectively reconciling the breadth of the authorities' overreaction and the relatively benign nature of the virus (Taguieff 153–154).

Ironically, Bello chooses this time to go along with the conspiracists: in his trilogy, the pandemic is Vargas's last creation for pharmaceutical clients. But of a particular interest is Sliv's reaction, sincerely appreciative of Vargas' talent for conspiracy: "for every Vargas concocting a sanitary disaster, another scenarist would have us believing that we were shielded from pandemics. The balance between their contradictory stories was called reality" (Bello, *Les Producteurs* 356). There is no outrage at the machination on Sliv's part: rather than denouncing Vargas' lies as the danger they may represent for public safety and economy, he prefers to consider them as a kind of *pharmakon*, a poison liable to

serve as an antidote to others, equally damaging, distortions of truth. In *Les Producteurs*, unlike in *Les Éclaireurs*, conspiracy is not shown as the empty frame it is anymore; rather, it is reality itself that appears deprived of any substantial content. Conspiracy theories at best are useful tools to cast suspicions on a foolish *doxa*. At worse, absurd endeavors to reconstitute a truth within a reality that offers no stable thread upon which to build. Relativism appears as the only truth of reality, and fiction, with its unique ability to mingle opinions and perspectives, as the best introduction to the acceptance of a fluid, moving world. As such, it offers itself as a playful remedy to the anxieties traditionally leading people to adhere to conspiracy theories.

Again, that is not to say that such a cognitive and ontological relativism directly translates into an ethical one: the flexibility of the CFR's conception of truth allows its agents to promote actions in favor of environment, discriminated groups, peacekeeping, etc., even in spite of their own personal convictions. In the trilogy, Sliv helps the emancipation of the Bushmen people, contributes to the UN adhesion of East Timor, and preserves a key archive of the Nanking Massacre from total destruction. But none of those actions would have been possible without him lying and forging documents. The only record of the Massacre having been lost, it is a fake video recreation of the lost original that will allow scholars to document the Japanese exactions. The narrator's avowed objective to "carry out reality" (Bello, *Les Éclaireurs* 488) is certainly not to be understood as an allegiance to scientific methods. "Carrying out reality" rather means to compensate for lacks of evidence of past facts.

Sliv distinguishes between narration and fact: if actual facts need to be brought to light to preserve a sense of balance amongst human endeavors—and *not* because of their supposed intrinsic value—narratives are but supple discursive forms for organizing facts into compelling stories. When said facts are missing, forgery becomes an effective and simple way to fill the gaps in the story. "Truth" is therefore a complex construct, the sum of antagonizing stories arranging facts differently and mixing up facts and fakes. An ethical attitude, the text suggests, is therefore not one of exposure of the fictional nature of some narratives—reality itself is a form of fiction—but a determination to carry



the general direction of a given story towards a form of restoration of a lost balance. Such relativism may be seen as highly perilous by those attached to fight the corrosive power of conspiracy theories; but it is also a powerful tool of rehabilitation of marginalized facts.

All in all, Sliv's attitude constantly oscillates between a profound faith in concord and consensus, and a bemused assessment of the versatility of reality and opinion, especially at the age of Internet. In any case, his relativism can also be seen as an effective answer to conspiracists "caricatural rigid thinking." After all, *Protocols* specialist Taguieff himself, to fight conspiracists, calls for "plurality in viewpoints and flexibility in judgments" (Taguieff 202). Rather than a caustic demystification on conspiracy theories, one could read Bello's trilogy as a playful suggestion for a democratic and heuristic use of them. Conspiracy theories are double-edged: undeniably harmful (Brotherton and French), they might also serve to remind us of the power play behind institutions grounding their political or social influence on unchallenged epistemic authority; of the danger to treat facts as mere self-evident, self-revealing truths (Moore); and of the democratic advantage of dissent.

Eco and Bello therefore build two symmetrical ethical defenses of fiction and the fictional use of a conspiracy narrative as opposed to a modern defiance for stories and storytelling. The former argues that fiction is the best demystification tool available: rather than an inescapably unconvincing rational argument against conspiracists, fiction, because of its ability to offer complex and compelling poetics of investigation leaving the reader with the responsibility for the reconstitution and the preservation of truth, is the best guarantee against the seductions of conspiracy theories narratives. Better even than scholar essays, fiction is an effective veridictive type of discourse, suggesting new and ethical ways of uncovering and producing truth.

In contrast, Bello presents a more labile conception of reality, where truth is nothing more than a regulating ideal and where investigation consists not in the collecting of clues, but in the gathering of sufficient information to forge credible evidence in support of a made-up story aiming at restoring balance, consensus and concord. Of course, such

visions depend upon differing political viewpoints: Eco's fight against a dangerous relativism treating the *Protocols* as a possible interpretation of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries events originates into a vivid awareness of the perils of the minimization of discrimination and symbolic violence; it is also part of a humanist legacy promoting values such as intellectual honesty. Bello is a French liberal business owner living in New York and attached to a right-wing form of political pragmatism, transposing company governance principles to the ruling of the state. The reconciling of differing viewpoints, the achievement of a consensual synthesis after a round of negotiations, are pragmatic models that he applies to the ethics of his fictions. In both cases though, fiction is less the "true lie" it has often be described as, than a complex means of production of a polysemous, labile truth, ethical because it is, at its core, polyphonic.

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## **A Writer's Avatar: Self-Fictionalization in James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces***

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*A Million Little Pieces* (AMLP) tells the story of James Frey, a drug and alcohol addict who wrestles with his addiction and fury. He is a twenty-three year old man who wakes up on a plane with wounds on his face, and no knowledge in his mind about his direction. When he lands in Chicago, he finds his parents, who take him later to a rehabilitation center. The center's process of healing is based on twelve steps the addict should go through. Frey faces some problems with few patients at the facility. Later on, he finds a friend in a man called Leonard and a lover, Lilly; both are patients at the center. Frey tells the reader about his problem with fury, and about his cold relationship with his parents. Frey's assumption of recovery leads to his rejecting the idea of following the Twelve Steps Method at the center. Instead, he believes a strong will can make him reach his goal to overcome addiction. After his success in reaching his goal, the real challenge for Frey is to stay sober. At the end of the story, we see Frey at a bar after ordering a glass of whiskey. He looks at it and smells it, and we think for a moment that he is going to drink it. However, he does not; he gets rid of it.

In 2003, *AMLP* was introduced to the public as a memoir, which “as a nonfiction genre . . . depicts the lives of real, not imagined individuals” (Couser 15). Probably, the secret ingredient that made people so attracted to the genre of memoir is the guarantee of truthfulness and the presentation of reality, which is the portrayal of events that really occurred. This is what readers are looking for, which is

similar to what they seek in reality shows on TV, like *Big Brother* for example.<sup>50</sup>

However, reality shows do not represent pure reality, but they offer a "hyper-reality" which is according to Jean Baudrillard: "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). Reality is combined with the word "hyper" in the sense that it is more real than the real itself because of its ability to mingle the real with the imaginary. This ends with a somehow fluid result, in which it is so hard to distinguish between what is factual and what is a mere product of imagination.

People seem to be enjoying living in hyperreality as they are watching the so-called Reality TV shows; the audience seems to be enjoying knowing details about other people's lives. This is what fuelled a "culture of confession" which was defined by Gayatri Spivak as "the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other" (7). What made this memoir attractive to readers is the idea of its being a non-fictional work narrating facts about a drug addict's life, and how he overcomes his addiction as an example to be followed. Besides, it breaks the rules about the twelve-step program followed in the rehabilitation centers to cure addicts. Instead, the author introduces a self-relied way to be set free from his addiction and stay sober. It is simply supposed to mirror the life it depicts. It is a life of a drug addict who is trying to heal his injured soul and start over.

*AMLP* sprang within what is termed by Mark Seltzer as "wound culture" or "post traumatic culture". It is a culture that seems to be feeding on "torn and opened private bodies and torn and opened psyches" (Seltzer 109). In *AMLP*, Frey exposes his torn body and soul to the public who receives them with open arms in order to satisfy its hunger for naked truth. Wound culture is "a culture of the atrocity exhibition, in which people wear their damage like badges of identity, or fashion accessories" (Seltzer 2), and make a show to entertain the public, who finds a great pleasure in watching them (in this case, it is reading about them). He begins doing

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50. On the show and how it invades privacy, see McGrath 56-98.

so by a dialogue in which he refers to himself as The Young Man who asks an Old Man for help. He says:

The Young Man came to the Old seeking counsel.  
 I broke something, Old Man.  
 How badly is it broken?  
 It's in a million little pieces.  
 I'm afraid I can't help you.  
 Why?  
 There is nothing you can do.  
 Why?  
 It can't be fixed.  
 Why?  
 It's broken beyond repair. It's in a million little pieces.  
 (N. pag.)

Frey says that he “just won't let [him]self be a victim” (*AMLP* 307). Instead, he built a mythical figure of himself in order to create “a writer’s avatar,” a fictional version of himself that he publicizes through his writing. To the best of my knowledge the phrase *writer’s avatar* has never been used in the field of literature. In this article, the term *avatar* is going to be borrowed on two levels and from two different sources, the first is Hindu mythology and the second is the online virtual world. To trace back the origins of the term avatar, one should travel to the land of deities, India, and examine the Hindu Culture. In Sanskrit, Avatara means “descent,” which, “in Hinduism refers to an incarnation, a bodily manifestation, of an immortal being” (Waggoner 8). Then, an avatar is a God within a human body.

The term *avatar* is also used in the computing system “to describe the digital representation of a physical person in a virtual world” (Kuniavsky 104). Neal Stephenson, in his book *Snow Crash* (1992), adds a new understanding of the word *avatar*. He says the word “‘avatar’ (in the sense used here)” is an intention which “I came up with when I decided that existing words (such as ‘virtual reality’) were simply too awkward to use” (470). Stephenson uses the term because he

thinks it conveys what he means about alter-reality<sup>51</sup> more than other words do.

According to Stephenson, one of the features the avatar provides is that you can control how your avatar looks like “up to the limitations of your equipments” (36). You can hide bad features and invent good ones. If one is ugly, one can make his avatar look prettier. If one is fat, one can make his avatar look thinner.

When combining both versions of the avatar, we can come up with a new use of the term as related to literature. In this article, what is meant by an avatar is the fictionalized self of the author in his work. It is the mythical figure that owns super powers, something the human author does not. In Hinduism, gods used these avatars “to access the physical mortal world of humanity” (Waggoner 8). In the world of pen and paper, humans create avatars of themselves through the means of fictionalization. The reasons behind their fictionalization are to be examined in detail. On the other hand, humans hide themselves behind a computerized version in a world of alter reality. Frey’s avatar mingles characteristics of both types of avatar to create a unique version. Despite the fact that Frey uses his real name, what he does throughout his book is related to a different character or an alter ego as it happens with the computerized version of humans. In fact, he creates events and alters his world by himself. Hence, his text is a fictional representation of James Frey’s self, which results in the creation of an avatar, but it was presented to readers as a memoir. For example, in the book, Frey mentions that he is arrested and sentenced to nearly three months in jail for carrying drugs and alcohol, hitting a policeman with his car and being violent when arrested. However, the Smoking Gun website contacted the police station and revealed that facts were altered and the real event was different and much simpler. Actually, Frey had one traffic ticket as a result of driving without a license and the second one for driving while being

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<sup>51</sup> It refers to facts, which are used with alterations in their conventionality to achieve fictional ends. This creates consequently potential or supposed realities and universes, which were not likely suggested using facts (Elder-Vass 235).



drunk, and was kept in the police station for five hours only and released after paying 733 dollars (Bastone N. pag.).

Frey's memoir was already successful, but the media made it even more famous. In an episode entitled: "The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake at Night: *A Million Little Pieces*" from "The Oprah Winfrey Show" in 2005, Oprah says the book is, like "nothing you've ever read before" (N. pag.). When a media figure like Oprah Winfrey adds a book to her Book Club list and asserts such a view about it, this makes it fly again to the top of *The New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list for fifteen weeks (Bastone N. pag.). The book sales have reached 3.5 million copies, and it was published in twenty-two languages (Barton N. pag.).

Frey was enjoying the success of his book and the glorification of his experience as a drug addict who won over addiction. He satisfied the public hunger for true stories about heroic and inspirational recovery, and he was satisfied, but not for so long. When lights were cast on him, and he became a celebrity, the curtain fell and James Frey's story was broken into "a million little pieces of lies" by "The Smoking Gun", a website which is interested in exposing famous people's laundry. This seemingly "true" story was proven by evidence to be fraudulent to a great extent. After his deceit was exposed, he had to face the nationwide anger.

In order to arrive at a broad understanding of Frey's book and people's reaction to it, more information about memoir writing is needed. This inquiry starts mainly with the questions about the meaning of *memoir*. What is all the narrative process about? Since an author writes 'himself' into paper, then the answer is the self, but what is meant by the self? First of all, the self is not an easy thing to define. Hence, it is a source of disagreement among critics of the self. It can be defined in different ways depending on the perspective one is using. According to Jennifer Beer, "the self consists of internal, external, and socially perceived attributes that are shaped by a number of factors, including culture, time and motivation" (330). In other words, the self is also about how others see you i.e., your social representation. This is probably one of the reasons that led Frey to provide his readers with an aggrandized version of himself, in which he is portrayed as a strong human who overcomes his drug addiction.

As far as self-writing is concerned, language is a tool used by the author to express himself. At first glance, writing the self may seem like a recent production of the human mind. However, the truth is that choosing the self as “something to write about . . . is one of the most ancient Western traditions” as Foucault notes (27). When we take a look at the history of self-writing, we find that the way of dealing with the self in literature has encountered dramatic changes throughout the ages. The process of writing the self is mainly about the rendering of a life into a story. During the 18th century, “it was considered more generally equivalent to ‘biography’, and biography was considered more generally to include autobiography and perhaps other kinds of autobiographical writing” (Kadar 3). What grasps one’s attention is that authors seem to get deeper into the area of the self, which was at first characterized by being private (Heehs N. pag.). In the twenty-first century, authors began to provide their readers with a detailed description of themselves.

Writing the self can take different forms like diaries, memoirs and autobiographies. An author can write himself within the layers of fiction, hide himself between the lines of imagination, or expose himself to the public through an autobiographical work. Traditionally speaking, autobiography is considered as “a theatre of self-expression, self-knowledge and self-discovery” (Woods 147). It is the most obvious way in which the self is expressed openly in front of the public. Moreover, its main practice is based on the author’s choice to say that this is “I” and this is my story as told by me. When Frey describes how he sees himself, he says “I have no self-confidence, no self-esteem, no sense of self-worth. My sense of self-preservation was gone a long time ago” (AML 52).

About the matter of self-fictionalization, Alex Hughes indicates that autofiction “offers a patently enriched and treated, hence fictionalized, and metamorphic, version of the life-story of the autofictionneur” (qtd. in Kaindl and Spitzl 222). What we may infer from Hughes’ words is that autofiction provides an edited version of the writer’s life. This version is mainly characterized by being treated with fictional elements to create a metamorphosis out of the author’s self. When looking at Frey’s book with that loop, we

can notice that this is exactly what he did. He actually provided a version, or we may refer to it as a copy of himself since it looks different from the original. The result of this fictionalization is referred to in this article as an avatar. Frey gives us hints about the avatar he created of himself as he says, “I made other alterations in my portrayal of myself, most of which portrayed me in ways that made me tougher and more daring and more aggressive than in reality I was, or I am” (“Frey’s Note to the Reader” N. pag.). For example, he claimed that when he was told no anesthesia, be it local or general neither during nor after was to be used when giving him an urgent tooth treatment, because the centre prohibited the use of Novocane, he easily accepted it and said that he had been through worse situations (*AMLP* 59).

The mythical version of Frey is characterized by possessing stronger powers related to both physical aggressiveness and mental thinking. Moreover, we can refer to James the protagonist as a literary-constructed version of Frey’s. As people do when they create avatars online, Frey presents to his audience a glorified copy of himself, a copy which fills in what he lacks. He admits this fact when he says “...writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience” (“Frey’s Note to the Reader” N. pag.).

In the case of Frey, and with all the questioning of his truthfulness, the reason behind his self-fictionalization needed to be explained to his readers. To this end, he said “people cope with adversity in many different ways, ways that are deeply personal. I think one way people cope is by developing a skewed perception of themselves that allows them to overcome and do things they thought they couldn’t do before” (“Frey’s Note to the Reader” N. pag.). Then, what led Frey to fictionalize himself was a need for an avatar that is stronger and owns ‘magical powers’ as in Hindu mythology. When one sees himself as a creature who is able to do what he cannot do as the person he is, he glorifies himself. This is the excuse we can infer from Frey’s words.

Since the self is the core of autobiographical/autofictional writing, readers expect this self to be written with an ink made of truthfulness. Mridula Garg in her article “Writing the Self” opposes this consensus view, and asserts that “any conscious attempt to write a true or honest

portrayal of the self is self-defeating” (93). In other terms, it is impossible to write truthfully about the self because most probably one cannot be objective when it comes to self portrayal. In the same vein, A.O.J. Cockshut declares “the last thing any person, however truthful, learns to treat with perfect fairness is the self” (12). But what about all these autobiographies that were claimed to be true throughout history? They are actually not as true as they appear. Taking a look back at history shows that they seem truthful accounts, but they are not devoid of fabrications. In fact, literary fabrications are not new, but they may be as old as autobiography itself. Not many admitted their fabrications, but there are a few examples like that of Ernest Hemingway who said about his memoir *A Moveable Feast* that if the reader prefers, this book may be regarded as fiction (Donaldson 33). By espousing this belief, the authenticity high-pitched voice should lower down.

To support this idea, Paul John Eakin argues that the self “is necessarily a fictive structure” (3). This is then the first supportive argument to the idea that not being truthful is accepted when dealing with self writing. In this sense, “fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life” (5). In simpler terms, fiction is a necessary tool for understanding truth. Eakin’s account may prove helpful in understanding Frey’s fictional episodes in his book. Frey made it clear that the purpose of his writing was not to claim authenticity but to impact people with his experience. Frey apologizes by saying:

I am deeply sorry to any readers who I have disappointed and I hope these revelations will not alter their faith in the book’s central message—that drug addiction and alcoholism can be overcome, and there is always a path to redemption if you fight to find one. Thirteen years after I left treatment, I’m still on the path, and I hope, ultimately, I’ll get there. (“Frey’s Note to the Reader” N. pag.)

Even autobiographies may contain fictitious ingredients in them. It is just that the autobiographical pact does somehow blindfold the reader’s eyes. Nevertheless, a close look at autobiographies may totally change the way people see

truthfulness in terms of how truth itself has subjective connotations. Hence, it can give an excuse to Frey's lies in his book. Doubrovsky supports this view by saying: "even classical autobiographers know that they are writing fiction" (qtd. in Jones 97).

Generally, it is hard for critics and readers to differentiate between fictional and non-fictional elements in a memoir. There is no software to separate what is real from what is 'fabricated.' In the case of *AMLP*, a very helpful tool was provided by "The Smoking Gun" website. After this website's investigation, the veracity of Frey was called into question, and readers were required to read between the lies. Ethically speaking, this work causes moral troubles to Frey. It was, and is still, a disdained work. What is ironic in Frey's case is his emphasis on truth in the book. He says:

My mind is clear and my urges are gone and my heart is beating slow and steady. In my mind, my obituary is done. It is done and it is right. It tells the truth, and as awful as it can be. The truth is what matters. It is what I should be remembered by, if I am remembered at all. Remember the truth. It is all that matters. (*AMLP* 95)

Frey goes on to insist on the vitality of truth and only truth in several parts of the book by saying: "Truth is all that matters" (98, 159). The reader after that is invited to feel safe and believe everything in the book because of that great emphasis on truth, which seems of great importance to the author.

Besides, in his first interview with Oprah, he said "I was a bad guy . . . If I was gonna write a book that was TRUE, and I was gonna write a book that was HONEST, then I was gonna have to write about myself in very very negative ways" ("The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake" N. pag. emphasis mine). This indicates that Frey had to alter some facts in order to see himself positively as a stronger creature with super powers of an avatar.

In Frey's opinion, the shibboleth about truthfulness in memoir writing does not hold true. He also focuses on the fact that he was not in his full senses because he was a recovering addict. For him, he said the truth, but in his own way ("Frey's Note to the Reader" N.pag.). The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard theorized something about "subjective

truth". For him what matters is that the individual himself believes something is true, and is not necessarily for the whole world to believe it (Solomon 73).

In a second episode with Oprah Winfrey, Frey admits lying, and about the information that the investigative website published, he said "I think most of what they wrote was pretty accurate." Frey's defense was composed of several sections to clarify his point. First, he says that the reason behind his lying was that "I thought of myself as being tougher than I was and badder than I was—and it helped me cope. When I was writing the book . . . instead of being as introspective as I should have been, I clung to that image" ("JFAMLPC" N. pag.). So, as mentioned earlier, Frey's avatar formation was essential for overcoming his addiction, and the fictionalization of himself made him "Mr Bravado tough guy" as in Oprah's words. Another lie that he reveals in Oprah Show is that Lilly, the woman he fell for in the rehab, did not hang herself as he wrote in the book, but only cut her wrists. However, he did not explain why he altered this truth, but in another place, he said "I had just written about certain events in a different way" (Barton N. pag.). Further on this topic, in Larry King's Show, he said that he changed some incidents because he thought some of them were "too ridiculous" or for "simple reasons of efficiency." As an example for his account, he said that in reality, "[He] fell down, [his] lower teeth tore up [his] lip and penetrated it in two separate places." However, in the book, what he wrote was that he cut his cheek (Barton N. pag.).

About the intense and fired criticism of the American media, and the fury of American people after the curtain fell on Frey's fact alterations, he explains that: "America in a lot of ways is still a puritan society ... there are a lot of issues related to truth that are at the forefront of our culture right now" (Barton N.pag.).

Accordingly, trying to write in a pure, truthful way is a very hard task for authors to fulfill, as truthfulness in self representation and events account requires such a great accuracy. However, the reader seems to not respect this matter, and all he cares about is sincerity from the author's part.

It is worth bringing an original focus on the fact/fiction dichotomy. Controversies around the relationship between

fact and fiction have served as stimuli for a larger debate around the issue of genre in *AMLP*. Genre is “a specific type of artistic or cultural composition, identified by codes which the audience recognize” (Anderson 142). Each published work is supposed to be labelled with its genre, whether it is fiction, non-fiction, novel, fable, etc. After Frey was done with writing his book and billing it as a novel, he visited several publishers. The book was rejected by all of them, including the one that published it later, which is Doubleday. Later on, Frey’s debut work was granted access into the world of publication, but the subtitle “novel” was substituted by “memoir” because of the popularity of non-fiction at that time (Barton N. pag.).

The dilemma surrounding *AMLP* revolves mainly around its genre. It is generally acknowledged that the memoir genre is non-fiction. The exposure of Frey’s fact alterations shakes this notion. As a result, the book was accused of being no more than a novel. In fact, what grants the book its glorious success was its being a memoir i.e., a real story.

In defense of his book’s status as a memoir, Frey claims that there is nothing against the book’s classification as a memoir, simply because “A memoir, the word literally means my story. A memoir is a subjective retelling of events,” and this is what he wrote exactly (“IWJF” N. pag.). Critics and readers disagree with this view and consider the book to be a mere work of fiction that is generally classified as a novel. Frey clearly opposes this view; for him the genre of the novel cannot be devoid of the author’s autobiographical elements. He provides examples of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Charles Bukowski and Henry Miller’s novels, and he believes that not thinking that these works were about the lives of these men is “a ridiculous idea” (Barton N. pag.). He goes on to compare his book to the latter works in the sense that *AMLP* is “working in sort of a tradition—a long tradition of what American writers have done in the past” (“IWJF” N. pag.).

Furthermore, he argues that the only reason that made the previously mentioned works not to be published under the title of “memoir” is because this genre did not exist at that time. In the same breath, Frey supports his arguments with reliable information about Kerouac’s novel *On the*

*Road*. This book “was going to be published as non-fiction, and they altered it cos they were worried about legal ramifications” (Barton N. pag.). In other words, if both fiction and fact were mingled within the novel, though it was supposed to be fictive only, they should be allowed to mix under the umbrella of non-fiction.

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## **Mythe et vérité, vérité du mythe Le problème de la forme de la vérité dans la discussion de Cassirer par Merleau-Ponty**

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La question du mythe a été abordée au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle de nombreuses façons par des penseurs d'horizon différents. Parmi ces penseurs qui ont pris la forme mythique au sérieux, on peut noter à titre d'exemple Mircea Eliade auteur de textes sur les aspects du mythe ou plus généralement sur celui, paradigmatique, de l'éternel retour. On peut également noter des analyses structurales avec la pensée de Claude Lévi-Strauss et ses analyses de *l'histoire de lynx* ou de *la potière jalouse* pour ne prendre que quelques études significatives. On peut enfin parler de *la philosophie des formes symboliques* d'Ernest Cassirer qui comprend dans la deuxième partie de l'ouvrage une analyse de la pensée mythique.

Le but de cet auteur qu'on range dans la pensée néokantienne est de comprendre les formes symboliques. Il propose dans ce cadre-là une analyse des mythes comme des formes de pensées distinctes de la pensée scientifique. Ce sont moins les valeurs de vérité et de fausseté au sens factuel du terme qui importent que les valeurs de sacré et de profane, c'est-à-dire les valeurs de la religion qui sont mises en avant. En procédant ainsi, on s'aperçoit que la forme de la vérité scientifique et la forme mythique obéissent à des règles symboliques différentes. Ainsi le mythe proposerait une analyse qui serait d'ordre "structurel" quand la science proposerait des analyses "fonctionnelles." On voit qu'on n'a pas affaire au même symbolisme dans les deux cas.

Cependant, cette distinction des formes de la pensée symboliques n'implique pas nécessairement qu'on ait affaire à des formes distinctes au sujet de la vérité. Certes la pensée mythique n'entre pas dans le cadre d'un discours qui est vérifiable factuellement: l'existence de Zeus n'est pas démontrable selon des procédures qui aboutissent à la constitution d'un fait scientifique. Mais cela ne signifie pas que la forme symbolique mythique soit fausse. Tout dépend en réalité de la définition qu'on donne à la vérité: la forme symbolique mythique n'est fausse que si on limite la vérité à la vérité factuelle. On peut se demander en revanche si elle n'est pas vraie au sens où elle ouvre un monde comme une totalité dont les fragments ne seraient pas épars mais auraient, comme le *symbolon* de l'antiquité à se réjoindre. Opposé à la vérité des faits, nous aurions une vérité de la forme comprise comme *Gestalt* qui apparaîtrait.

Le but de notre propos sera de montrer que la discussion que le philosophe français Maurice Merleau-Ponty a avec Ernest Cassirer porte sur ce rapport de la pensée mythique à la vérité: en montrant que la pensée mythique est une mise en forme, Cassirer et Merleau-Ponty qui s'entendent sur ce point, montrent qu'un comportement qui peut être faux au niveau factuel possède une vérité au niveau de la vérité comprise comme forme au sens de la mise en forme de la transcendance des sujets vers le monde.

Il faudra alors savoir comment les questions que posent Merleau-Ponty à la pensée de Cassirer permettent de comprendre les rapports du mythe à la vérité non pas dans un rapport aux faits compris comme fragments isolés (ce qui semble être le cas dans la vérité factuelle), mais comme vérité symbolique, c'est-à-dire vérité qui recompose les fragments au niveau d'une totalité disparue et qui peut de ce fait donner une ouverture au monde que la vérité factuelle ignore.

Nous établirons comment la forme symbolique mythique s'oppose à la forme symbolique scientifique dans la pensée de Cassirer et nous essaierons de voir s'il est légitime de parler de vérité dans ce cas. Ceci nous amènera à voir comment on peut rendre vivante la pensée du mythe chez Cassirer en l'approchant de la notion merleau-pontyenne d'institution qui permet de penser la vérité non pas comme

vérité factuelle, mais comme ouverture au monde dont il faut rendre compte.

**Fonction et structure: le mythe comme interprétation de l'espace et du temps.**

Les analyses d'Ernest Cassirer au sujet de la pensée mythique s'attardent sur la pensée positive et sur le point de vue d'Auguste Comte. Le positivisme reste une philosophie de l'histoire qui serait marquée par le passage successif de l'esprit humain par trois états. Cassirer le présente ainsi:

La philosophie positiviste de l'histoire et de la civilisation telle qu'elle a été instituée par Auguste Comte en particulier, admet une hiérarchie dans le développement de l'esprit, qui conduirait peu à peu l'humanité des états "primitifs" de la conscience jusqu'à la connaissance théorique, et ainsi jusqu'à la domination complète de l'esprit sur la réalité. (Cassirer II, 1972, 276)

Cassirer ne sembla pas trahir la loi des trois états telle qu'elle est énoncée dans le *discours sur l'esprit positif*. Il s'agit de passer d'un état théologique qui est spontané à un état métaphysique abstrait pour aboutir à un état positif et réel où la vérité apparaîtrait comme "fait". Le "fait" est ce à quoi aboutissent les procédures scientifiques par un processus de systématisation qui s'oppose à la spontanéité initiale. Ce mouvement semble indiquer qu'il y aurait un mouvement qui irait du faux au vrai, même si le faux est une étape inévitable.

L'attitude de Cassirer ne peut être compatible avec celle du positivisme au sujet de la vérité. La question touche le cœur de notre problème. D'un point de vue formel on peut considérer que la vérité est l'adéquation de ce qu'on dit et de ce qui est. Mais cette définition pose plus de problèmes qu'elle ne résout de difficultés. Elle laisse indéterminé le problème de savoir si "ce qui est" est extérieur au langage ou si le langage est lui-même quelque chose qui est. Or on ne voit pas par quel moyen on pourrait dire que le langage est quelque chose qui n'est pas.

Si on suppose que le langage est extérieur à l'être, on aurait une définition de la vérité qui serait celle d'une forme

de redoublement. Le monde serait constitué par des faits qui préexisteraient à ce qu'on en dit et la vérité consisterait à les dire. La vérité serait redoublement par le langage d'un être qui existe préalablement dans le monde.

On peut critiquer une telle définition de la vérité. Elle exclut ce qui est rangé sous le terme de "performatif" où le langage crée ce qu'il fait. Le problème est que lorsqu'un maire dit "je vous marie", il fait effectivement ce qu'il dit au moment où il le dit et qu'on a une vérité qui ne devance pas sa "représentation." Le terme de "représentation" est lui-même ambigu: il semble impliquer que le monde devance ce qu'on en dit. Or les exemples où ce qu'on dit du monde le crée sont très nombreux et foisonnants. La difficulté que nous soulevons est probablement l'un des points de départ de l'interrogation d'Ernest Cassirer sur les formes symboliques. On voudrait que la vérité soit le redoublement par le langage d'un être qui le devance. Mais tout est plus compliqué: parfois on retrouve à la fin du processus ce qui est censé le devancer.

Le problème de la vérité dans *la philosophie des formes symboliques* tient à la représentation. Il est des représentations qui ne sont pas simplement passives, mais qui possèdent une forme d'activité. Elles mettent les choses en lumière:

La connaissance comme le langage, le mythe et l'art: aucun ne joue le rôle de pur miroir qui renverrait simplement, telles qu'elles se produisent en lui, les images d'un donné de l'être extérieur ou de l'être intérieur; ce ne sont pas des milieux indifférents, mais les véritables sources de lumière, les conditions du voir et l'origine de toute configuration visuelle. (Cassirer I, 1972: 35)

Le mythe appartient à ces formes symboliques à l'origine de toute vision. On sait que Cassirer a proposé trois grands champs d'étude pour les formes symboliques: le langage, la pensée mythique et la pensée scientifique. La vérité y est décrite en termes de vision. Il s'agit de voir et les formes symboliques apparaissent comme de gigantesques machines destinées à voir. Ces machines (le langage, les mythes, l'art, la connaissance scientifique) permettent de voir et

d'identifier ce qui est vu. Cette identification, ce sont les faits. En science, on établit des faits scientifiques. Cassirer aurait probablement donné raison à Auguste Comte quand ce dernier disait que la science établissait des faits. Mais le fait n'est pas l'établissement d'une réalité préalable, c'est le résultat de la machine à fabriquer des faits scientifiques. L'universalité atteinte ne vaut que dans ce champ et non pour tous les domaines. Il est facile de montrer que le processus d'Auguste Comte conduit à une impasse dans laquelle le philosophe positiviste s'est engouffré. Dans le *discours sur l'ensemble du positivisme*, il tombe dans une forme de religion. Pour Cassirer le diagnostic est simple: Auguste Comte n'a pas analysé les formes symboliques ou n'a considéré les formes primitives du symbolisme que comme des formes nécessaires, mais fausses de l'esprit humain. D'où la terrible désillusion pour lui: il faut en appeler à une forme de religion pour achever le système. Auguste Comte n'a pas avoué la désillusion et il assumait presque avec enthousiasme son positionnement. Toutefois l'évolution de la pensée du philosophe impliquait une sorte de cassure à l'intérieur de la philosophie de l'histoire du positivisme. La loi des trois états conduisait non à la victoire de la science, mais au rétablissement de la religion.

Il serait sadique d'insister sur ce point. Cassirer ne se prive pas de ce petit moment de plaisir destructeur quand il remarque :

Cette reconnaissance tardive que la religion et le culte arrachent ici n'est pas seulement un trait caractéristique et important de l'évolution spirituelle de Comte lui-même, elle exprime en même temps l'aveu indirect d'un défaut *objectif* de la construction positiviste de l'histoire. Le schéma des trois degrés, que Comte appelle "la loi des trois états" ne permet aucune appréciation *immanente* de la fonction mythique ou religieuse. (Cassirer II, 1972: 277)

Le mythe ne fonctionne pas selon les mêmes règles symboliques que la science. Il faut savoir s'il fonctionne selon un régime de vérité. Si on entend par vérité l'établissement d'un fait scientifique, la réponse est non. Si on entend par

vérité l'ouverture d'un regard au monde, les choses deviennent plus complexes.

Comprendre un mythe, c'est en dégager la forme. Elle n'est pas la forme scientifique. Elle se distingue également de la forme langagière. On peut constater que le mythe structure et met en forme l'espace selon une intuition mythique. La science est une activité symbolique formatrice d'espace. Elle ne procède cependant pas de la même manière. Pour la connaissance scientifique, l'espace est engendré de manière dynamique: la ligne est, par exemple, engendrée à partir du point. L'espace est quelque chose de construit. Il naît de cette fonction. La forme mythique, quant à elle, n'est pas formatrice d'espace à partir d'une fonction. Elle comprend l'espace comme structure. L'opposition de la structure et de la fonction recoupe celle du statique et du dynamique. Cassirer insiste sur cette distinction :

L'espace du mythe, à l'inverse de cet espace *fonctionnel* de la mathématique pure, s'avère être un espace totalement *structurel*. Le tout ne naît pas des éléments, il ne *devient* pas en se développant génétiquement. Nous avons plutôt un rapport purement statique d'intériorité et d'inhérence. Aussi loin que nous puissions faire progresser l'intériorité et l'inhérence. Aussi loin que nous puissions faire progresser l'analyse, nous trouvons dans chaque partie la forme, la structure du tout. Cette forme n'est donc pas, comme dans l'analyse mathématique, éclatée en éléments homogènes et, partant, dépourvus de figure propre. Elle demeure, sans être détruite dans cette division et sans en être affectée. La totalité du monde de l'espace et avec lui du cosmos en général apparaît construite selon un certain *modèle* qui peut se présenter à nous tantôt à une échelle agrandie, tantôt à une échelle réduite, mais qui reste dans le maximum comme dans le minimum, toujours identique. (Cassirer II, 1972: 115)

Le mythe se présente comme éternel retour du tout dans les parties et des parties dans le tout. La configuration de l'espace comme structure et non comme fonction aboutit à la forme de la répétition absolue. Mais cette répétition est



répétition dans la différence. Ce qui structure l'espace du mythe, c'est l'opposition du sacré et du profane. Contrairement à l'espace mathématique homogène, l'espace du mythe est valorisé. D'où l'importance de certains lieux de passages: les seuils. Tous les lieux ne se valent pas. Ce qui est vrai du lieu est vrai du temps. Dans le temps calendaire, les mythes valorisent certains jours quand ils sont sacrés: les jours de fête montrent un temps qui n'est pas homogène. Il y a une valorisation des lieux et des temps et non une homogénéisation scientifique. Le mythe apparaît comme une valorisation du monde à travers une dimension affective.

Il importe de rendre compte du fonctionnement de la pensée mythique. Ce qui est dit dans les mythes ne constitue pas une vérité factuelle au sens scientifique. Mais ce type de pensée n'est pas faux au sens d'une étape qui serait une propédeutique au vrai que seule la science donnerait. La pensée mythique est une pensée de la valorisation : l'espace n'y est pas homogène, le temps non plus. La distinction du sacré et du profane commande les distinctions. Le mythe n'est pas une vérité amoindrie : il est donateur de sens parce qu'il figure un différentiel entre les temps et les lieux qui leur confère une forme de valeur. D'une certaine façon, la pensée mythique répond au cri de Pascal : "le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie." La science s'occupe bien d'espace infini et homogène qui n'a rien à nous dire concernant le sens de nos vies. Ces espaces ne possèdent apparemment aucune tonalité affective. Cependant cette absence d'affect crée un affect qui est l'effroi devant ce monde absurde parce que complètement homogène. On ne saurait reprocher à Blaise Pascal d'avoir été un scientifique. Mais il sentait l'absurdité d'un monde physique complètement homogène qui n'aurait rien à nous dire. Cassirer se distingue de Pascal cependant parce qu'il interroge la pensée mythique au niveau des formes symboliques. Pour lui, la science possède également une fonction symbolique même si son fonctionnement diffère de la pensée mythique.

La pensée de Cassirer organise la pensée mythique de façon à la comprendre comme une forme symbolique. Le dernier chapitre du livre sur la pensée mythique analyse cette forme d'un point de vue "dialectique." Ce terme n'est pas expliqué. S'agit-il d'une logique de l'illusion qui doit être levée ? Si on considère que Cassirer rattache une partie de sa

démarche à l'œuvre de Kant, on peut penser que le terme de dialectique renvoie à une logique de l'illusion et à la détermination des limites des facultés de connaissance. Mais si cette dimension est présente, elle n'explique pas complètement son emploi. Cassirer présente la pensée mythique comme un mouvement en trois étapes qui recourent celles qui avaient été présentées dans le tome de *la philosophie des formes symboliques* consacré au langage. Ce sont la forme mimique, la forme analogique et la forme symbolique. Il s'agit d'une dialectique historique.

Il s'agit d'une logique de dégagement des illusions puisque le mime, première forme mythique, laisse tout dans l'indifférenciation. Le mime n'est pas vu comme représentation, mais comme la présence d'un dieu. Cassirer introduit une distinction entre le mythe et la religion. Le mythe et la religion ont pour point commun d'organiser une distinction du sacré et du profane. Toutefois à la dimension mythique qui ne se déroule que du point de vue signifiant et ne porte que sur un régime de signe, la religion apporte une dimension qui est la question de l'existence (Cassirer II, 1972: 280).<sup>52</sup> Cette question aboutit à ne plus identifier le signe avec ce qui est, mais à passer à une étape analogique. Ainsi s'ouvre l'ère herméneutique qui cherche à comprendre les modalités de la compréhension. Le problème qui s'est posé aux doctes et intellectuels était celui de savoir comment comprendre les textes religieux, alors que ceux-ci sont équivoques: ils comportent plusieurs sens. Cassirer rappelle en citant Dante (Cassirer II, 1972 : 299-300) qu'il y a quatre sens dégagés par la pensée analogique: le sens littéral, le sens allégorique, le sens moral et le sens anagogique. Ce dernier porte sur le rapport à l'invisible. Le sens anagogique apparaît comme le sens suprême: révélation du supraterrrestre au

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<sup>52</sup> La religion peut sembler poser des questions plus "réelles" que la pensée mythique. On peut se demander si dans les sociétés de consommation dite laïques, c'est-à-dire qui ne s'intéressent pas aux questions religieuses dans le discours public, on n'a pas une régression au niveau du questionnement. Le discours publicitaire commercial surabondant fonctionne ainsi comme un régime de signes; il ne s'intéresse absolument pas à savoir quel est le rapport de ces signes avec une quelconque existence. La société de consommation fonctionne ainsi comme mythe, mais pas comme religion, ce qui permet d'amoindrir ses responsabilités.

sein du terrestre. Il est question d'un double mouvement de montée du visible vers l'invisible et de redescente de l'invisible vers le visible. La compréhension de la pensée mythique comme forme symbolique apparaît quand le lien entre invisible et visible n'est plus vu comme une question de contenu, mais de forme.

La formation scientifique d'un événement ne dépend plus désormais de son contenu, mais uniquement de sa forme: il reçoit son caractère symbolique, non pas d'après ce qu'il est, ni selon son origine immédiate, mais de l'aspect spirituel sous lequel il apparaît, autrement dit de la "relation" à l'univers qu'il acquiert dans le sentiment et la pensée religieuses. Ce sont ces allées et venues, l'oscillation vivante entre ces deux conceptions fondamentales qui constituent le mouvement de l'esprit religieux, par laquelle se construit sa forme spécifique qui est ainsi moins une forme statique qu'un mode particulier de formation. (Cassirer II, 1972 : 304)

On voit que le mythe apparaît non comme une vérité affaiblie, mais comme une formation de la pensée qui offre une valorisation du monde à partir de l'opposition du sacré et du profane. Le penser comme forme symbolique, c'est le réhabiliter en fixant sa limite: si le mythe propose du sens, et de la signification comme forme symbolique, il éprouve des difficultés par rapport au problème de l'existence (Cassirer II, 1972 : 305).

### **Les limites de la compréhension du mythe comme forme symbolique: signe et symbole. Ouverture au monde par la chair.**

La limite de la pensée mythique tient à ce qu'elle ne passe pas l'épreuve de l'existence. La pensée scientifique peine sur le problème de la signification. Le symbolisme est chaque fois différent, mais bute toujours sur une limite.

La philosophie des formes symboliques de Cassirer obtint une audience certaine et fut fortement discutée. Il rencontra Martin Heidegger à Davos en 1929. Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposa pour sa part, des analyses du

troisième tome de *la philosophie des formes symboliques* dans *la phénoménologie de la perception*. Il fit également une référence critique à Cassirer dans le cours qu'il donna au Collège de France en 1954-1955 sur la notion d'institution.

La notion de symbole occupe une place déterminante dans la pensée merleau-pontyenne: le symbole est vu comme un signe qui est en même temps un fragment du monde qui doit se recomposer et qui a vocation à former une communauté. Le symbole est un signe de reconnaissance. La notion d'institution analysée par le philosophe est une notion liée à celle du symbole. Le symbole est ce fragment qui a à se recomposer pour être signifiant. Il apparaît central dans une pensée de la réversibilité qui est la "vérité ultime" (Merleau-Ponty 1964 : 204). C'est sur ce fond d'une fragmentation de l'imaginaire et du réel et d'une complémentarité des deux que le philosophe tient sa pensée. Le problème tient dans une forme de collusion entre le mythe et la réalité. L'imaginaire traverse le réel et le réel traverse l'imaginaire. C'est la figure du chiasme qui rend compte de ce qui est.

Merleau-Ponty adresse une critique à la philosophie des formes symboliques de Cassirer. Celle-ci semblerait traiter des formes symboliques d'un point de vue absolu, alors que la philosophie est prise dans le jeu de l'expression. Elle n'est pas un point de vue absolu hors monde. Elle est comprise en lui. Vouloir dégager les formes symboliques dans leurs règles en se plaçant d'un point de vue transcendant paraît insuffisant:

Faiblesse de la philosophie de Cassirer: croire que le criticisme est point d'arrivée, que le sens philosophique a valeur rectrice, alors qu'il est lui-même pris dans la sédimentation. Considérer le criticisme lui-même comme forme symbolique et non comme philosophie des formes symboliques. (Merleau-Ponty 2003 : 82)

Cassirer produirait une philosophie de l'histoire possédant un point final et absolu: celui de la philosophie des formes symboliques. Il proposerait une philosophie de la réflexion qui aboutirait à dégager trois étapes pour la pensée mythique: le mime, l'analogie, la forme symbolique; la philosophie aurait pour tâche de dégager les lois d'un tel

développement. Ce sont ces problèmes de la réflexion qui sont abordés. Une telle philosophie ne serait tenable pour Merleau-Ponty qu'à une unique condition: il faudrait trouver un point hors du monde pour cette réflexion. Mais ce point est introuvable. Il faut passer par une "surréflexion," c'est-à-dire par un discours qui n'est plus déraciné du monde, une pensée de "survol," mais qui tient à l'enracinement de l'homme. L'homme n'est jamais un pur spectateur dans le monde: le monde n'est pas installé dans un face à face avec le sujet, il n'est pas simplement ce qui fait face, il est ce qui entoure:

En d'autres termes, nous entrevoyons la nécessité d'une autre opération que la conversion réflexive, plus fondamentale qu'elle, d'une sorte de surréflexion qui tiendrait compte d'elle-même et les changements qu'elle introduit dans le spectacle, qui donc ne perdrait pas de vue la chose et la perception brutes, et qui enfin ne les effacerait pas, ne couperait pas par une hypothèse d'inexistence, les liens organiques de la perception et de la chose perçue, et se donnerait au contraire pour tâche de les penser de réfléchir sur la transcendance du monde comme transcendance, d'en parler non pas comme la loi des significations de mots inhérentes au langage, mais par un effort, peut-être difficile, qui les emploie à exprimer, au-delà d'elle-même, notre contact muet avec les choses, quand elles ne sont pas encore des choses dites. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 61)

La pensée de Merleau-Ponty s'inscrit dans un horizon ontologique. L'être est fait de cette étoffe qui lie l'expression à une dimension sauvage où il y a une indistinction entre réel et imaginaire et entre le mythe et la réalité. Le mythe, soit sous la forme qu'ont rencontrée les ethnologues, soit sous la forme qu'il prend dans les sociétés modernes et industrielles, serait une forme de rencontre de l'être avec l'être sauvage.

S'il semble possible de dire que le mythe habite nos sociétés dites modernes qui évoluent en clamant leur rationalité avec leur métamorphose (société industrielle, société de consommation, société numérique, société . . .), c'est parce que Merleau-Ponty pose la possibilité de devenir

l'ethnologue de sa propre culture, c'est-à-dire de regarder celle-ci comme "autre." L'ethnologie apparaît comme une méthode permettant de cerner la part de mythe qui habite toute culture :

L'ethnologie n'est pas une spécialité définie par un objet particulier, les sociétés "primitives"; c'est une manière de penser, celle qui s'impose quand l'objet est "autre" et exige que nous nous transformions nous-mêmes. Ainsi devenons-nous les ethnologues de notre propre société, si nous prenons distance envers elle. (Merleau-Ponty 1960: 194)

La question de la vérité ne se pose pas de la même manière quand on l'envisage du point de vue d'une philosophie de la réflexion et du point de vue d'une philosophie de la surréflexion qui renvoie à l'"ontologie de la chair." Merleau-Ponty précise que ce terme "n'a de nom dans aucune philosophie" (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 193) et qu'il n'est pas la "matière," (Merleau-Ponty 1964 : 191). La chair est une désignation de l'être et du problème qu'elle pose dans son rapport entre l'être sauvage, l'institué, le civilisé. Elle se manifeste dans le rapport des sens au monde :

La chair est l'enroulement du visible sur le corps voyant, du tangible sur le corps touchant, qui est attesté notamment quand le corps se voit, se touche en train de voir et de toucher les choses, de sorte que simultanément, comme tangible, il descend parmi elles, comme touchant, il les domine toutes et tire de lui-même ce double rapport, par déhiscence ou fission de sa masse. (Merleau-Ponty 1964 : 191-192)

Toute chair est habitée par un mouvement violent: ce mouvement est celui de la vérité. Par vérité, il ne faut pas entendre la vérité factuelle, mais une vérité d'interprétation. Mais s'il y a interprétation, cela s'explique d'un point de vue ontologique: l'homme est pris dans le monde qui vaut comme chair, c'est-à-dire comme un va et vient entre le visible et celui qui est vu, entre le tangible et ce qui est touché et de manière plus universelle, par l'être sauvage avec ce qui souhaite une rationalité. Si on rattache la notion de chair à la vérité, on parvient à l'idée que la chair est ce qui

permet notre ouverture au monde. On ne peut parler de “fait” que sur ce fond d’ouverture. C’est cette ouverture qui est première et doit être vue pour saisir la vérité comme ce qui permet l’apparaître :

Il nous a semblé que la tâche était de décrire strictement notre rapport au monde, non pas comme ouverture du néant à l’être, mais comme ouverture simplement: c’est par l’ouverture que nous pourrions comprendre l’être et le néant, non par l’être et le néant que nous pourrions comprendre l’ouverture. Du point de vue de *l’Être et le Néant*, l’ouverture à l’être veut dire que je le visite en lui-même: s’il reste éloigné, c’est que le néant, l’anonyme en moi qui voit, pousse devant lui-même une zone de vide où l’être n’est plus seulement, mais est vu. (Merleau-Ponty 1964 : 135)

La question est de savoir si la dialectique donne accès à l’être en sa vérité. On ne peut partir de l’opposition de l’être et du néant. La vérité est un acte de transcendance vers le monde à partir d’une ouverture qui doit être vue: c’est dans la vision de cette ouverture que des vérités factuelles se détachent. La pensée mythique n’est pas à voir ici comme une pensée symbolique, mais comme une pensée permettant une ouverture à un monde et une compréhension de celui-ci à partir de l’ouverture qui y a été forée. Le mythe n’apparaît pas comme une demi-vérité, comme une vérité morcelée et mutilée, il apparaît comme ce qui autorise une ouverture au monde qui est vérité. Mais si la vérité se définit ainsi, c’est que les démarches d’une philosophie de la réflexion ont été insuffisantes pour rendre compte de l’ouverture au monde. C’est ici que s’opposent une philosophie des formes symboliques et une ontologie de la chair.

Il ne faut pas croire que les complexes, les rêves ou les névroses des Occidentaux nous donnent en clair la vérité du mythe, de la magie ou de la sorcellerie. Selon la règle de double critique qui est celle de la méthode ethnologique, il s’agit aussi bien de voir la psychanalyse comme mythe ou le psychanalyste comme sorcier ou shamann. (Merleau-Ponty 1960 : 197)

La philosophie doit être doublement critique pour rendre compte de la vérité, pour voir, ce qui rend possible l'ouverture à l'être. C'est dans le cercle de l'analyste qui doit également être analysé que le mythe peut révéler ainsi sa vérité. De ce fait la vérité est à comprendre à partir de ce cercle et cette double appartenance à l'ordre de la subjectivité et de l'objectivité qui constitue justement la chair. Tout ceci repose finalement sur la forme même de la vérité. Celle-ci n'est pas simplement adéquation de ce qu'on dit et de ce qui est, c'est-à-dire une vérité factuelle ou l'entente de l'être est plus ou moins supposée sans entrer dans le champ thématique. Elle est d'abord questionnement sur l'ouverture de la chair à elle-même: témoignant de la double appartenance de la chair à l'ordre du sujet et à l'ordre de l'objet, elle prend la forme d'une *Gestaltung*, d'une mise en forme et d'un entrelacs qui se fonde sur le domaine de la réversibilité. De ce point de vue-là, la véritable critique ne consiste pas en la remise en cause des faits, elle consiste à éclairer ce point qui permet aux faits d'être tenus pour vrai et éventuellement à voir quels intérêts (c'est-à-dire désir caché et laissé dans l'obscurité) peuvent soutenir l'agencement de tels ou tels faits. Si une telle vision n'est pas exprimée explicitement par Merleau-Ponty, il est pourtant évident que cette sorte d'"herméneutique du soupçon" est une voie clairement indiquée par le fait d'interroger la vérité dans sa dimension d'ouverture à l'être.

## Conclusion

La discussion de la philosophie d'Ernest Cassirer par Merleau-Ponty met en avant qu'une compréhension des mythes comme formes symboliques s'avère insuffisante à rendre compte de leur vérité ou de leur fausseté. Il y a certes une sorte de réhabilitation de la pensée mythique qui se fait par le philosophe allemand contre la pensée positiviste. Cependant comprendre le mythe comme forme symbolique semble encore devoir se situer en deçà de la vérité. Le questionnement sur la vérité doit porter à la fois sur les vérités factuelles qui se détachent, mais également sur l'ouverture au monde qui les rend possibles. Or c'est là le principal attrait du mythe et sa continuité dans toutes les sociétés en atteste, que celui-ci rend compte d'une ouverture



au monde sauvage, ouverture qui est peut-être occultée par les philosophies réflexives ou même directement dialectiques.

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**PART TWO**  
**ARTS OF ILLUSION**

## **Evolution of a Myth Live The Poppy Project Example**

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### **The Poppy Project**

Poppy is an American singer, named Moriah Pereira, who publishes videos on her YouTube channel under Titanic Sinclair's direction a.k.a Corey Mixter. Her first appearance was in 2014 in a video where she can be seen eating cotton candy. Her YouTube channel is a project about the character of Poppy who, using short format videos, is making a satire of pop-culture, mass consumption society and its values.

Poppy, herself, is a materialization of pop culture and its industry. Her stage name, "Pop-py", defines her in this movement as an allegorical representation of pop-culture. Thereby, the project's aesthetic is making it a form of the ultimate imagery of pop culture. Poppy is a young woman with long and smooth blond hair, a soft and high-pitched voice, who acts like a child. She describes her style as "Barbie kawaiï child,"<sup>53</sup> wears colorful barrettes and little pastel dress. Poppy makes short videos, with abstract side, in which she talks about money, fame or armpit hair.

The messages of her videos are often opaque but respond to a way of conceiving the world of today. But above all, Poppy is a brand: through her look, her behaviour and the topics of her videos and songs, she managed to stir increasing curiosity around her work. The main reason is that she brings together in the same fictional space a kind of actor play and a cryptic treatment of subjects that create a lot

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<sup>53</sup> Official interview with singer That POPPY, uploaded at November 23 2015, Style Verify.

of attention online. This enthusiasm is illustrated by a massive quantity of videos from fans and YouTube users trying to explain Poppy's attitude, the different elements of her channel and the evolution of her character. Thereby, the videos' composition leaves room for interpretation, a personal reading from YouTube users who share their own beliefs and researches about Poppy. This interest comes from the story that is created around the character over the narration, due to the YouTube video format. Every word, action or inaction is studied by users transposing the satirical character into a mythological universe 2.0. Because Poppy puts in her character a range of fabulous representations, which create a peculiar mythology from existing myths, as Illuminati and androids. The use of multiple references introduces a game between what is real and what is fictional. Indeed, these different references can play on the identity of Poppy, between Illuminati's doll, fembot and performer.

### **A Narrative Weaving**

The Poppy Project, which has more than 300 videos shared on YouTube, is built around a dual narrative system. The first narration is based on the clearest message of the videos, the speech: when Poppy speaks about the fact that it is important to be famous or to have money, she produces a speech that puts forward the values to which she attaches importance. These values will be the basis of the formation of her archetypal character, the idol.

Indeed, Poppy behaves like a star of our time, by keeping a certain duality between person and character. She uses social networks to be closer to her fans and to be accessible while remaining distant. She produces commercial, accessible and ephemeral music, with melody and easy-to-remember and to-dance-to lyrics. Her physical appearance is very studied, to the point of being copied by her fans. She is playing on those characteristics with a shift in tone and attitude. More than a sensation of discomfort, this shift in tone allows the duo Poppy-Titanic Sinclair to highlight the absurdity of these patterns.

The Poppy Project presents an archetype of standardized pop-culture. This archetype is parodied into a satirical content which incorporates representative elements

of its philosophy and its values. The criticism of mass culture is expressed through a satirical use of consumption goods and social networks. For instance, Poppy eats food that is typical of today's capitalist society. She eats Doritos in "Doritos Monster Energy Drink," and drinks Redbull while presenting the goods as she was in an advertisement. Beyond the use of brands and famous goods, Poppy shares several videos in which she praises the benefits of money and fame. The parodic use of these elements is undeniable. The staging of commercial goods or desires linked to social elevation can clearly be seen through the distance that Poppy puts in her actor play. She stays impassive, with voice intonations that reflect the desired artificiality.

The whole aesthetic is designed with a remarkable degree of precision. The white-pink background locks the scene into an empty universe, which in certain videos leads to the backstage of a film set. The minimalist stage set produces a feeling of artificiality when it is associated with the stylistic work done on Poppy. Her dresses are always very well thought-out, always very neat, and arranged with utmost accuracy. This clever use of Poppy's appearance can be seen when viewers notice the evolution of her look through her videos. For example, she has slightly tousled hair in her first videos, whereas she sports a mane smoothed to perfection in her most recent ones. The appearance is led to participate in a major storytelling, the creation of Poppy as a brand object, which takes different forms of presentation over the course of the narration.

The elements presented contribute to the creation of a universe that plays between fiction and reality. In a video entitled "Do You Believe in The Internet?" Poppy says: "If it's on the internet, it's real!" Poppy's YouTube channel is built around this prerequisite which allows her to establish a troubled area around her identity. This vagueness around her identity is found throughout the videos and helps to create a narrative around the evolution of Poppy as her career takes off.

The narrative arc "Charlotte Interviews Poppy" is representative of this construction. This arc consists of four videos uploaded between May 26, 2015 and August 31, 2016. In these videos, Poppy is interviewed by a plastic dummy, Charlotte. The videos show Poppy's evolution, both

physically and mentally. On a physical level, Poppy gradually changes her attitude and becomes less and less natural in her gestures. The first video shows a future young singer who laughs while the fourth video shows her body closed on itself and mastered. The background also changes little by little. At first blue, the decor becomes clearer and more sanitized, with the last video having a white background which will become permanent. Changes can also be felt about her answers. The first three videos are made in the tradition of “people” interviews, with a game that flirts with satire as illustrated by this dialogue of the first video:

Charlotte: Poppy, what inspires you as an artist?

Poppy: What an interesting and remarkable question that no one has ever asked me before. . . .

The first three interviews take place normally; Charlotte asks questions and Poppy answers. But the fourth video marks a turning point in the Poppy era. Indeed, Poppy no longer answers Charlotte's questions but gives automatic answers. An excerpt from this video illustrates this sudden shift in tone:

Charlotte: Poppy, I asked you a question.

Poppy: I love my fans, my record label, and my handler.

Charlotte: Are you okay? You aren't making any sense.”

It is with this video that a narrative arc has been crossed, leading to a new one, “Poppy Changed”, which begins December 1, 2016. In this new story arc, friends of Poppy meet to talk about their concerns around her attitude change, from a girl with a dream to a young girl formatted by the music industry. This new arc will allow the introduction of a plot that will remain throughout the videos of Poppy, that of her behavior change and by extension her identity. Because new elements are introduced in the production of her Youtube channel, constituting different facets of Poppy's identity.

### **Mythological Background: The Illuminati Myth**

The video clip “Lowlife”, released on June 24, 2015, takes on themes of conspiracy imagery. The first sequence opens with the singer sitting in front of a white triangle. Her right hand is raised and her left hand lowered, two fingers raised. The only color line of this shot is on the singer who wears a green fake fur coat. The rest of the room is immaculate white. Two extras in full body leotards position themselves with a leg raised on both sides of Poppy. Candles and kawaii-style animal sculptures complete the composition. This first image opens the door to a worked aesthetic that takes over, in an aesthetic diversion, the symbols of occult imagery. Thus, Poppy finds herself at the center of a softened and fluidized representation of the pyramid that has on its summit, not an eye that would clearly indicate the symbolic Illuminati, but a heart that sits in majesty. The heart refers to a value system introduced by Poppy Project, in keeping with a soft link that exists between a pop-star and her fans to whom she says that she loves them. Poppy's position is not trivial either. She borrows the traditional posture of Baphomet,<sup>54</sup> once again with an aesthetic diversion made by the brightness of the composition and by the outfit worn by the singer. The use of Illuminati imagery, Baphomet, or Satanism is common in current pop clips.<sup>55</sup>

In the rest of the clip, Poppy is accompanied by a man disguised as a Devil whose appearance is also softened and made cute. The end of the clip shows older men, three of them in wheelchairs. These characters are references to people in Poppy's unnamed videos. Poppy refers to them only by the use of the pronoun “They”. The use of this pronoun occurs in videos in which Poppy's body language seems all the more controlled. In the video “I Have You”, the slow staging and the behavior of Poppy creates a climate of embarrassment. Poppy is presented only on camera and

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<sup>54</sup> Baphomet is an idol worshiped by the Knights Templar of the 12th century. It did not have any connection with occultism until the 19th century. The first image of Baphomet was created in 1854 by Eliphas Levi to illustrate his book *Doctrine and Ritual of High Magic*. The image was adopted by Anton LaVey in 1966 to integrate the aesthetics of his Church of Satan and became an image of occultism.

<sup>55</sup> For example we can think of the video clip “Black Horse” by Katy Perry or “Yung Rapunxel” by Azealia Banks.

talks about the artificiality of Hollywood, while asking the user to show her satisfaction by liking the video and subscribing to the YouTube channel. The modified voice-over enjoins Poppy to keep her impassive and cold air in front of the camera:

Poppy: “Don't believe everything you see. Here in Hollywood, we call it movie magic. Make sure you like and subscribe and I have you. I have you.”  
Distorted voice: “Just keep looking in that direction. Don't stop looking in that direction.”

As Stéphane François explains, the myth of Illuminati is the myth of the progressive political formation of the Enlightened of Bavaria, whose mission was to fight in the second half of the 18th century against the secret society of the Rose Gold Cross Conservative; it disappeared and is reborn transformed thanks to the internet of the 2000s.<sup>56</sup> The myth fascinates and becomes that of an elite who acts in the shadows to manipulate, enslave and control the masses. It is therefore quite commonly found in current productions.<sup>57</sup> Occultism and conspiracy are objects of curiosity that have experienced a stronger exposure since the arrival of the Internet. Outside of mass culture, it constitutes a fertile ground for proposing a new universe. In the Poppy Project, the occult elements are also parodied, such as the kawaii style devil, in order to make them more ridiculous than frightening. The men in wheelchairs, who represent the team that controls Poppy's productions, appear weak and manageable. The use of the myth of the Illuminati has evolved in the overall composition of the Poppy channel: first used for a comical purpose in 2015, the Illuminati are

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<sup>56</sup> The twentieth century feeds this myth in successive layers. Thus, while literature conveys the myth of the Illuminati since 1958 by the work of William Guy Carr who makes the link between the imagery of the pyramid surmounted by one eye and its presence on the American notes, the 1980s will make the link between society and the Roswell affair through the book by Charles Berlitz and William Moore, *The Mystery of Roswell*. A link is then established between invaders, “reptilians,” and the high institutions.

<sup>57</sup> The Area 51 video game, *Dan Brown's Angels and Demons*, a film-based novel, and Gamma Ray's *No World Order*, may be cited.



increasingly present in the background and appear to be more and more threatening.

Video clips like “Bleach Blond Girl”, “Money” or “Let's Make a Video” also make use of the symbol of the eye of Providence, the pentagram and the pyramid. This usage also appears in the productions of her collaborator Titanic Sinclair, who frequently uses Satanist iconography in his own productions. A video entitled “It's a Global Conspiracy!” released on September 6, 2010 on the YouTube channel Grocerybag (in collaboration with his former partner Mars Argo<sup>58</sup>), shows a comic use of conspiracy theories. The plan shows photos and symbols connected by hands, on comic and distorted music. This 5-seconds montage runs in a loop for 10 minutes. Without saying anything during this video, the duo highlights the madness that surrounds these theories as well as their uselessness. The same use is found in Poppy's videos. Far from endorsing these theories, the videos play on an apparently excessive adoption of these theories to show precisely their inconsistency.

### **Creation of a Futuristic Entity: From The Singer to the Fembot**

The videos in Poppy's YouTube channel are both artistic and parodic. The videos are generally short, between 0:30 seconds and 1:30 minutes. These short formats offer hermetic content that can initially be hard to grasp, mostly with monologues, using a restricted vocabulary. This allows the buildup of a storytelling: specific sentences can be used in different videos, creating a cryptic narration that viewers learn to discern in the background. Therefore, “Being famous is important” phrases that appear in videos like “Fame Is Important” or “Fame is Funny.” These videos appear after three other videos: “Famous People,” “Famous Politician,” and “I Know Who Famous People Are.” The reading order shows a change in Poppy's perception. She begins with

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<sup>58</sup> Mars Argo is currently at the center of a case in which she is attacking Moriah Pereira and Corey Mixer for Copyright infringement, Common Law Right of California's Unfair Business Laws Publicity and domestic violence. The present work does not take any part in this case in progress. It is for this reason that there is only mention of the Poppy Project, regardless of its link with its real creator.

videos of celebrities and then talks about herself as a celebrity, which highlights the advancement of storytelling. This storytelling is not trivial because it will be used to create a brand image. Indeed, the parodic Poppy tends to become herself a brand around which a community can be formed.

The Illuminati background took a much more serious and scary twist. This can be explained by the appeal of this secret society, especially on websites that allow the sharing of content. According to Stéphane François, this appeal refers to a need to explain the complexity of the world. The myth of the Illuminati creates a mysterious and hostile climate, a set conducive to mythical creation. The background, the music and acting seek to recreate this oppressive atmosphere that helps establish a satire of this myth. Indeed, this one uses those symbols to excess, until becoming absurd. This excessive use makes it possible to push the theory to its extreme and thus to discredit it.

In an interview with digital magazine *Circa*, the journalist introduces Poppy in these terms:

She's a YouTube sensation, a pop singer, and, I'm convinced, an alien. A very cute, ingenue-type—but an alien nonetheless.

Fans then produce theories to explain her behavior and know her true identity. Some go further in their speculations and explain her behavior with far fetched theories. For some she acts as a robot, for others an alien or a MK-ultra slave, which belongs to the Illuminati imagery. MK-ultra are programmed people with dualistic minds who can talk to themselves. This theory is illustrated by videos in which Poppy multiplies and spawns one or two clones with which she speaks, as “Oh no!” This theory also comes from Poppy’s body language. She has a very limited use of her body. As for her speech, Poppy has a language that can be compared to that of a chat-bot. For example, when she talks about her channel she is referring to “YouTube dot com.” She sometimes repeats the same sentence several times in one video, which generates a repetitive and mechanical speech.

Poppy uses the aesthetic and behavioral elements that relate to the human robot and more specifically to the fembot. Her physical appearance corresponds to the current

criteria of feminine beauty and her attitude would evoke a robot that tries to reproduce human behaviors, like when she said: “Am I Doing Right?” as the chat bot Zo in the epoym video. The Poppy Project aims at building the persona of the fembot by attributing to it characteristics expected for this type of profile. Thus, the Poppy fembot will be designed on the basis of the Japanese idol: young, childish appearance that brings an image of innocence and purity. The meticulous aesthetics of her videos and especially her wardrobe choice combine with her cold expression to create an artificial imagery. This impression of artificiality is related to the concept of “uncanny valley”, the theory of the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori, highlighting the gap between the human and the imaginary. A robot that is in the “uncanny valley” is no longer judged by the criteria of a robot that manages to pretend to be a human but is unconsciously judged as a human who is unable to act in a normal way, as proven by some theories of famous fans for this such as Repzilla and his video “THAT POPPY IS A COLD ROBOT ... BRRR” or ReXia “If You Still Believe Poppy Is Human, Watch This.” The strangeness around Poppy comes from her acting that makes her body language and speech seem fake, as a robot trying to act like a human. There is then a parodic upheaval between the human and the non-human. This upheaval is illustrated by secondary characters such as Charlotte, the plastic dummy who claims to be a real person in the video “I Am A Real Person.”

### **When the Parody Becomes Cult: Poppy.Church**

A culture of mystery resides around the figure of Poppy, which accentuates the mythic range of the character. Thus, Poppy’s YouTube channel does not show the number of subscribers it has, which goes against the traditional use of this medium.

As Linda Hutcheon points out: “Parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimates and subverts that which it parodies” (101). Indeed, the use of representative elements of pop culture shows this dual use. While the videos establish a critical distance from the subject, the representation of the object or subject tends to promote it even though it is parodied. Hence, by producing a channel

that parodies the elements of pop culture while using its codes, representations and ideology, Poppy becomes an allegory which will in turn be idolized by her fans. The parody thus becomes real and leads the watchers of her videos to conform eventually to the object of derision. The path of irony subverts the expressed ideology so that it finds an audience that is sensitive to it. The whole parodic production leads, ironically, to the reinforcement of the expressed ideology. The fans choose to follow the proposed artificiality. The Poppy Project is therefore a production that is deeply rooted in postmodernism. The parody of pop culture empties it of its content in order to remove any historical or aesthetic significance. Poppy becomes the emblematic figure of this culture.

It is then that the parody becomes more powerful. With its fan base, it can go further in the treatment of the constituent elements of pop culture. Religion, which is an important component of pop culture and is found in lyrics of pop songs like those of Lady Gaga, is indirectly criticized. Preparatory videos introduce the subject while making it obvious that it is treated parodically. In “I Am Not In a Cult”, Poppy behaves, while saying the opposite, as if she were part of a sect. She introduces a new narrative arc, that of Poppy.Church.

In May 2017 a website about Poppy.Church is created but is revealed to the public only in February 2018, through maps leading to the website given at Poppy’s concert. This website is an interactive game, made for the fans, which as of now is still a mystery as to its functioning after the first phase, that of the enrolment. A phone number allows viewers to listen to a message left by Poppy.

“Hi, it’s me. Poppy! Are you ready for salvation? Poppy.Church is coming, are you ready? Hello?”

A “pop quiz”, always with Poppy’s voice, is then given to the neophytes who have to answer questions about Poppy and the church. The end of this ordeal leads to another one: they have to draw their name in a white rectangle with their own blood and send it. They then arrive in “the hole” and, if they are accepted into the church, they can build a room on Floor 1.

In addition to the website a Gospel of Poppy was published, which is an object purely dedicated to the fans and which consists of sentences scattered in the videos of the channel. Poppy shares her tenants: creativity, intelligence and imagination. Its tenants are then detailed in several sections; Fortune, Blasphemy, Meditation, Reflection. The texts, always short, are accompanied by sentences such as “Famous people tell us what to think and who to like” or “POPPY condemns blasphemy.” A parodic use of pop culture and its values, twisted with the help of comic prayers to the glory of Poppy. However, it sometimes gets more philosophical, particularly when these themes are discussed: Reflection, Creation, and Infinity, questioning the meaning of reality. Thus, the book constitutes a new narrative tool that includes a sacred character, combining the typical characteristics of the Christian gospel<sup>59</sup> with a reflection on the digital world, and what is real or not, once again mixing two different mythologies. This system of integration in Poppy's church then evokes, in a digital version, the different steps / tests that the neophyte must perform in order to be accepted as a member of the secret cult.

Poppy then became religion. But the irony lies in the fact that parody has become a serious object. Social or collaborative networks<sup>60</sup> are the most telling places for the awareness of the community created around the character of Poppy. To take the example of Twitter, we can find accounts exclusively dedicated to the role of fan in which their membership in the church of Poppy is proudly displayed. These accounts are recognizable by the omnipresence of Poppy, specifically in the sharing of her pictures and tweets. In some cases, the status of fan leads the users to identify themselves physically with Poppy: some accounts reveal that numerous girls copy the style of the character. What is even more representative is to see the large number of videos shared on YouTube that aim to decrypt the content of Poppy's videos, whether it is about decoding her speech, appearance or personality. Poppy.Church is representative of the fan community enjoyed by music stars, a close-knit

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<sup>59</sup> The symbol of The Gospel of Poppy is a pastiche of chrism.

<sup>60</sup> The Wikia page of Poppy illustrates the importance of this community which lists videos, pictures, interviews. <http://poppy.wikia.com/>

community that shares its love for the same celebrity. Poppy is called “Queen” by her devoted fans as shown by this @hailqueenPoppy tweet about the video “I Love My Fans” and Poppy’s request “Will you do anything I tell you?”: “I love it when @poppy asks me this. Of course my queen. Always wanting for the next command.”

### **Warhol Heritage and Creating a Brand Image**

Beyond its parody of celebrity and social networks, the work around Poppy is an artistic project inspired by the work of Warhol. First of all, the use of the Internet is a pop medium because of the accessibility it offers. Then, the aesthetics of the videos: the sober background and the attitude of the actor who stares at the camera are part of the continuity of Warhol’s “Screen Tests.” This taste is also found in a system of repetition of speech and gesture dear to Warhol. Like Campbell’s soup cans, Poppy uses today’s iconic brands in her videos under the false pretense of promotional advertising, such as Amazon or Doritos. This use of brands highlights a mercantile dimension, the staged brand as well as Poppy herself. Even if the videos are abstract, they always sell a speech that is built between short videos and songs, and used to form a reference game internal to the channel. This artistic project crystallizes around the very identity of Poppy. This apparent emotional distance from the actress allows us to embody the warholian notion of “mechanization of celebrity”, that is to say, American icons brought to the rank of symbol to the point where they are disconnected from the real world. Warhol said, “Machines have less problems. I would like to be a machine, would not you?”

This creation of the brand Poppy is therefore a desire to obscure certain details of her purely human characteristics, such as the tone or the gesture used. And it is from this parodic construction carried to the extreme of the persona that the project can be exported to the level of the community of the fans. Indeed, Poppy is a brand that loves its fans and repeats it tirelessly, making this repetition sound robotic. In the video “I Love My Fans”, Poppy reiterates that she loves her fans and that she does not know what she would do without them. The repetition puts forward an intonation that is in no way natural but overplayed and

sounds wrong. Her gesture also puts forward this game. She keeps her arms behind her back, which gives the impression that she repeats a learned text by heart.

It is at this level that the community formed around Poppy is divided between on the one hand, the fans who stop at the first “marketed” identity of Poppy, that of a performer, and on the other, those who seek at all costs the real identity of Poppy and the one who became Poppy. The first identity, that of the “traditional” pop star, is supported by its musical production—danceable, releases upbeat—and by its record label which guarantees legitimacy in the world of music. From this point of view, she does not differ from other pop personalities for mass appeal. It is from this legitimate identity that will be grafted her second identity. The current pop stars are people whose privacy is constantly monitored and commented, as evidenced by the large number of journals dedicated to telling the stars’ every minute detail. This desire to know at all costs the privacy of the stars confronts the game of Poppy who intentionally hides parts of her identity—her past life is silenced and videos of Moriah Pereira prior to the project are removed from Youtube—or of her humanity, whether in her videos or interviews. This parodic use makes it possible to push the problem of identity to its most logical extent and to play with the nature of the fan. And that’s when curious fans, intrigued by the tone of Poppy’s speech, will look for hidden messages in videos or songs to respond to her behavior. This is the case through the video “Shirt” released on September 6, 2016. Poppy repeats what “They” tell her to say, for a promotional purpose, with a distorted voice: “If money can’t buy happiness, then why is it so fabulous?” This sentence is taken from her song “Money” released in February of the same year which is an apologia for money. This phrase, taken out of context, introduces a reference game. The voice seems to be those who would control Poppy while the video clip “Money” puts forward a series of symbols related to the Illuminati. This identity then poses the problem of the border between the artist who creates a personality that meets the expectations for a pop star and the real personality of the actress.

A number of decryption videos highlight the mentions made to Illuminati imagery. A search with the words “poppy

illuminati” on the YouTube search engine shows the existence of 29,700 results. The videos are produced in various languages and produce content that seems sensitive to the mention of Illuminati imagery as proof of the existence of the secret society. For examples of video decryption of Internet users see: “THE GIRL OF THE DEVIL, ALL THE TRUTH ON POPPY” by UPoxie, “Poppy the nueva marioneta Illuminati of Liberémonos” by The Matrix or “That Poppy The YouTube Star Under Illuminati Mind Control” by Strange Thing. These videos have many views and are produced by several profiles of Internet users who are sensitive to conspiracy content. They explain the strangeness of the channel by a complete story that finds explanations to all mysteries. The fans have the ambition to decrypt the videos of Poppy to find what they think are clues about her identity. This craze around her identity is to be related to the attitude of fans compared to their idols. Indeed, fans seek at all costs to know as much as possible about their idols, as evidenced for example by the mass of magazines on this subject. It is therefore on the role of the fan that the issue of identity is focused. Far from finding answers, the theories around the character of Poppy only reinforce her vague identity and by extension her existence as an idol.

## **Conclusion**

This article does not provide an exhaustive reading of the universe created around Poppy's character. This universe is complex because it combines cultural elements from different horizons. Thus, the Poppy Project extends, first of all, its universe to fantasized worlds, tinged with mystery. The Illuminati and the digital world are worlds to be discovered and therefore offer the opportunity to play on the expectations and fascination of the public. It is a game about established codes. Parody allows their integration into the established narrative. It is then not a simple collection of distinct myths, but a rereading of these myths through a parodic use. Emptied of their original history, myths become part of a brand new story that becomes a complex mythology. These mysterious mythologies are coupled with a parodic use of religious worship. The Poppy Project cleverly mixes the mystery and sacredness of these mythologies with



a community that replicates the pop singer's almost sectarian idolatrous behavior, by the enthusiasm of fans, both in terms of performance and identity. The Poppy Project is a mythology of pop culture, of its values and its deviances. As Titanic Sinclair explains in a DSC Interview, the logical continuation of the narrative fiction of The Poppy Project lies in a perspective, always Warholian, of death. Thus, the YouTube channel seems to seek to explore the depths of pop culture until the death of its star character.

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## Mythologie du féminisme et du socialisme accoquinés sur les écrans en République populaire de Chine: 古為今用

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### Introduction

En tant que sinologue et cinélogue, examinons comment la cinématographie produite par la République populaire de Chine promeut certains mythes. Ce qui s'appelait encore naguère désinformation.

Nous cultivons, exploitons le terrain avec deux œuvres emblématiques, au large spectre: entre 1957 et 2012. Ainsi que le *topos* du féminisme.

### 乘风破浪, *Grâce au vent briser les flots* (1957)

Comédie lyrique propagandiste. Trompe-l'œil voire trompe-oreille, assurément assourdissant. *Communists have more fun. . .*

Sun Yu, Chiang Chun Chao, *alias* Jiang Junchao, coréaliserent en 1957 *Cheng Feng Po Lang*, sur un scénario du cinéaste: production par le Studio cinématographique Jiang Nan de Shanghai. Le chef-opérateur Li Sheng Wei filma consciencieusement pendant quatre-vingt-quatorze minutes Huang Yin, Wang Yi, Zhang Yi, Jen Shen, Su Hui, Lin Chen.

Rejetons la traduction, (dé)politisée, de ce film en couleur: “avec le vent en poupe”. Notre *Grâce au vent briser*

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*les flots* traduit plus exactement *Cheng Feng Po Lang*, restituant l'aspect martial, militant de cette manipulation cinématographiée: Sun Yu amalgame cinéma soviétique et cinéma hollywoodien. Au regard de l'instrumentalisation propagandiste, osons effectivement une translation pertinente . . . *Communists have more fun! Bis* . . . Transposition pour *Cheng Feng Po Lang*.

Un tel slogan, au contenu largement diffusé en République populaire, sous différentes formes artistiques voire chromos, subsume *Grâce au vent briser les flots*. Celui-ci équivaut à un échantillon: hélas représentatif, certes réussi grâce à la technique d'un Sun Yu.

Nous snobons les points d'exclamation. Cependant, en l'occurrence, le militantisme de l'œuvre justifie ceux-ci. Ne laissons point escamoter le "niveau sonore," *Yin Liang*, abaissé par quelque(s) sinologue(s) complice(s) soucieux de masquer le matraquage.

Assurément, la fraîcheur et le présumé naturel ne valent que postures, impostures. Le long métrage, volontiers musical, utilise force décibels afin d'entraîner l'adhésion, à tel point que d'aucuns, collaborateurs occidentaux du Parti communiste, tentent de réduire le volume en séance française. Cependant, la chanson liminaire intime de voguer en avant toute (!).

"Nous nous efforçons résolument d'acquérir de nouvelles connaissances." La gaîté se surjoue. Volontarisme et martialité: généralisés. "Nous, les jeunes marins déterminés, lutterons toujours."

L'époque: celle de hurlements tels que capitaine, femmes sur le quai s'entendent au port de Shanghai malgré les engins qui roulaient près d'elles. Sans recours au porte-voix: pourtant tellement fréquent en République (populaire), jusqu'à aujourd'hui.

Action: à l'école navale Nan Hai, pour la marine civile mais fort militarisée quant à l'embrigadement, aux chants idéologiques, trois camarades suivent une formation tant psychologique que technique pour devenir les premières pilotes de navire sur le Yang Zi Jiang, en "Chine nouvelle." À la vérité, les scénaristes relatent qu'elles ne s'avèrent pas encore émouluées. Liang Ying, héroïne interprétée par Huang

Yin, subira victorieusement les différentes épreuves de son apprentissage: en commençant par sauter à l'eau, d'un quai shanghaien, industriel voire industriel, pour tenter de sauver un marin tombé dans le Huang Pu en lançant une corde du navire que commande le capitaine Chao, joué par Chang Yi. Finalement, une grue sur camion manœuvré(e) par une femme, entr'aperçue(s) auparavant, hisse les protagonistes: la victime masculine, l'intrépide au féminin, un autre sauveteur.

Après les cours à Nan Hai, celle-ci embarque comme cadette s'exerçant au labeur des matelots sur le *Peuple n° 91*, que le spectacle incite à admirer fièrement en raison de sa fabrication national(ist)e et qui remonte le majestueux Yang Zi, jusqu'à Chongqing, cité capitale sichuannaise, à la limite du Sichuan. Les cadettes se collettent avec les tâches les plus ingrates, entraînant sinon enjouement: lavage du pont, nettoyage, pis, graissage des machines. Visages femelles soigneusement salis afin de (dé)montrer l'égalitarisme prolétarien.

Face au rétrograde capitaine Chao, niant les compétences féminines, le "bienveillant commissaire politique" Su Hui, *alias* Li, protégera les aspirantes. La professionnelle Liang Ying saura-t-elle éprouver, inspirer de la confiance, pour piloter à travers une passe dangereuse jonchée d'épaves? Le *suspense* scénarisé pendant la traversée périlleuse se rapporte non seulement aux douze bateaux qui coulèrent par le fond, mais surtout aux relations humaines. La demoiselle réussirait-elle à obtenir le respect du timonier Ma Chun, au demeurant bien-aimé, du commandant? L'héroïne se questionne même en voix *off*: le cinéma de Sun Yu applique désormais le didactisme du communisme.

Sentimentalement, la célibataire Liang Ying se trouve également au sein d'un triangle: entre le collègue aux manières aristocratiques et Ma Chun, prolétaire autodidacte qui forme d'autres *Lao Bai Xing*, sans-dents, qui choisirait-elle? Ce dernier, maître d'équipage, ancien quartier-maître, auparavant simple matelot, apprend à des camarades comment écrire les caractères plutôt que d'assister au concert enchantant l'équipage. Chromo d'une présumée méritocratie socialiste. Ou autre . . . .

Décelons quelque intertextualité. *Qing Chun Zhi Ge, Le chant de la jeunesse*, déclamé en 1959 “de concert” par le duo Chen Huai'ai, procréateur de Kaige, Cui Wei, presque aussi tonitruant que *Cheng Feng Po Lang*, ses décibels que d'aucun(e)s souhaiteraient camoufler, fustige un Yu: Yu Yongze, comparable au personnage stigmatisé par Sun Yu. *Scoop*: autocritique chez l'ex-privilegié (Sun) Yu.

Malgré la linéarité du récit, *Grâce au vent briser les flots*, volontiers musical, ponctué de repas, suscite l'attention des spectateurs grâce à nombre de trouvailles scénaristiques, à l'arsenal non exclusivement maritime mais généralement technique: cadrage méticuleux, somptueux décors et accessoires, voyages, tourisme déjà, suspens(e) naval, humour, voire comique de répétition, singulièrement séquences hilarantes, toutefois instrumentalisées sur l'usage correct des tresses, symbolisme, en particulier des fleurs. Des intrigues sentimentales complètent l'initiation des navigatrices. Détrompons les naïfs ne jurant désormais que par les animations virtuelles, aveugles à la débauche de moyens par un « régime » qui ne tardera pas à provoquer la plus monstrueuse famine de l'histoire: Sun Yu rééduqué réalise une superproduction d'époque.

Or, celle-ci consiste essentiellement en un travail propagandiste: nullement comédie légère qui valoriserait la beauté féminine. La première scène, où deux protagonistes, en maillot de bain, rament virilement tandis que la troisième barre, se révèle emblématique, programmatique: le large drapeau national-communiste entre compulsivement dans le champ de la caméra, alors qu'il décore politiquement un esquif à l'espace réduit. Propagande rouge *versus* appétence manifestée par le Sun Yu d'avant 1949 pour les naïades. Précisément, le film se déroulera tel le programme de (dé)formation tant politique que professionnelle sinon sexuelle: du canot non mixte au paquebot(-mixte) ou cargo(-mixte), où une mixité asexuée prospérera.

Plan climax: Liang Ying, barreuse en maillot rouge, à sa droite un étendard écarlate, ordonne à son équipage de ramer plus rapidement afin de ne pas manquer le cérémonial communiste. “Plus vite! Nous devons nous dépêcher de prendre part à la cérémonie!” Sun Yu, s'il ne collaborait pleinement avec le régime, s'attarderait, comme à son accoutumée, sur les jambes féminines.

Certes, l'hagiographie de la femme au travail, en uniforme bénéficie d'un enrichissement au moyen d'une certaine psychologie. La trahison féminine dont souffrit Ma Chun explique son caractère: celui-ci, qu'une belle camarade de classe trahit dix ans antérieurement, se méfie de l'espèce femelle. L'homme se sentait mal un seul jour sans elle, puis s'engagea dans la marine suite au décès de son père. Néanmoins, la lutte des classes reste, essentiel message: *us* l'aristocrate sophistiqué.

*Cheng Feng Po Lang* n'encense aucunement l'esthétique des demoiselles mais au contraire leur compétence, parvenant néanmoins à caractériser chacune des trois, malgré d'identiques conditions, uniformes. Ainsi de leur rapport à la gent masculine: l'une possède son fiancé avec elle, l'autre, la moins masculine, un amoureux éloigné, Liang Ying, certainement vierge, finira par trouver le sien. Lors de leur embarquement: gros plan sur le contenu de la valise qu'apporta la sentimentale, déversé pêle-mêle sur le pont. Châtiment immanent du sentimentalisme.

Pendant leur premier repas à bord, tandis que la commensalité typique de la Chine éternelle alimente le cinéma communiste, chacune feint son attitude. "Je veux couper mes tresses !" La zélée Liang Ying, zélatrice du PCC boudeuse à l'encontre de son ancienne apparence physique, s'exclame, alors que la romantique aux nattes démesurées s'admire devant le miroir, la troisième mangeant dans son bol.

Fondamentale exhibition d'une volonté censée libre. Sun Yu s'efforce à (dé)montrer que l'engagement des volontaires, jusqu'à travers la modification de leur *hexis* corporelle, procède de leur motivation socialiste: non l'embrigadement. Derrière la bluette, le chromo: film à thèse, radicalement didactique.

Astucieusement, le réalisateur, excellent technicien sinon psychologue, réussit à conférer une évolution à Liang Ying, y compris physique. Le visage même de celle-ci acquiert quelque maturité.

Apogée tant propagandiste qu'humoristique: les tresses deviennent un enjeu idéologique. Si au départ les filles en parlent assez légèrement lors de leur toilette, effectuée en commun, promiscuité femelle qui dénote des obsessions habituelles à Sun Yu, la coiffure se transforme en

attribut diégétique symbolisant la métamorphose de la mentalité. Effectivement, l'héroïne se métamorphose en communiste digne de Lei Feng lorsqu'elle utilise ses appâts, cheveux, en triviale sustentation pour s'empêcher de dormir: le stakhanovisme studieux conduit à suspendre les nattes pour soutenir la tête. Cette scène s'avère réjouissante: conjointement à la politisation des corps, sexe(s).

La présentation hagiographique se révèle aussi tirée par les cheveux que les tresses de Liang Ying: celle-ci affiche la résistance contre la fatigue en (s')attachant ceux-ci au plafond de sa cabine pour réviser nuitamment le manuel de pilotage, en dernière analyse l'édification du communisme. Le public à endoctriner passe des nattes voletantes, coquettes, aux tresses instrumentalisées. Climax: consécutivement à l'examen, coupe de celles-ci pour Liang Ying, devenue "second."

Hélas, suspectons l'optimisme exhibé comme contrefait après la dizaine d'années pendant lesquelles Sun Yu s'abstint suite à *Wu Xun Zhuan: La vie de Wu Xun* sorti en 1951. Guère de "fraîcheur", sinon embruns de cinéma: superproduction propagandiste méticuleusement fabriquée, arborant la lutte des classes, l'enrôlement corporel, s'évertuant à ôter ses charmes à la féminité, voire virginité. Sun Yu, afin de s'amender politiquement, polysémiqument, boit le calice jusqu'à la lie: le rejet de l'érotisation, pis, la masculinisation s'oppose diamétralement à l'ancienne, systématique valorisation chez le réalisateur de l'anatomie, singulièrement des membres inférieurs.

Distinguons cependant quelques allusions intertextuelles à *Ye Mei Gui*, *Ti Yu Huang Hou*, de respectivement 1932, 1934, lorsque Liang Ying chute en écartant les jambes, quand l'obsédé invite le spectateur au dortoir des rameuses, cadettes se déshabillant ou se rhabillant: typique fixation chez Sun Yu, aimant l'intromission aux lavabos de sportives, préférant les cabines d'essayage à celles de pilotage. La scène de grand écart lorsque l'héroïne tombe en se hâtant évoque l'entrée dans la belle société shanghaienne de certaine *Rose sauvage*. Des amis taquinaient les amoureux, comme sur *La grand'route*: presque un quart-de-siècle ultérieurement à *Da Lu*, Liang Ying, l'ex-matelot s'avérèrent également importunés dans leur commerce.

Appréciez la transmutation socialiste . . . De la jupe soulevée chez la culturiste *Reine du sport* Li Lili, espiègle plaisancière sur la cheminée d'un luxueux paquebot, à la salopette de la martiale comédienne Huang Yin tombant de la mâture qu'elle repeint en rouge sur un vernaculaire cargo mixte.

Au sein même de *Grâce au vent briser les flots*, Liang Ying se convertit totalement: la vêtue symbolise la conversion. Au maillot de bain, lors de son apparition initiale, succède la salopette, moyennant un comportement de garçon manqué: coups de coude, poing . . .

Ne cédon point à l'interprétation féministe, anachronique, fausse. L'éloge des timonnières s'insère dans celui des ouvriers modèles: Lei Feng en figure emblématique. Rappelons la programmation politicienne de la première séquence: le *trio*, i.e. deux rameuses, une barreuse, (dé)vêtues de bain rouge sur une chaloupe, arborent ostensiblement la bannière nationale-communiste, non moins rougeoyante. Assimilons les donzelles à des enseignes de vaisseau pékinois.

"C'est notre devoir d'encourager les femmes navigatrices de la Nouvelle Chine": ce slogan proféré par le commissaire Li à la bibliothèque, tandis que la neige tombe derrière les véritables fenêtres du *Peuple n° 91*, instrumentalise ostensiblement le féminisme. Pourquoi de présumé(e)s spécialistes le cachent-il en Occident ?

Dialectiquement, les dialogues instruisent le procès du capitaine Chao, technicien capable mais dont le tort consiste sans doute en une formation sous l'ancien régime, *versus* gentil représentant du PCC. "C'est la faiblesse de l'engeance féminine." Le "commissaire politique" réplique à ce diagnostic du marin . . . "C'est la faiblesse de votre cerveau."

Postérieurement, le capitaine s'écriera, après que Liang Ying pilota à travers les parages dangereux sous la tempête, l'orage au-dessus de nombreuses épaves . . . "Mon pauvre cerveau !" S'exclamant, le spécialiste de la navigation absorbe le message (politicien): à l'instar d'un Sun Yu désormais filmeur relativement passif.

Certaine prudence remplace l'ancien érotisme propre à Sun Yu. L'une des camarades s'empresse de dissimuler la photographie portée dans sa poche de poitrine et qu'elle



montrait à ses amies coquines à l'arrivée imprévue de son promis, jusque-là éloigné.

Paris de l'Orient, shanghaienne, aussi dérobée aux regards que les robes troquées contre des combinaisons . . . Alors que du bateau Shanghai excite la curiosité, belle à visiter intégralement, les trois futures navigatrices ne visitent que des *docks*, admirent les grues, risquent joyeusement un accident avec un tracteur conduit par des femmes et transportant celles-ci. "Il y a des filles partout. Comme c'est poétique !" Exclamation extravagante lorsque les compagnes aperçoivent une grutière. Crucial symptôme.

À la vue du *Peuple n° 91* arrivant à Shanghai, l'une demande son tonnage. Poésie socialisante . . .

Naguère emblème de la modernité, cité cosmopolite, le Bund, *topos* pourtant de Shanghai au cinéma, n'apparaîtra pour la première fois qu'en arrière-plan, simple faire-valoir en faveur d'une manœuvre. Symptomatique occultation dont la métropole souffrait alors. Quai prolétaire *versus* Bund capitaliste, Yang Zi Jiang *vs* Huang Pu, Chongqing *versus* Shanghai.

Le *Wai Tan* ne parvient au plein écran qu'en un panoramique non gratuit annonçant une montée d'escalier intérieur par le capitaine Chao. La filmographie après 1949 renia la "perle de l'Orient": abhorrée, naguère arborée par pléthore, dont *Ti Yu Huang Hou*. Le cinéaste, Shanghaien d'adoption, recherche probablement "quelque virginité politique" grâce au propagandisme vingt-trois années ultérieurement sur les navigations maoïstes: naviguant vers Chongqing, toujours stratégique, plus important port fluvial, au confluent des Yang Zi, Han, accueillant des navires de haute mer.

*A contrario*, Chongqing, havre communiste, se trouve fortement valorisée, encore actuellement. Dès 1957, les navigateurs s'y adonnèrent même, paradoxalement, au tourisme. Clichés sans appareil photographique . . . La géographie étalée en RPC ne saurait se considérer anodine. Ancien fief de Bo Xilai . . .

Fâcheusement, communisante Wuhan, ancienne Hankou, au Hubei: aussi escale scénarisée, prépondérante chez le "Sun Yu post-1949." Le *Club* du marin wuhannais héberge fête, explications amoureuses: à l'occasion

desquelles l'héroïne rompt définitivement, en colère, avec son soupirant hautain.

Celui-ci se discrédite complètement lors de la soirée: au regard tant des canons (communistes), féministes que du personnage Liang Ying. Au jardin où le galant invita celle-ci à s'asseoir sur un banc à l'écart afin de parler sérieusement, suite à sa déclaration en règle, l'homme lui déconseille de persévérer dans son métier.

“Croyez-moi, ce travail ne convient pas aux femmes”: l'aristocrate quittera la profession, postulera pour un emploi à Shanghai. Notre Lei Feng au féminin l'interrompt, sèchement, vigoureusement, se levant. “Assez !”

Wuhan *vs* Shanghai, Nanjing . . . Le *script* ménagea auparavant des indices destinés à étiqueter la mauvaise origine sociale entachant le démissionnaire, polysémique: en écho aux persécutions, déportations antidroitistes lancées précisément l'année du filmage.

Loin d'équivaloir à une simple blquette, *Cheng Feng Po Lang* enflamme un brûlot, politisant chaque décor: idéologiquement polarisé. Précisément, Wuhan, outre qu'elle endure la piètre réputation de four climatique, bien antérieurement à la propagande des Khmers verts: base pour le PCC sinon les Khmers rouges. Partant, l'État-parti communique là-dessus.

Inepte de répercuter l'idéologie suivant laquelle une telle production refléterait un quelconque optimisme aux commencements socialistes, quelque hymne à la jeunesse, alors même que l'environnement s'avère celui des Cent Fleurs. Piège perpétré à l'encontre les présumés droitistes. *Bai Hua Yu Dong*, le Mouvement des Cent Fleurs en 1956, campagne de rectification censée inciter à critiquer le Parti afin d'améliorer son action, intervint alors que Mao Zedong subissait la contestation au sein même du PCC. Visant en vérité à purger des ennemis voire contradicteurs bénins, *Bai Hua Yu Dong* aboutit à un tragique gauchissement (anti)culturel dans l'industrie cinématographique: simultanément aux pléthoriques relégations, massacres.

Cohérence idéologique des images tout uniment fléchées vers l'idéalisation du socialisme: lors de la réunion où le capitaine apprend que le directeur lui affecte des étudiants, en surnombre, les premiers fument respectivement pipe, cigarette, le commissaire Li, paragon

de morale, s'abstient. Posture conforme au légendaire ascétisme révolutionnaire. Retrouvons un tel symbolisme à l'époque contemporaine, guère postsocialiste: *Xin Yi Xiong Di* selon Fang Junliang. *Fidélité fraternelle* de 2011: le frère aîné, nouveau Lei Feng ouvrier, boit de l'eau, alors que son benjamin se sert de l'alcool.

Un plan emblématise la propagande moderniste, nationaliste: jonques en arrière-plan, devant navire moderne construit "par nous-mêmes", conformément à un *Leitmotiv*. Celui-ci: première qualité du *Peuple n° 91* clamée dès son arrivée. Géopolitisons l'apparent léger divertissement des tresses commis par Sun Yu: prémices du schisme opposant la sœur aînée URSS, révisionniste, le stalinisme aux caractéristiques chinoises. Précisément, le vingtième Congrès du Parti Communiste de l'Union Soviétique (des républiques socialistes) annonça la déstalinisation l'année qui précéda le film.

Néanmoins, notre superproduction bénéficie d'une logique interne au champ cinématographique: culminant grâce à plusieurs tirades de mise en abyme. "Elles doivent être des actrices venues ici pour obtenir une expérience de la vie." Ainsi s'exprime l'un des marins à l'arrivée des trois apprenties sur le *Peuple n° 91*. "Ils disent que nous sommes des actrices." Répliques dignes d'un métafilm.

Impliquées dans une épopée: les lourds moyens mobilisés, d'autant plus à discerner pour une heureuse époque où les effets spéciaux ne surexploitaient point les fonds verts, les soins techniques minutieux confirment l'importance que les autorités attachèrent à la (super)production. Ode communiste aux premières navigatrices sur le Yang Zi. Les timonnières affichées à l'écran toujours moins décolletées collaborent au dessein du Grand Timonier.

Formellement, la caméra tangué pour donner l'impression d'une "mer" agitée. Subtilement, les reflets de l'eau sur le plafond de la timonerie dénotent systématiquement le cabotage. Jusqu'au final(e) chantant les lendemains rouges: les ombres, reflets censés aqueux, agrémentent le plafond dans la cabine de pilotage où travaille le couple protagoniste.

Assurément, relevons des traits de sinitude, apolitiques, telle la prégnance si chinoise de copieux repas

ainsi que l'humour, en l'espèce volontiers comique de répétition, l'appétence idiosyncrasique pour la gent féminine typiques de Sun Yu. Celui-ci introduit d'abondantes scènes d'affection entre femmes, voire au delà, des attouchements. *Versus* poignées de main viriles entre femelles. La camaraderie ostentatoire, respectant des canons (politiques) s'érotiserait-elle ?

Techniquement, (sur)cadrage rigoureux: consécutivement à l'évanouissement de la beauté préposée à la gouverne, fiévreuse, désirant édifier le communisme naval, accablée par quarante degrés, de nombreux amoureux putatifs visitent son chevet, le capitaine déposant une pomme en catimini auprès de la vierge, le lourdaud Ma Chun contrôlant également ses pas patauds sur la neige. Le complaisant Sun Yu n'oublie pas de montrer à travers une prise de vue symptomatique soupirant, fruit, sûrement aussi défendu que rare à l'époque précédant immédiatement la famine extrême occasionnée par le Grand Bond en avant.

Quant au symbolisme: idéologiquement instrumentalisé. Le prétendant officier chic banquette, alors que le prolétaire amoureux veille sous les flocons tête nue près de la paroi derrière laquelle la malade sommeille.

Pareillement: qualité du décor, détails étudiés. Le spectateur attentif aperçoit la marionnette à main près du hublot lors des retrouvailles réjouissant les trois amies: celle-ci joua un rôle émotif. Retrouvons la symétrie, typique au septième art chinois: pendant le nouveau concert sur bateau, vespéral, les mêmes instruments retentirent, moyennant un mouvement de caméra identique à la première sérénade. Puis, celle qui arborait auparavant de longues tresses chantonne . . . Certes, (dés)avouons les facilités des *double takes*: probablement tournées concomitamment.

Le spectateur entiché de la Chine contempera encore les Trois Gorges: avant les destructions causées par le monstre du barrage actuel. Au demeurant, un présumé urbanisme, en vérité peu urbain, détruisit aussi un autre *topos*, polysémique: Chongqing. Arasement montagneux, monstrueuses autoroutes citadines, suspendues.

Espérons que nos confrères, -sœurs sinologues apprennent, politiquement, que le prétendu "optimisme des années 50" s'analyse en (re)constructions propagandistes, filmiquement la "fraîcheur" en poncifs naïfs: notre cinélogie

enseigne qu'un rire à l'écran ne consacre aucune innocence. Tout à rebours . . . *Idem* relativement aux décibels: cris *versus* arguments.

*Communists have more fun:* propagande. Convoquons le sociologue Theodor Adorno: sa théorie selon laquelle les Allemands n'adorèrent jamais sincèrement leur *Führer*.

Cinématographiquement, assignons Pedro Costa, pourfendeur de la naïveté: en l'occurrence, manipulations de l'*entertainment*. Prétendue "euphorie si caractéristique de cette époque", vociférante à l'instar de la bande-son: opium du peuple. *Duo Shou*, i.e. "timonier", vocable encensant Mao Zedong sans besoin du "grand" à la française, essaime en timonnières, le féminisme convergeant avec le socialisme.

Objectiver l'endoctrinement celé par *Grâce au vent briser les flots* s'avère d'autant nécessaire, urgent qu'il contribue à la désinformation encore ânonnée suivant laquelle Mao Zedong libérerait les femmes. Nonobstant, les salopettes communistes bandent les corps: au delà des pieds, lotus.

### **Féminisme(s)**

"La nuit, j'écarquillai les yeux en la voyant revêtir au lieu d'une chemise de nuit un pyjama": daubons cette ridicule Simone (de) Beauvoir, laideron embourgeoisé. Donnons la parole à l'accorte Joan Chen.

J'ai fait d'innombrables erreurs stupides dans ma vie et vouloir être sortie du scénario de *Twin Peaks* a été parmi les plus stupides. Avec l'ignorance de ma jeunesse, et l'influence des factions du PC dans la communauté asiatique, je me suis naïvement rebellé contre l'état de fleur exotique. Je croyais devoir vouloir être quelque chose avec plus de sens. Quand j'ai demandé à être sortie du scénario de *Twin Peaks*, je ne savais pas comment incroyablement précieuse était l'opportunité d'être un beau vase Ming. Contrairement à un véritable vase Ming, dont la valeur augmente de jour en jour, la version humaine, comme un épanouissement de cereus, n'a de valeur

que pour quelques heures. N'aurais-je pu chercher du sens après la seule floraison de toute ma vie ?

Chez le sous-continentale Sun Yu, propagandiste de 1957, qui embarqua dans *Cheng Feng Po Lang*, les femmes se virilisèrent, (se) soumièrent indubitablement aux valeurs mâles, canons (masculins), polysémiques, point seulement martiaux. *Grâce au vent briser les flots claironne*.

De manière, hélas, révélatrice, Leta (Hong) Fincher assimile l'époque des Ming à un poncif de régression, alors qu'elle reprend la propagande alléguant un quelconque progrès féminin sous le communisme: *Leftover Women*. La grassouillette *scholar*, mentionnant une *Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, hypostasie la moitié du ciel que Mao Zedong clamait portée par les femmes. Habituelle faute d'interprétation: République populaire présumée postsocialiste, oxymore. *PRC versus China, indeed*.

Camille Philadelphia, *vs* Leta Fincher, *dixit* . . . “Le féminisme est devenu un bac à légumes où des pleureuses déposent leurs névroses pourrissantes”: contre-feu contre les surinterprétations volontiers féministes du cinéma produit par le Parti communiste, monnayant la complicité occidentale, à la réception biaisée.

Néanmoins, convergeons avec nos féministes pour moquer des poncifs. Ainsi, le réalisateur américain James Gray parla du “côté plus féminin, cet aspect plus tendre et émotionnel”.<sup>62</sup> Le bouc de ce réalisateur dénote quelque virilité défaillante: tentant de cacher cette impuissance, partant, certaine méconnaissance des femelles.

Osons mettre en abyme la lexicographie. Pourquoi diable l'Académie française, dans son dictionnaire, conjugue au conditionnel la définition du matriarcat? “Forme d'organisation sociale conçue en opposition avec le patriarcat, fondée sur la filiation en ligne maternelle et où les femmes exerceraient l'autorité politique”.<sup>63</sup> En revanche, patriarcat et sa stigmatisation s'affichent à l'indicatif.

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<sup>62</sup> Communication personnelle.

<sup>63</sup> *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*. Institut de France: Paris (2018), non paginé.

De Joan à Donald (Trump)... “*If Hillary Clinton can't satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America?*”

“Le féminisme j'en ai MARRE!” Claire Bretécher, *frustrée*: “Est-ce que tu te sens comme un agneau terrifié chaque fois que tu rentres chez toi à onze heures du soir ?” Non: 1978.

### 一九四二, (*Back to*) 1942 (2012)

*Blockbuster* de propagande. *Yi Jiu Si Er, 1942*, superproduction commise par le continental Feng Xiao Gang, qui adapta le récit *Souvenir de 1942* selon Liu Zhenyun, enrôla les (ex-)vedettes, polysémiques, occidentales Tim Robbins & Adrien Brody, concurremment à Zhang Guoli. Ceux-ci content une famine en Chine occupée par les troupes japonaises, auxquelles s'ajoutent une terrible sécheresse ainsi que l'impéritie des nationalistes. La population au Henan part en exode, avec à l'écran pour protagoniste l'ex-riche propriétaire terrien Fan du Yanjin, témoins un prêtre catholique, le père Thomas Morgan, ainsi qu'un journaliste américain, Theodore White, correspondant du *Time Magazine*.

Livrons des analyses d'images: la (super)production entrecoupe plans larges, macroscopiques, d'obédience macrohistorique, microhistoire familiale. Une certaine guerre des étoiles, numérique sinon pyrotechnique, requiert pléthore d'effets spéciaux. Les bombardements nippons rythment autant l'exil diégétique que le métrage effectivement long: deux heures et vingt-six minutes.

Le filmeur exploite les ressorts des spectacles populistes. Xingxing, charmante fille du riche, cherche désespérément son cher chat parmi les cratères causés par les bombes. *Suspense*... Le félidé miaulera même: obscénité du sentimentalisme. Étonnant que personne ne songeât à manger la bête...

Invitons le faiseur Feng Xiao Gang à s'éduquer auprès des mânes laissés par William Dukenfield condamnant les animaux de compagnie. “Un homme qui déteste les chiens ne peut pas être tout à fait mauvais”. Assurément, la *doxa*

scientiste, sectaire, clame: “l’Homme est un Mammifère rangé dans l’ordre des Primates.”

Au demeurant, un autre film de guerre en Asie souffre de semblables faiblesse & démagogie: *Apocalypse Now*, chef-d’œuvre par hasard puisque le montage (censé) imposé à Francis Coppola s’avère préférable au *director’s cut*, *marketing*. En 1979, le faiseur épargna un chiot trouvé sur un esquif suite à l’extermination de l’équipage vietnamien.

Au surplus, en *Yi Jiu Si Er*, démagogique, un propos idéologique se nicha. Huayi Brothers, puissants producteurs censés privés mais aux accointances politiciennes, confirmées par Jiao Jinghua, consacrèrent plus de trente millions en dollars à la superproduction: sortie du 29 novembre 2012 dans quelque huit-mille cinémas. La République populaire soutint massivement le *blockbuster* du communisme, le projeta, polysémiqument, au festival cinématographique de Rome, proposa pour le *Best Foreign Language Film* aux quatre-vingt-sixièmes *Academy Awards*, en 2013. Choix étatique(s). *A contrario*, lorsqu’un réalisateur chinois ose présenter son œuvre dans un festival, dénué(e) d’autorisation, l’État-parti le sanctionne, voire l’interdit de tourner.

China Lion distribua *Yi Jiu Si Er* jusqu’en Amérique du Nord. Au demeurant, nous (re)vîmes celui-ci en avion en partance de New York City sur la British Airways. Une telle diffusion en pays libre d’une propagande vantant, en creux, la geste prétendument héroïque des communistes contre tant lesdits nationalistes que l’armée japonaise dénote une volonté géopolitique: développer le *soft power*.

Politiquement, 1942, outre quelques méchants Japonais de service, stigmatise surtout la prétendue lâcheté affectant l’armée gouvernementale: celle-ci abandonnerait trente millions d’habitants face à l’avancée nipponne. Un tel argumentaire scénaristique s’inscrit à la désinformation traditionnelle en RPC: postulant que l’Armée rouge résisterait à l’encontre des Japonais à la différence du Guo Min Dang.

Historiquement faux: à rebours, l’invasion affaiblit considérablement les forces de celui-ci, qui combattirent avec ténacité à Shanghai, Nanjing. À la vérité, la Longue Marche (des communistes), syntagme malencontreusement



toujours valorisé jusqu'en Occident, s'analyse en interminables fuites.

*Yi Jiu Si Er* dénonce des soldats chinois, volant nourriture, argent. Thèse essentielle: "l'armée chinoise est une partie du problème", demandant le reliquat de grains pour les troupes. Concomitamment à la corruption nationaliste, le film met en scène Jiang Jie Shi, Chiang Kai Shek lui-même, ainsi que l'ambassadeur États-Unien Clarence Gauss, dédaigneux sinon se gaussant. En relation: *Le Rapport Karski*, alias Jan Kozielski, diffusé en 2010, selon Claude Lanzmann, décédé le 5 juillet 2018.

La réécriture filmique, frelatée sous les oripeaux d'un *blockbuster* romancé, omet le cynisme de Mao Zedong, qui déclara... "Quand il n'y a pas assez de nourriture, des gens meurent de faim. Il vaut mieux laisser mourir la moitié de la population, afin que l'autre moitié puisse manger suffisamment."

Frauduleusement, *1942* exploite le passé dynamité à cause du propagandisme socialiste. Famine à dévoiler: celle causée par le Grand Bond en avant (communiste), qui tua des dizaines de millions, sans même de recours à des bombardements japonais. *Yi Jiu Si Er*, plutôt que favoriser quelque anamnèse, vise à occulter, en hors-champ, la responsabilité du Parti communiste. Une disette en cache une autre: Feng Xiao Gang *versus* Wang Bing, dont *Jia Bian Gou*, premier film sur le *Lao Gai*, la Grande Famine maoïste, *Le Fossé* sortit peu avant la (super)production qui instrumentalisait l'histoire.

## Conclusion

En épilogue, notre article, fondé sur des analyses circonstanciées, partant, non fondues en une synthèse lâche, autorise à révéler tant les interprétations tendancieuses de certaines études dites cinématographiques que le contenu idéologique de nombreuses réalisations. Au sens sociologique, nous réalisons ici des expériences cruciales. Effectivement, Sun Yu incarne un artiste historique, à la qualité aussi asservissante que servile, travestissant son voyeurisme en *undercover operation*. Quant à Feng Xiao Gang, il représente le réalisateur le plus populaire en RPC.

Celle-ci revendique la finalisation des discours, œuvres artistiques: dont le cinématographe. Dès les années 1950, le slogan 古為今用, *Gu Wei Jin Yong*, arrimant solidement au thème du *Lincoln Humanities Journal*, s'appliqua: "le passé sert le présent". Ainsi, ceux-ci subissent des distorsions afin de (re)construire le futur. Anticipation de 1984 (sans George Orwell). Enjeu *meta*: défendre une alterna(rra)tive de la cinématographie, sachant que la politisation et le prisme dudit genre déforment la réception. *It's not the crime, it's the cover-up* (Watergate).

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## Leurre littéraire et mensonge romanesque<sup>64</sup>

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*Lorsqu'ils sont le fait de poètes, divertissements, farces et supercheries appartiennent encore à la poésie—Oulipo*

La critique littéraire utilise souvent la notion du leurre sans en définir d'abord le fonctionnement. S'il advient qu'elle en étudie les implications littéraires, elle n'en analyse pas les mécanismes de fonctionnement ni les procédés par lesquelles un narrateur manipule ses lecteurs. En témoigne le numéro que *Littérature* a consacré il y a des dizaines d'années au "leurre littéraire."<sup>65</sup> Nulle part n'y est posée la question de savoir comment se reconnaît un effet de leurre, ou encore si le leurre est par exemple une figure de mot ou une figure de pensée, une figure phrastique ou bien discursive, un effet textuel ou une construction du lecteur. Or, c'est dans ce genre de questions que réside précisément l'intérêt théorique de cet aspect narratif très peu étudié.

L'objectif de cette étude est de déterminer avec précision le fonctionnement du leurre et d'en dégager les principales caractéristiques. Pour ce faire, l'analyse se fondera sur plusieurs hypothèses de départ, qu'elle proposera de vérifier. D'abord, elle présuppose que le leurre a une structure triadique similaire à celle de la communication ironique et qu'ainsi il mobilise la présence, fût-elle implicite, d'une part, de deux acteurs: l'agent du leurre (auteur et/ou narrateur) et l'objet du leurre (le lecteur

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<sup>64</sup> This article is a condensed version of a few chapters from my book titled, *La Rhétorique du leurre dans Les Gommages d'Alain Robbe-Grillet* (1987). Thanks to technology and social media, the theme of lying and deception has never been more in vogue and in full view of the world than it is today.

<sup>65</sup> *Littérature*, 31, 1978.

comme cible et éventuellement comme victime), et d'autre part, d'une médiation, qui devient à la fois l'espace et l'objet de l'échange.

Un tel échange nous amène précisément à supposer en outre que le leurre entretient des rapports privilégiés avec le récit en général et le roman en particulier. Si l'on en croit Bakhtine, l'échange et le jeu (au sens technique et ludique du mot) sont en effet caractéristiques du roman dialogique. Bakhtine en précise le fonctionnement en ces termes:

Une attitude dialogique est possible vis-à-vis de notre propre énoncé . . . si nous prenons du recul par rapport à cet énoncé, s'il y a une distanciation par rapport à lui, soit que nous nous restreignons, soit que nous dédoublions en quelque sorte notre paternité.<sup>66</sup>

Le mouvement dialogique est décrit en termes d'espace ("recul," "distanciation," etc.), mais aussi de jeu, en ce sens qu'il mobilise des procédés de prolifération (se dédoubler, se distancer, se restreindre pour se multiplier) et d'ambivalence ("paternité" partielle). Or, ces procédés d'engendrement d'un espace ludique sont caractéristiques à la fois du genre narratif et du leurre. C'est pourquoi le roman est, parmi les genres littéraires, celui qui se prête le mieux à la rhétorique du leurre. Il est à même d'offrir un espace textuel vital où pourraient se déployer des dispositifs producteurs de ce type d'effet.

Pendant, il faut reconnaître avec Bakhtine que le dialogisme n'est pas inhérent au genre romanesque: tout roman n'est pas nécessairement dialogique, bien au contraire. Seuls quelques romans portent cette caractéristique de modernité. C'est dire qu'on peut à forte raison supposer que le leurre entretient des rapports privilégiés avec le type de récit que Barthes qualifie de "moderne," c'est-à-dire construit sur une logique de rupture et de transgression. Alors que le récit normal (que Barthes appelle aussi "lisible" et "sérieux") s'attache à se conformer aux règles du genre, le leurre, de par sa nature, se fonde en

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<sup>66</sup> Cité sans référence par M.P. Bange in *Linguistique et sémiologie* (2). Kerbrat-Orecchioni (78).

grande partie sur la manipulation de telles règles, soit qu'il les dénonce, les enfreint, ou les caricature afin de dé/mystifier le lecteur.

Pour tenter de mieux cerner ces questions et examiner ces hypothèses de départ, je me propose d'étudier *Les Gommès* de Robbe-Grillet, ou plus précisément son niveau énonciatif, c'est-à-dire tout ce qui se rapporte dans ce roman à l'acte de production: le narrateur et le lecteur, leur attitude à l'égard de l'échange et les coordonnées spatio-temporelles dans lesquelles s'inscrit la narration. Il s'agira précisément de déterminer comment le niveau énonciatif des *Gommès* (niveau auquel je limite mon analyse dans le cadre de cet article) offre un espace propice au leurre, et comment les règles du genre narratif<sup>67</sup> deviennent un lieu de prédilection pour la mise en place de pièges trompeurs, voire l'enjeu même du leurre. A partir de cette analyse, il sera possible d'esquisser les éléments d'une poétique du leurre.

### **L'envers e(s)t l'endroit**

*Les Gommès* présente un espace de jeu d'autant plus propice au déploiement du leurre que le système énonciatif y est assez paradoxal et relativement ambigu. Il n'est pas rare que le lecteur, placé devant des problèmes d'accommodation, se demande comme Wallas: "D'où sortent donc ces phrases?" (261) Qui les prend en charge? Qui parle? Qui écrit?<sup>68</sup>

Rien n'illustre mieux la stratégie mystificatrice à l'œuvre dans de nombreuses séquences du roman que le troisième chapitre dans lequel le narrateur rend compte des fabulations du commissaire. En voici l'incipit:

Comme à l'ordinaire, la grande maison est silencieuse.

Au rez-de-chaussée, la vieille gouvernante sourde achève la préparation du dîner. Elle porte des chaussons de feutre et l'on n'entend pas ses allées et

<sup>67</sup> Sur les différents aspects du "contrat narratif", cf. Jean-Michel Adam (11-12).

<sup>68</sup> A propos des instructions de Bona (croquis, description des lieux, détail des opérations, etc.), on lit que Garinati "ignore quel en est l'auteur; quels en sont les auteurs, plutôt, car plusieurs personnes ont dû se répartir le travail (40). Narrateur donc multiple et mystérieux.

venues le long du corridor—entre la cuisine et la salle à manger, où, sur l’immense table, elle dispose en un ordre immuable un unique couvert.

C’est lundi: le dîner du lundi n’est jamais très compliqué: une soupe de légumes, du jambon probablement et quelque crème “renversée” au goût trop imprécis—ou bien du riz au caramel. . . .

Mais Daniel Dupont ne se soucie pas beaucoup de gastronomie.

Assis au bureau, il est en train d’examiner son revolver. Il ne faudrait pas qu’il vienne à s’enrayer—depuis tant d’années que personne ne s’en est servi. Dupont le manipule avec précaution; il l’ouvre, enlève les balles, nettoie soigneusement le mécanisme, en vérifie le bon fonctionnement; il remet enfin le chargeur en place et range son chiffon dans un tiroir.

. . .

Tout est en ordre. Dupont n’a plus qu’à descendre dîner. Il doit paraître d’humeur égale pour que la vieille Anna ne soupçonne rien. Il donne des ordres pour le lendemain; il règle, avec sa précision coutumière, quelques détails désormais sans importance.

A sept heures et demie il remonte et, sans perdre une minute, il se tire une balle dans le cœur. (141-143)

Comme début de chapitre, ce texte joue le rôle d’une micro-exposition ou d’un résumé. Du point de vue énonciatif, il semble qu’il ne pourrait être attribué qu’au “narrateur anonyme” des *Gommes*<sup>69</sup>: conscience omnisciente, ce narrateur reconstitue la vérité sur le meurtre de Dupont. D’ailleurs, l’évocation précise du personnage candidat au suicide (ses gestes, ses pensées, ses sentiments), l’intérêt accordé aux détails en vue de produire un effet de réel (“chaussons de feutre”, menu du lundi, etc.), la motivation réaliste du suicide (argumentation solide): tous ces éléments ont, a priori, pour fonction de renforcer l’illusion réaliste et

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<sup>69</sup> Au sujet de cette expression, voir la judicieuse mise au point par Laurent Danon-Boileau dans *Produire le fictif* (38). Le même linguiste parle aussi parfois de “narrateur sans visage” (38).

le caractère objectif de la narration, et donc de confirmer notre intuition du fait que le texte serait assumé directement par le narrateur.<sup>70</sup>

Cependant, après un blanc typographique devant marquer l'autonomie relative de la séquence par rapport à ce qui suit,<sup>71</sup> on nous donne à lire au début de la séquence suivante ce bref paragraphe: "Ici Laurent s'arrête; il y a toujours quelque chose qui n'est pas clair: Dupont est-il mort sur le coup, ou non?" (143). Cette révélation dévoile le piège et, au lecteur, elle fait l'effet d'une humiliation: le texte se révèle avoir pour centre focal et modal non pas le narrateur, comme on avait cru le comprendre, mais un personnage. Ce qu'on pensait être (et lisait comme étant) en focalisation zéro se trouve être en focalisation interne.<sup>72</sup> Le piège ou le stratagème consiste donc ici dans un décalage trompeur et dans le report mystificateur d'une information essentielle: le texte est en réalité une forme de citation, mais qui fait semblant de s'ignorer, une sorte de monologue intérieur qui se déguise en récit d'événements, et qui veut donc passer pour autre qu'il n'est. En bref, le texte raconte non pas un événement comme tout semble l'indiquer, mais un discours (immédiat) comme nous le précise le narrateur après coup.

Cette ruse s'en double d'une autre, relative à la paternité du segment textuel. La révélation du vrai statut modal du texte nous met sur les traces d'une autre simulation. On a cru que le narrateur assumait le discours dans sa totalité (niveau signifiant et niveau signifié); la résolution du piège nous montre qu'en réalité il n'en est rien, et que le narrateur a seulement feint de l'assumer. Elle nous oblige donc à faire part à deux: le narrateur prend en charge le discours, mais n'assume guère la responsabilité du contenu de ce discours. En d'autres termes, on se trouve amené à rattacher le texte à deux instances distinctes après avoir cru qu'il était l'effet d'une seule. La révélation de l'imposture s'accompagne ainsi d'un dédoublement du texte (signifiant vs signifié) et de l'instance narrative (locuteur vs

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<sup>70</sup> D'un point de vue réaliste ou logique, ce texte ne peut être filtré par un personnage. Car tous les personnages concernés par l'enquête sur le meurtre ignorent tout de Dupont (physique, emploi du temps, etc.).

<sup>71</sup> Rappelons que le roman est divisé en chapitres qui sont divisés en scènes, lesquelles sont divisées en séquences.

<sup>72</sup> Sur cette terminologie, voir Genette, *Figures III* (206-208).



énonciateur).<sup>73</sup> Ces dédoublements sont dus au désengagement du narrateur à l'égard du dit, mais non du dire. Le leurre consiste donc ici à simuler l'engagement pour montrer à la fin que le prétendu engagement est une autre forme de désengagement; simulation rendue possible par la rétention d'une information décisive et par le déguisement (le texte ayant effacé tout ce qui pourrait le trahir).

Cette distanciation à rebours, résultat d'un piège à retardement, n'est pas sans conséquences sur le statut du texte. Au lieu d'être le détenteur de la vérité comme on l'avait cru, le texte se dévoile comme l'espace de la polyphonie des vérités relatives: aux yeux du lecteur, il n'est plus qu'une hypothèse due au délire d'interprétation d'un des personnages du roman. Par conséquent, il cesse d'être un document à mémoriser, une valeur authentique garantissant la vérité de la fiction.<sup>74</sup> Ainsi, si le texte retrouve son support énonciatif, il perd, si l'on peut dire, sa valeur d'échange et sort amoindri, mutilé, démystifié.

En bref, ce texte est triplement mystificateur: par son mode et sa modalisation (les conditions de production), par son origine, et par son statut (duquel dépend sa valeur). Ces divers décalages énonciatifs sont à l'origine de la difficulté d'accommodation du lecteur et à la base des jeux de miroirs dont ce dernier peut être la victime. En effet, outre les procédés naturalisant le passage et évoqués plus haut (et qui sont donc tous trompeurs: précision, effet de réel, motivation réaliste), il convient de signaler que rien dans ce qui précède le troisième chapitre n'annonce le commissaire: dans les

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<sup>73</sup> On rejoint ainsi l'analyse faite par Ducrot de la polyphonie: pour caractériser les similitudes et les différences qu'il y a entre le discours sérieux, le discours ironique et le discours rapporté, Ducrot introduit une distinction entre le locuteur (le responsable du dire) et l'énonciateur (le responsable de l'acte illocutionnaire). Il y a polyphonie quand le locuteur et l'énonciateur ne sont pas identiques (44-46). Cf. aussi François Recanati (161-222).

<sup>74</sup> Cette idée rejoint ce que J.-M. Adam appelle "l'isotopie de la vérité et de l'authenticité": "les événements et les qualifications sont filtrés en deux ensembles: jugés *authentiques* [et vrais] s'ils émanent du narrateur, ils sont jugés d'emblée *non authentiques* lorsqu'ils sont le fait des personnages" (c'est l'auteur qui souligne) (97). Cette isotopie est donc fondamentale du point de vue des récits; elle fait partie du trio isotopique recherché systématiquement par le lecteur (les deux autres étant "l'isotopie narrative" et "l'isotopie discursive-contextuelle"; 97).

dernières pages du chapitre précédent, il n'était question que de Wallas.<sup>75</sup> De plus, le rôle joué par le présent narratif dans cette stratégie du leurre n'est pas négligeable: d'une part il actualise ce qui est incertain et hypothétique, c'est-à-dire ce qui doit être mis au conditionnel; d'autre part il confère une valeur performative et une densité de réel à ce qui n'est que fictif et imaginaire.<sup>76</sup>

Ainsi toute une stratégie est mise en place en vue de mystifier le lecteur et de lui faire prendre de fausses pistes. Il apparaît donc que le leurre énonciatif se présente à son mieux comme le produit d'une combinatoire rhétorico-argumentative complexe où plusieurs aspects énonciatifs sont mobilisés de façon concertée pour provoquer une lecture plausible, mais dénoncée comme fausse après coup.

### **Le lieu e(s)t le non lieu**

Notons que si la situation énonciative du narrateur n'est pas intégrée dans ces exemples de montage mystificateur, c'est parce que dans un récit de type hétérodiégétique, comme le texte précédent, il n'est pas besoin pour le lecteur de situer spatialement et temporellement le narrateur ou son relais (de parole, de mode, en l'occurrence le personnage du commissaire).<sup>77</sup> Il n'en va pas tout à fait de même pour des segments ou des séquences ayant l'allure d'un discours, c'est-à-dire qui semblent engager plus ou moins ouvertement la situation énonciative, et qui sont donc susceptibles de faire de celle-ci un espace propice au leurre. Qu'on se reporte justement à la première page du deuxième chapitre:<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Donc même si on avait à rattacher le texte à la conscience d'un personnage quelconque, on aurait pensé à Wallas, mais jamais au commissaire.

<sup>76</sup> Cette objectivation du fictif ainsi que son contraire, la déréalisation du réel, font partie des stratagèmes du leurre.

<sup>77</sup> Comme le narrateur (ou le personnage-relais) n'est pas impliqué dans l'action qu'il raconte, tout doit être référé au contexte spatio-temporel de l'histoire racontée. Cf. Danon-Boileau (68-78, 95-96). Voir en particulier l'opposition entre ce qu'il appelle "le repérage par deixis" et "le repérage par anaphore". Sur la notion de "relais", voir aussi Patillon (40 sq).

<sup>78</sup> Robbe-Grillet semble privilégier les débuts (de chapitres, de scènes) pour tendre ses pièges énonciatifs. On le devine, de tels endroits se prêtent parfaitement aux simulacres, à ceux impliquant en particulier l'idée de continuité, de relation ou d'unité.

C'est bien un bruit de pas; des pas dans l'escalier, qui se rapprochent. Quelqu'un monte. Quelqu'un monte lentement—non: posément; peut-être avec circonspection? Tenant la rampe, à ce qu'il semble. Une personne que l'ascension trop raide essouffle, ou bien fatiguée d'être venue de loin. C'est un pas d'homme, mais un pas discret, aux trois quarts étouffé par le tapis—ce qui lui donne, par instants, comme un air timoré, ou clandestin.

Cette impression cependant ne dure pas. De plus près, on reconnaît là un pas précis, probablement sans fard: celui d'un homme aux idées sereines qui monte tranquillement.

Les trois dernières marches sont franchies avec plus de vigueur, dans la hâte sans doute d'atteindre le palier. L'homme est maintenant devant la porte; il s'arrête un moment pour reprendre haleine . . .

(. . . un coup, trois petits coups rapides . . .)

Mais il ne s'attarde pas plus de quelques secondes et commence à gravir la volée suivante. Les pas s'éloignent vers le haut de l'immeuble. (99)

Visiblement ce texte ne peut être attribué à une conscience omnisciente. En effet certains termes relativisent diversement le savoir et la portée (le champ) du regard: “quelqu'un,” “peut-être,” “à ce qu'il semble,” “ou,” “ou bien.” Le texte est donc implicitement focalisé sur une conscience perceptive et interprétative qui reste cependant indéterminée. En outre, celle-ci est implicitement située dans l'espace et le temps, sans quoi d'ailleurs, des éléments comme “l'escalier,”<sup>79</sup> “maintenant,” qui sont des figures déictiques, n'auraient aucun sens (ils n'ont de sens que par rapport à celui qui les énonce). On le devine, c'est ce genre de failles ou d'“imperfections” qui facilitent la mise en place du piège. En effet l'essentiel du leurre consiste précisément ici à focaliser le texte mais en masquant le foyer et en dissimulant

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<sup>79</sup> Sur l'article défini, voir les remarques percutantes de Danon-Boileau (28-29).

l'identité du personnage focal, à le situer mais très vaguement dans un espace-temps plus ou moins indéterminé, de telle sorte que le lecteur se trouve impliqué malgré lui dans cette scène, identifié à un narrateur (et/ou un personnage)-foyer, en situation d'attente ou à l'affût (on ne sait au juste). En bref, on le "met en condition" (perceptivement, spatialement et temporellement).

Outre cette indétermination affectant certains aspects du texte, on relève, comme faisant partie du dispositif du leurre, l'introduction du suspense dans la mesure où celui-ci favorise une certaine participation en avivant une curiosité inquiète chez le lecteur. De même, certains termes employés développent cette identification et parachèvent l'illusion; ainsi l'adverbe "maintenant" qui se rattache généralement (et se définit par rapport) à celui qui l'énonce et/ou le lit, ou encore le pronom "on" qui, dans "on reconnaît là", intègre le lecteur à l'instance perceptive et interprétative ("on" = je + . . . ).<sup>80</sup> On le voit, des éléments nombreux et différents convergent et tendent vers un effet unique: modifier la situation du lecteur et son attitude.

Or, c'est cela précisément le piège. En effet, dès que le lecteur s'installe confortablement dans cette (nouvelle) position de foyer et que le piège se referme sur lui, on l'en expulse brutalement, le texte ayant continué de la sorte: "Ce n'était pas Garinati" (99). Cette sentence (elle forme en effet la dernière phrase du passage) ainsi que la révélation de l'identité de la conscience perceptive et cognitive réelle (on apprendra que c'est Bona attendant Garinati dans son appartement pour un rendez-vous fixé à 10 heures), tout cela rappelle vertement au lecteur qu'il est étranger au récit, situé à l'extérieur de la diégèse, et que le texte est subordonné à un personnage précis; le "quelqu'un" qui monte l'escalier n'est de surcroît qu'une "fiction." L'illusion auditive et interprétative de Bona ("Non! Il est impossible de confondre plus longtemps Garinati avec cette fiction";99) devient celle du lecteur. Celui-ci se trouve pris ici en flagrant délit d'hallucination et d'affabulation.

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16 Il est vrai que "on" peut aussi bien signifier le contraire et "traduire la distance qu'un locuteur veut établir entre lui et autrui pour souligner un sentiment d'ironie, d'affection . . ." (R.I. Wagner et J. Pinchon [203]; voir aussi Grévisse [644]).

## Dérèglement du langage

Chaque mot est susceptible de charrier une histoire ou d'entrer dans un paradigme syntaxique ou culturel, plus ou moins codé. Placé dans l'espace clos d'un roman, par exemple, le même mot peut, en outre, engager de nouveaux rapports, établir des liens multiples avec les autres mots, objets ou personnages faisant partie du même univers: il mobilise alors un nombre (a priori limité) de syntagmes contextuels. De tels mots, déjà précodés et plus ou moins structurés, se prêtent aisément à la mystification. Ainsi en est-il de l'usage que le narrateur des *Gommes* fait du pronom "il".

Il arrive que le "il" soit employé de telle sorte qu'il semble renvoyer sournoisement à plusieurs personnages. En témoigne le début de la septième scène du quatrième chapitre, que nous citons en même temps que les derniers paragraphes de la sixième scène:

### Scène 6:

Dupont devait être en train de faire les cent pas entre le lit et la fenêtre. Il a une figure contrariée.

-Le bras va bien? demande Juard.

-Oui, oui. Très bien . . . .

Dupont ne répond pas. Il pense à autre chose . . .  
 . . Dupont lâche le bord du rideau . . . .

Le professeur baisse le bras, avec une certaine lenteur, en homme qui n'a pas autre chose à faire ensuite—et n'a donc aucune raison de hâter ses mouvements. Il attend quelqu'un qui ne vient pas; pour masquer son énervement—et le maîtriser en partie—il se force à cette modération exagérée. Il abaisse le bras.

Sa main, au lieu de rester pendre naturellement, remonte le long de la jambe, hésite vers le bas du nouveau, passe outre, et finit par disparaître dans la poche.

Dupont se retourne vers le docteur. (216)

*Scène 7:*

Il aperçoit son visage dans la glace de la cheminée et, au-dessous, la double rangée des objets alignés sur le marbre: la statuette et son reflet, le bougeoir de cuivre et son reflet, où un beau lutteur s'apprête à écraser un lézard.

L'athlète au lézard, le cendrier, le pot à tabac, le bougeoir . . . Il sort la main de sa poche et la tend vers la première statuette, vieil aveugle guidé par un enfant. Dans la glace, le reflet de la main s'avance à sa rencontre. Toutes les deux restent suspendues un instant au-dessus du bougeoir de cuivre-indécises. Puis le reflet et la main se posent, l'un en face de l'autre, sagement, à égale distance de la surface du miroir, sur le bord du marbre et sur le bord de son image . . . .

Il demeure encore quelque temps dans l'expectative . . . . Il contemple son ouvrage . . . . Il échange l'un pour l'autre les deux derniers objets . . . .

Enfin, il pousse le petit cendrier rouge de quelques centimètres vers l'angle du marbre. (217)

Tout naturellement et tout innocemment, nous avons tendance (mécanismes appris et réflexes aidant) à attribuer le “il” de la scène 7 au personnage évoqué d'ailleurs très longuement à la fin de la scène précédente (la scène 6): le professeur Dupont. Or le faire c'est précisément tomber dans un piège soigneusement préparé. Pourtant, dira-t-on, les arguments, en faveur de cette lecture, ne manquent pas: plusieurs éléments légitiment et justifient une telle attribution. D'abord, Dupont est en situation d'attente comme notre “il” qui apparemment trompe son ennui en modifiant la disposition des objets qui ornent sa cheminée. Ensuite, l'arrêt insistant sur les mouvements de la main (sorte de gros plan) prépare précisément l'exercice manuel dont il est question dans notre texte. Enfin et surtout, la main qui a “fini . . . par disparaître dans la poche” (216) dans le premier texte semble être la même que celle qui est retirée de la poche dans le deuxième texte (“il sort sa main de sa poche”[ 217]). On en convient, autant de concordances ne sauraient être le fait du hasard.

On a bien affaire à un piège soigneusement préparé. Comble du leurre, toutes ces concordances ont pour fonction d'endormir la vigilance éventuelle du lecteur et de motiver une lecture linéaire. Or, la ruse consiste dans le fait que notre "il" est tourné non vers le passé du texte comme on s'y attendait, mais vers la séquence qui suit, c'est-à-dire dans le cas qui nous occupe: "Garinati sort de sa chambre, en ferme la porte au verrou et commence à descendre la longue spirale de l'escalier" (217-218). Le terme en expansion ("Garinati") suit, dans le discours, le terme condensé ("il") qui le reprend, au lieu de le précéder.<sup>81</sup> L'illusion majeure, dans cet épisode, est donc due à un décalage insoupçonné, à la simulation d'une fonction inattendue et à une interversion de l'ordre habituel: l'anaphore est transformée en cataphore<sup>82</sup> pour ainsi dire.

Ainsi le lecteur se découvre souvent, comme d'ailleurs les personnages des *Gommes*, en train de combler les failles dans la situation énonciative des textes en y injectant (ou en les nivelant par) des fables; car le vide (silence du narrateur sur tel ou tel aspect, effacement provisoire d'une des composantes de l'énonciation, décalage et simulation) fonctionne précisément comme un piège infaillible. A "rémunérer les défauts" de l'énonciation—pourrait-on dire en parodiant Mallarmé—on ne devient pas poète mais dupe.

### **Vers une poétique du leurre**

Plusieurs observations peuvent être faites, qui précisent nos hypothèses de départ ainsi que les caractéristiques fondamentales du leurre. Il est remarquable d'abord que, du point de vue de la structure triadique, le leurre se rapproche fonctionnellement de l'ironie. Comme l'ironie, le leurre est souvent perçu a posteriori et décodé par feed-back: son effet est donc plutôt rétroactif et comme à rebours. Cependant, alors que l'ironie est ponctuelle et instantanée, le leurre cultive l'étendue (spatiale et temporelle). Il a lieu

<sup>81</sup> Durozoi dans son essai (*Les gommes*, Hatier, 1973, p. 59) et Morrisette (dans *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, Editions de Minuit, 1986, p. 57) interprètent correctement le "Il", sans faire de commentaire.

<sup>82</sup> Sur ces deux termes, voir Greimas, *Sémiotique*, p. 15.

précisément pendant cet espace-temps d'égarément qui s'ignore; il est dans cette illusion de lisibilité qui ne se dénonce comme telle qu'après coup. C'est que, pour être déchiffré, le leurre a besoin, comme l'ironie, de ce que Kerbrat-Orecchioni appelle le "calcul interprétatif,"<sup>83</sup> un acte auquel tout lecteur est obligé de se livrer chaque fois qu'il se trouve en face d'un texte piégé. Effet d'écriture, le leurre est ainsi dans une certaine mesure aussi un effet de lecture. De même que l'engagement du narrateur est essentiel dans un contexte ironique, il ne peut y avoir de leurre "anonyme" ou "à la troisième personne". Cependant, dans le contexte du leurre, cette présence du lecteur ne transforme pas celui-ci en complice du narrateur comme c'est le cas dans l'ironie, elle en fait le partenaire victime. C'est ce qui sépare le leurre de l'ironie: le leurre est essentiellement un jeu de force, qui établit avec le lecteur un rapport déceptif. Remarquons en effet que les pièges portant sur les faits énonciatifs se ramènent tous à un surplus d'illusion et donc de valeur: ils sont de nature hyperbolique. Aussi le revirement que constitue le dévoilement du piège est-il toujours à caractère déceptif et critique. C'est en cela que le leurre se rapproche du mensonge.

Comme le mensonge, le leurre cherche à tromper mais tandis que la personne qui ment tente d'effacer toutes les traces de son acte, celle qui recourt au leurre fait en sorte que certains indices dénoncent la supercherie après qu'elle a eu lieu. Le leurre est donc un mensonge mais transitoire et qui ne craint pas d'être reconnu comme tel. C'est ainsi que, curieusement, le mensonge semble exclure le jeu et donc rejoindre le type de discours monologique et sérieux: parce qu'il refuse de laisser des traces, et surtout parce qu'il substitue une réalité à une autre, le menteur n'aurait qu'une voix, quand bien même il mentirait. Le leurre par contre, parce qu'il cultive les discordances en se dénonçant, crée, à sa manière, l'espace et les conditions d'un dialogue à plusieurs voix.

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<sup>83</sup> Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, *Poétique* 41 (117).



D'autre part, il est notable que le leurre est un phénomène plutôt romanesque, dans la mesure où, comme le trompe-l'œil en peinture, il a besoin d'un espace pluridimensionnel et d'une aire de jeu, que seul le roman a pu traditionnellement fournir. En effet, pour que le leurre puisse se déployer, se préparer lentement, s'insinuer discrètement, et tenter de séduire le lecteur avant de le prendre au piège, il lui faut de l'étendue textuelle. A cet égard, la longueur des citations que j'ai développées dans le cours de cette étude n'a pas d'autre explication. Figure discursive plutôt que figure de mot, le leurre se confond avec la mise en place d'un dispositif logico-argumentatif complexe et convaincant. Comme construction de l'écriture, le leurre est ainsi inséparable d'une rhétorique du discours. Flaubert en donne une illustration parfaite lorsqu'il préconise la composition d'un ouvrage "arrangé de telle manière que le lecteur ne sache pas si on se fout de lui, oui ou non".<sup>84</sup>

Ce mot de Flaubert nous permettra enfin de mieux préciser le rapport du leurre avec le roman moderne. Pour générer un espace dialogique conflictuel, le leurre manipule les fondements de l'échange narratif, à savoir les règles romanesques sur lesquelles se fondent la complicité et l'adhésion des lecteurs et dont le narrateur/auteur est normalement garant: pas de récit sans ces règles, nous dit Jean-Michel Adam. Jouer avec ces présupposés c'est transformer inévitablement le dialogue entre le narrateur et le lecteur en un rapport de force. Bien que gai, le leurre est donc par définition subversif. Incompatible avec la transparence narrative, son intervention dans l'énonciation et dans le texte introduit une grande part d'opacité et problématise la communication. On comprend pourquoi certains textes sont, plus que d'autres, disposés au leurre, lequel semble profondément lié à une esthétique anti-narrative.

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<sup>84</sup> Lettre de Flaubert à Bouilhet datée du 4 septembre 1850. Cité par Kerbrat Orecchioni in *Linguistique et sémiologie* (35).

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**PART THREE**  
**WOMEN: MASTERS OF DECEIT?**

**Tue-moi, belle tentatrice !  
Femmes médiévales et femmes fatales dans  
la littérature moderne**

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Lorsqu'elle traite du Moyen Âge, la littérature moderne a bien souvent tendance à se livrer à une construction intellectuelle et artistique, plus fréquemment nourrie de préjugés que de véritables faits historiques. Il arrive aussi qu'elle reprenne à son compte des lieux communs directement hérités des conceptions médiévales afin de les utiliser à des fins politiques ou idéologique; ainsi peut-on parfois déceler dans les figures féminines tentatrices toute une série de *topoi* qui semblent directement issus du Roman de la Rose ou des légendes arthuriennes, marquant la pérennité des structures d'oppression masculine dans le monde et l'imaginaire occidental. La femme fatale apparaît donc souvent comme une alliée du Diable, poussant l'homme au péché ou à la damnation et les représentations médiévales de la fée, de l'hérétique ou de la sorcière ont parfois connu une étonnante postérité dans la littérature moderne. Afin d'analyser ses influences et survivances, je souhaiterais aborder ici trois écrits des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles où le Moyen Âge joue un rôle capital. Le premier de ces textes, *La bonne mort*, est une nouvelle de jeunesse rédigée par Charles Maurras alors qu'il n'avait de 24 ans. Achevée en 1892 et publiée dans le recueil intitulé *Le chemin de Paradis*, elle évoque les émois intérieurs d'Octave, jeune homme assoiffé de mysticisme et dévoré par des passions charnelles, qui finira par se donner la mort après avoir été tenté par d'étranges apparitions féminines. Si l'action de la nouvelle se déroule à l'époque moderne, son auteur affirmait avoir été

inspiré par le Moyen Âge, plus précisément par le vieux thème du Chevalier ayant vendu son âme au diable et gagnant la partie par la grâce de Notre-Dame (Maurras 65).

Le second, *Un jardin sur l'Oronte*, dernier roman de Maurice Barrès paru en 1922 est profondément marqué par l'influence de Tristan et Iseut. Il met en scène les amours aussi passionnées que tragiques d'un chevalier chrétien, Guillaume, et d'une Musulmane nommée Oriante à l'époque des Croisades. Envoyé en ambassade par les Chrétiens de Tripoli auprès de l'émir de Qalaat, le jeune franc tombe éperdument amoureux de la plus belle femme du harem et débute avec elle une relation enflammée à l'insu de l'émir. Mais la situation politique s'altère, la trêve est rompue et les Chrétiens assiègent Qalaat; trahissant ses frères d'armes, Guillaume rejoint les Sarrasins pour demeurer auprès d'Oriante. La forteresse finit par tomber aux mains des croisés mais les amants séparés continuent de se voir en cachette, jusqu'à ce que Guillaume apprenne qu'Oriante s'est convertie et a épousé un seigneur franc. Fou de rage et de tristesse, il se rend à Qalaat où il provoque une terrible esclandre avant d'être blessé à mort par les chevaliers; quant à Oriante, elle le réconfortera durant son agonie et deviendra plus tard abbesse de Qalaat. Ce deuxième texte est donc entièrement enraciné dans le Moyen Âge et placé sous la double influence de la *fin'amor* et de la *fol'amor*, mêlant les caractéristiques de l'amour courtois à celui de l'amour passionnel et destructeur.

Enfin, dans *Montsalvat* (1957), troisième récit de notre corpus, Pierre Benoit se livre à une étonnante réécriture de la quête du Graal dans laquelle François Sevestre, un jeune professeur d'université, cède aux charmes d'Alcyone, envoûtante et mystérieuse descendante des cathares pour laquelle il va abandonner femme et enfant. Totalement fascinée par la jeune femme, il va la suivre dans un périple haletant à travers le sud de la France et l'Espagne en vue de retrouver le Saint Graal, qui aurait été gardé par les Albigeois et dissimulé à Montségur. L'histoire se déroulant en pleine Occupation, il devra également éviter deux officiers allemands, lancés eux aussi à la recherche de la coupe légendaire et qui finiront par trouver la mort. Mais après avoir percé les secrets du Graal, Sevestre devra payer un prix particulièrement élevé: il perdra Alcyone et

apprendra avec horreur la mort de sa jeune fille, tombée malade durant son absence.

Tous ces textes gravitent autour de la figure d'une femme fatale: je m'attacherai donc à dresser le portrait de ces tentatrices tout en analysant les rapports de pouvoir qui les lient aux personnages masculins du corpus, ainsi que les éventuelles influences médiévales pesant sur lesdits rapports.

### **Les visages de la séduction**

Avant toute autre considération, je souhaiterais m'intéresser à l'identité de ces femmes et à leurs caractéristiques, afin de voir si celles-ci reflètent déjà, indépendamment de leurs actions, des préjugés misogynes.

Dans la nouvelle de Maurras, nous sommes confrontés à plusieurs figures féminines, ou du moins à une même entité apparaissant sous des aspects divers, peuplant les songes agités du héros. À bien des égards, ce texte est sans doute le plus proche des sources médiévales—en particulier arthuriennes—dans lesquelles la tentatrice (parfois simplement une illusion générée par le diable) apparaît de manière ponctuelle sur la route du chevalier avant de s'évanouir, souvent chassée par un signe religieux; on retrouve de nombreuses scènes de ce genre dans les romans du Graal, en particulier ceux qui sont influencés par la morale cistercienne, comme la *Quête du Graal*.

La première description de ces femmes mystérieuses, fruit des pensées d'Octave, reste extrêmement vague et laisse présager un danger imminent: "Il songe aux jeunes filles qui se déshabillent sur le rivage. Elles vont le rejoindre. . . . Le souvenir lui vient aussi que ces délectations sont périlleuses entre toutes" (Maurras 65). Très vite, les créatures révèlent leur monstruosité et tout comme Perceval ou Galaad cherchaient leur salut dans le signe de la croix, le pauvre Octave tente lui aussi le recours au sacré pour fuir:

Ses deux pieds sont captifs; ses yeux rouverts  
cherchent le ciel; mais c'est une eau verdâtre,  
six méduses violettes y font le cercle autour de lui.  
L'effroi l'abat à la renverse sur des pelouses d'algues  
qui lui nouent les poignets, comme elles ont noué ses

pieds. L'eau amère l'étouffe. Il veut faire un acte de foi en ce péril et regarde sur sa poitrine. Le scapulaire n'y est plus. (Maurras 65)

Plus loin dans le texte, Maurras évoque encore une "dame très belle" qui, prodiguant mille tendresses, transforme Octave en "faible jouet d'amour." Mais là encore, la métamorphose est immédiate et l'issue fatale: "elle lui soulève la tête, elle enlève le scapulaire, rejette ce symbole exécré de Marie et dans ses longs cheveux aux cycles de reptile, étrangle le petit garçon" (Maurras 71).

Cette hostilité de la tentatrice envers la Sainte Vierge se retrouve également dans *Montsalvat*, lorsque Benoît décrit la visite de sa flamboyante héroïne dans une église où se trouve une grande statue de Marie:

Elle et Alcyone avaient l'air de deux créatures étrangères. On eût dit qu'elles se dévisageaient avec une curieuse et sauvage fixité comme deux créatures qui n'ont jamais appartenu, qui n'appartiennent point, qui n'appartiendront jamais au même univers. (Benoît 165)

Hormis cette allusion révélatrice de la nature foncière d'Alcyone, on n'apprendra pas grand-chose d'autre au sujet de la jeune cathare, mis à part quelques timides remarques du narrateur qui décrit sa beauté "singulière" et que l'on devine fascinante. Mais un des traits les plus caractéristiques de Pierre Benoît n'est-il pas la présence, dans presque tous ses romans, d'héroïnes séduisantes et mystérieuses dont le prénom commence par la lettre A ? Depuis *Koenigsmark* et *L'Atlantide*, parus respectivement en 1918 et 1919, une intrigue commune se retrouve en effet au cœur de la plupart des textes de Benoît: dans un contexte fréquemment exotique, un jeune homme fait la connaissance d'une femme fatale qui va l'entraîner vers des péripéties parfois dévastatrices. Face à ces dames, le héros se montre le plus souvent "faible et désarmé, dépourvu de ressort et de volonté" (Monestier 139); mais surtout, il est rapidement voué "à sa perdition, à sa destruction, et fréquemment au crime" (Monestier 140). *Montsalvat* ne fait donc nullement exception à ces constantes et malgré les descriptions

laconiques d'Alcyone, le lecteur familier de Benoit reconnaitra bien vite l'incarnation du redoutable archétype féminin qui hante ses écrits. . . .

À l'opposé du silence et de ces suggestions qui entourent Alcyone, le portrait de l'héroïne d'*Un Jardin sur l'Oronte* apparaît étonnamment riche et détaillé; Barrès lui offre des louanges dithyrambiques, évoque "une âme faite d'amour et de grâce . . . dont la flamme immortelle jaillissait de ses grands yeux" (Barrès 140), mentionne la beauté de son chant qui hypnotise littéralement le jeune Guillaume et va même jusqu'à la qualifier de "cantique vivant" (Barrès 26) . Charme, vivacité, intelligence et humour ne font nullement défaut à la belle Sarrasine qui, parée aussi bien de grâce que de vertu, échauffe à la fois les sens et l'esprit. Sur bien des plans, elle se rapproche ainsi des tentatrices arthuriennes qui déployaient également une foule de talents variés pour mieux conduire les hommes à leur perte. Qu'on relise pour s'en convaincre le passage du *Val des amants infidèles*, dans lequel une ravissante demoiselle tente de séduire Lancelot du Lac:

Elle s'emploie à le servir et à le flatter de son mieux: elle le charme de belles paroles et rit et badine avec lui tout en chevauchant. Elle l'excite par tous les moyens . . . elle dénoue souvent son voile devant lui pour lui montrer son visage et sa tête, d'une extrême beauté, elle chante des lais bretons et autres chants agréables; elle avait la voix haute et claire et s'exprimait bien en français, en breton, et dans beaucoup d'autres langues. (Le Val des amants infidèles 335)

Le diable peut donc se montrer prodigue en matière de qualités, et si nous sommes fort loin de la flagrante monstruosité des femmes murrassiennes, le péril n'en est pas moins grand. Et bien que ces descriptions semblent mettre la femme sur un piédestal, elles constituent plutôt une forme pernicieuse d'asservissement; le caractère misogyne de cette excessive glorification féminine a d'ailleurs été mis en exergue par Simone de Beauvoir, qui reprochait par exemple à André Breton de transcender la femme tout en la réduisant à un "accès à l'au-delà", un



simple moyen d'élévation pour l'homme et de ne jamais parler d'elle en tant que sujet (Beauvoir 292).

### **La tentation de l'ailleurs**

Dans la littérature médiévale, la femme fatale provient fréquemment d'un autre monde, qu'il soit exotique ou féérique, et s'avère parfois même être un démon sous apparence féminine—surtout dans la matière arthurienne— ce qui la retranche non seulement du monde chrétien, mais aussi de l'humanité toute entière. Ses origines conditionnent donc sa nature: provenant d'une autre dimension, elle ne peut qu'apporter le péché et le chaos, d'ailleurs souvent sciemment.

Cette altérité foncière qui caractérise les figures féminines redoutables se retrouve de manière systématique dans notre corpus, mais à des degrés différents: si elle est évidente chez Barrès qui met en scène une Sarrasine dont le prénom rappelle très clairement la terre natale, elle est en revanche plus subtile dans *Montsalvat*, où l'intrigue se situe exclusivement en Europe. La tentatrice de Maurras n'a, pour sa part, aucune existence véritable; issue d'un monde purement onirique, sa figure est donc très proche de celle de la fée, voire même de la servante démoniaque dont elle partage bien des caractéristiques.

Dans son chapitre intitulé *La belle dame sans merci* – référence à une ballade de Keats dont le titre est emprunté au poète du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle Alain Chartier—Mario Praz rappelle les liens qui unissent ces différentes formes d'altérité à la soif d'absolu:

Il y a une certaine similitude entre l'exotiste et le mystique: ce dernier se projette hors du monde dans un climat de transcendance où il s'unit à la divinité; l'autre se transporte hors du temps et de l'espace actuels et croit voir dans ce qui est passé et lointain le climat idéal au bonheur des sens (Praz 175).

Ainsi, la présence de l'ailleurs (l'Orient ou l'Autre monde féérique) et de l'autrefois (le Moyen Âge) sont deux éléments indispensables à la quête passionnelle des héros masculins du corpus: de fait, les femmes qu'ils vont rencontrer seront

forcément des initiatrices ou des corruptrices

Avant même que Guillaume ne voie Oriante pour la première fois, Barrès suggère au lecteur l'imminence d'une rencontre inhabituelle, et même surnaturelle. Les souhaits du jeune chevalier traduisent bien cette préoccupation, lui qui espère "voir des anges avant même que de mourir" et pense retourner en France "avec l'idée de trouver au chevet de notre église, près de la rivière, l'ange ou la fée que (lui) a refusé l'Asie." Oriante est donc attendue et transcendée avant même d'entrer en scène, comme le confirme la promesse de l'émir à son invité: "Le paradis existe sur terre, et tu ne quitteras pas Qalaat sans avoir soupçonné ce que peuvent être les anges des nuits d'Asie." Cette référence à l'Asie, elle n'est bien sûr pas nouvelle chez Barrès, qui fut hanté par l'Orient durant toute sa vie, affichant un mélange de répulsion et de fascination souvent reflété par les figures féminines de ses romans:

Dans *Les Déracinés* (1897), la belle Arménienne Astiné Aravian, . . . incarne le type de l'amour oriental et païen, à la manière de la courtisane de *Novembre* de Flaubert ("Elle vient d'Asie et des régions mystérieuses et parfumées comme de belles esclaves voilées"), celle qui porte en elle le charme exotique de Tiflis, la ville "de même infecte et parfumée, c'est-à-dire sentant la mort et les roses." (Praz 316)

La femme orientale possède donc un attrait indiscutable mais appelle également à la méfiance, car elle demeure toujours, à l'image de son peuple, une ennemie viscérale du christianisme, et ce conformément à l'esprit des croisades qui anime souvent Barrès. La misogynie se double ainsi d'une xénophobie en partie héritée de la vision colonialiste et orientaliste de l'époque—qualifiée par E. Saïd de "style occidental de domination, de restructuration et d'autorité sur l'Orient" (Saïd 15).

Ces préjugés se retrouvent ici ravivés par tous les clichés de la période coloniale et l'impérieuse nécessité de soumission des peuples indigènes aux valeurs de la Troisième République. Il n'est ainsi pas superflu de rappeler qu'un an après la parution d'*Un jardin sur l'Oronte*—soit en 1923—, Barrès achève son *Enquête aux pays du Levant*, récit

des voyages qu'il effectua durant l'année 1914 à Beyrouth, Damas, ou encore Antioche. Le point de vue qu'il y expose est clairement marqué par une volonté de domination sur "l'Orient, tout rempli de ces forces magnifiques [qui] laissent s'égarer et se perdre ce que l'Occident et l'Eglise guident, épurent, emploient et sublimisent" (Barrès III): une vision certes très politisée mais qui, dans le fond, ne diffère guère de celle du *Jardin*, mettant en scène une terre sensuelle capable de charmer ou de corrompre le plus endurci des chevaliers.

Chez Maurras, la situation est quelque peu différente: l'origine surnaturelle de la tentatrice qui conduit Octave à sa perte est clairement annoncée, elle est décrite comme

une de ces mauvaises femmes que flétrissent tant de saints livres et dont les images sans voiles lui dévoreraient le sang de leur désir curieux et sombre. Elles sont filles des démons, elles perdent les jeunes hommes. (Maurras 26)

Outre la diabolisation manifeste de la dame, on relèvera dans cette définition le passage à une identité collective et exclusivement féminine, rappelant les descriptions médiévales de femmes fatales. Ainsi, contrairement à Oriante et Alcyone qui possèdent des personnalités bien affirmées, la sinistre muse d'Octave n'est que l'émanation de ce groupe de succubes; le héros de Maurras va cependant lui donner un nom et un visage, d'ailleurs tous deux marqués par une forme d'exotisme qui, comme chez Barrès, s'avère étroitement mêlée à une symbolique érotique et macabre:

Maintenant il sait bien comment il connut cette dame. Elle lui apparut, vêtue de ses désirs, un matin de sa tendre enfance. Il feuilletait un tome des *Mille et une Nuits* orné d'assez belles vignettes, et ses yeux se fixèrent sur l'histoire d'Amine dont le corps nu et lisse fut exposé dans un linceul. (Maurras 26)

C'est donc une fois de plus la figure de l'Orientale qui vient incarner les dangers pesant sur la raison et l'intégrité morale de l'Occident, mais avec une connotation encore plus négative que chez les autres auteurs, puisqu'il s'agit ici

directement de l'œuvre du Malin. De fait, Maurras ne décrit plus simplement une passion ou une séduction, mais bel et bien une véritable possession, la lutte perdue d'un jeune chrétien contre des forces démoniaques auxquelles une imagination romantique et malade a donné le visage de l'Orient.

Dans *Montsalvat*, l'altérité d'Alcyone se traduit de diverses manières, attestant à la fois d'un éloignement géographique et spirituel: force est toutefois de constater que la véritable altérité d'Alcyone se situe plus dans le monde des idées. D'ailleurs, c'est ce que viennent attester les deux autres prénoms de la jeune femme: Marquésia, "celui de la belle-mère de [son] aïeul, Ramon de Pérella, brûlée le lendemain de la chute de Montségur, le 16 mars 1244, en même temps que sa fille Corba de Pérella et que sa petite-fille, Esclarmonde ainsi que Géralde, la comtesse de Lavaur, elle aussi cathare forcenée, suppliciée une trentaine d'années auparavant, et alliée sans doute à la famille de Pérella" (Benoit 26). De cette litanie hérétique, le lecteur retiendra surtout l'image saisissante du bûcher—et toute la symbolique qui s'y rattache—, superposée à celle de ces femmes qui, toutes générations confondues, préférèrent périr plutôt que d'abjurer leur foi; l'image de la rebelle se confond donc avec celle de la sorcière dans le lourd héritage de la jeune femme. Et bien que ses racines s'avèrent purement françaises, elle n'en demeure pas moins soumise à des influences étrangères puisque de nombreux auteurs n'ont pas hésité à imputer au catharisme des origines lointaines, faisant abstraction de ses nombreuses composantes chrétiennes pour se focaliser sur son dualisme ou sa croyance dans la métempsychose. Les sources contemporaines de l'hérésie pratiquaient déjà couramment cet amalgame: ainsi, en 1213, la *Chanson de la croisade albigeoise* nommait les albigeois *cels de Bolgaria* (La chanson de la croisade albigeoise 40), les Bougres, à savoir les Bulgares, pour souligner le caractère étranger de leurs croyances. Souvent assimilé au manichéisme, le dogme cathare continua à être dénaturé de la sorte durant toute la première moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle; le médiéviste Jacques Boulenger n'hésitait pas à le rapprocher du bouddhisme (Boulenger 160) pour la simple raison que ses adeptes prêchaient le rejet du monde matériel et adoptaient un ascétisme aux vagues relents orientaux. Parler de catharisme

en 1957 équivalait donc à évoquer une idéologie dépaysante et mystérieuse, susceptible de troubler les lecteurs catholiques et d'attiser la curiosité de tous les autres.

La femme fatale n'est donc pas de ce monde, du moins pas entièrement, et c'est toujours depuis l'ailleurs ou l'autrefois qu'elle fait son irruption dans la vie du héros pour la bouleverser à jamais. Néanmoins, elle est bien présente ici et maintenant et c'est dans une réalité langoureuse qu'elle se manifeste, frappant à la fois les sens et l'esprit, car c'est bien sur ces deux plans que la femme triomphe entièrement de l'homme, conquis dans son corps et soumis dans sa pensée, marionnette extatique prête à céder aux caprices souvent mortels de la tentatrice.

### **Le Mal à l'œuvre et la tragédie**

Une des caractéristiques fondamentales que partagent Oriante, Alcyone et Amine est la capacité à semer la mort dans leur entourage, et plus particulièrement encore à conduire leur victime masculine au trépas par les voies de l'amour et du plaisir, qu'il soit ou non charnel.

Contrairement aux autres textes, *Montsalvat* ne s'achève pas avec la mort du personnage masculin, mais de sa jeune fille Catherine, emportée par la maladie alors que François Sevestre suivait Alcyone dans ses aventures. Mais est-elle vraiment la responsable de ce décès ? Si Pierre Benoit laisse au lecteur le soin d'en juger, il est néanmoins incontestable que l'enfant est la victime innocente—et peut-être propitiatoire—de quelques châtements liés au Graal, aux cathares, out tout simplement à l'infidélité de son père . . . Une chose est certaine, Alcyone demeure de glace face au drame qui plonge François dans une longue période d'égarement; c'est sans une seule parole de réconfort et dans des termes bien laconiques qu'elle en fait mention dans la dernière lettre envoyée au jeune homme: "D'abord, c'est la mort de ta fillette qui m'a révélé, qui t'a révélé à toi surtout, que jamais, jamais, tu ne t'affranchirais du lien familial" (Benoit 183). Cette citation se passe de commentaires et le lecteur saisit rapidement toute la monstruosité de cette femme cathare dont le mépris affiché de la vie humaine et de

la famille<sup>85</sup> traduit fort bien les préjugés médiévaux qu'entretenait l'Église vis-à-vis des Albigeois et qu'elle continua de relayer par la suite conférant aux meurtres d'enfants un "rôle important dans la sorcellerie démoniaque" (Closson 221). L'Église médiévale a en effet bien souvent lié l'hérésie à l'infanticide: ainsi, une chronique du moine Adémar de Chabannes datée du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle, mentionne que, dans la région d'Orléans, "un paysan venu en ville distribu[ait] une poussière magique provenant de cadavres d'enfants; tous ceux qui en absorbaient étaient séduits et ne pouvaient plus se détacher de la secte des Manichéens" (Vauchez 21).

Égoïste et calculatrice, Alcyone incarne donc à la fin du roman l'image de la femme fatale délaissant l'amant qui lui a déplu, mais aussi de l'hérétique fanatisée plaçant ses croyances au-dessus de tout le reste. . . .

Chez Maurras, c'est la femme elle-même qui, dans une scène finale aux forts accents blasphématoires, va pousser le jeune homme au suicide, et peut-être à la damnation éternelle: l'auteur ne précise-t-il pas qu'Octave est prisonnier de croyances délirantes, qu'il "agite ses lèvres et ses narines de païen" (Maurras 74)? La tentatrice parachève son œuvre diabolique lorsque sa victime, après avoir passé un nœud coulant autour de son cou, se jette du haut d'un balcon. Non content de périr comme Judas et de se livrer à un des actes les plus réprouvés par la morale chrétienne, le malheureux consacre encore ses ultimes instants à celle qui scella son destin tragique: "Il souhaite consommer quelques péchés encore, et le temps le pressant, il envoie un baiser à l'image d'Amine qui flotte à l'Orient à la place où vient de pâlir une étoile tardive" (Maurras 78). Relisons enfin les toutes dernières lignes du récit pour mieux saisir sa dimension à la fois magique et sacrilège:

Rien ne serait plus beau que cette chair resplendissante, n'était le feu serein, couleur de la première aurore, qu'est devenue au même instant notre âme délivrée. Vêtue de confiance, elle s'avance hors du monde accompagnée des flûtes et de chants

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<sup>85</sup> La femme de François Sevestre demandera le divorce après la mort de l'enfant.

nuptiaux. Sur la rive opposée, l'odeur des lys unis à la fleur d'olivier présage la venue de la Vierge Marie, chantant avec ses filles selon les harpes de David. . . . (Maurras 79)

On conviendra volontiers que ce passage est quelque peu déconcertant, et ce d'autant plus que Maurras y utilise la deuxième personne du pluriel pour marquer sa proximité avec Octave. Mais c'est surtout cette mention de la Vierge accueillant le suicidé au terme de ces étranges noces qui a de quoi troubler . . . N'est-ce pas là une conception totalement iconoclaste ? En fait, ce schéma antithétique semble avoir été un topos littéraire assez courant au Moyen Âge et, dans son essai consacré à la mort féérique, Laurent Guyenot relève que "le héros [du *Lai de Lanval*] parle de sa fée-amante en des termes normalement réservés à la Sainte Vierge" (Guyenot 176) tout en soulignant la proximité de Fairyland avec le Ciel (Guyenot 175). Voilà comment le personnage maurrassien passe du statut de victime à celui de martyr, de saint—certes ambiguë—mais néanmoins promis à un au-delà qui ne paraît point si terrifiant.

La fin d'*Un Jardin sur l'Oronte* marque quant à elle une rupture bien nette avec son modèle tristanien; alors que la légende médiévale relate la mort des deux amants, seul Guillaume périt dans le roman de Barrès et Oriante va jouer un rôle considérable dans les circonstances conduisant à sa fin tragique. En effet, après avoir négocié la reddition de sa forteresse assiégée par les Croisés, la princesse orientale s'est convertie au christianisme et a épousé un seigneur franc, reniant ainsi sa foi alors qu'elle avait poussé Guillaume à abjurer la sienne. Ulcéré par le spectacle de sa bien-aimée parmi ses anciens frères d'armes, le chevalier renégat se laissera aller à un geste de colère fatal, traitant Oriante de "fille au sang de vipère" et reprochant aux Chrétiens que leur "belle conquête fut le fait d'une félonie, et le fruit d'un accord de [leur] lâcheté avec la trahison d'une femme païenne" (Barrès 145). Jeté en prison, Guillaume y connaît une lente agonie dont les accents christiques—son supplice évoquant de façon patente la crucifixion—seront une raison de plus d'horrifier le lectorat catholique de Barrès (Mercanton 194). Mais, tout comme dans *La bonne mort*, c'est encore des femmes, en l'occurrence Oriante et sa

suivante Isabelle, qui viennent paradoxalement adoucir les derniers instants du malheureux . . . Là aussi, on retrouve un avatar des noces féeriques médiévales<sup>86</sup> où la tentatrice, responsable de la déchéance du héros, assume le rôle d'une figure psychopompe au moment de son trépas. Mais que l'on se garde d'y voir une quelconque valorisation de la féminité : seul l'homme est transcendé par cet instant final, sorte de béatification profane genrée de façon quasi exclusive, comme le souligne Guyenot :

Faerie est en principe fermé à tout homme déjà marié et à toute femme mortelle, donc réservé aux bacheliers et aux fées. Faut-il comprendre qu'une femme ne peut pas, en principe, être immortelle en Faerie ? Aux jeunes hommes morts prématurément serait réservée l'héroïsation féerique, tandis que les femmes devraient se contenter de la mort chrétienne. (Guyenot 264)

### **Un pouvoir inversé ?**

De par cette diabolisation, les situations dépeintes dans notre corpus marquent également une rupture dans les rapports de pouvoir traditionnels; rappelons en effet “le double postulat qui caractérisait le statut de la femme dans l'Église médiévale: égalité des deux sexes sur le plan de la Rédemption, subordination par rapport à l'homme dans le domaine social et religieux” (Vauchez 157-158). Mais de telles dispositions ont-elles pour autant subsisté chez ces auteurs qui clament volontiers leur attachement au Moyen Âge ? Ce n'est assurément pas le cas dans le roman de Benoit, où François Sevestre se détache totalement de sa famille et de son travail pour suivre sa bien-aimée cathare, dans une soumission aussi totale qu'aveugle; quant à la Rédemption, force est de constater qu'Alcyone en est fort éloignée et qu'elle paraît de surcroît s'en soucier bien peu!

Chez Barrès, ce renversement de subordination au profit de la femme est encore plus manifeste: alors que

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<sup>86</sup> Topos de la littérature du Moyen Âge, les noces féeriques correspondent à la disparition d'un héros masculin, emmené par une fée vers l'autre monde.



l'impavide Oriante conserve tout au long du récit son statut aristocratique et les privilèges qui en découlent, le malheureux Guillaume se résigne à une existence des plus misérables pour se rapprocher d'elle; engagé comme manœuvre auprès d'un Musulman, il s'installe dans une pauvre cabane et renonce à sa situation d'antan en échange d'une amère servitude amoureuse. Certes, la déchéance matérielle ou sociale avait déjà sa place dans la littérature amoureuse médiévale, si l'on songe par exemple au fameux épisode de la forêt du Morois, dans lequel Tristan et Yseut se réfugient dans les bois pour mener une vie de simplicité et de dénuement. Mais dans ce dernier cas, le destin tragique est partagé par les deux amants, et c'est de cette communion même qu'ils tirent leur force: "Chascun d'eus soffre paine elgal,/Qar l'un por l'autre ne sent mal" (Béroul 98) nous dit le texte de Béroul, « tous les deux souffrent de la même façon mais chacun grâce à l'autre oublie ses maux » (Béroul 99).

Il en va tout autrement pour le héros barrésien qui souffre en solitaire et avoue "aspire[r] à user ses forces, à dissiper en sueurs d'esclaves ses trop douloureuses pensées" (Barrès 107). Nous ne sommes plus dans les codes du *fol'amor*, mais bel et bien dans les affres les plus dégradants de la passion; pire encore, la belle orientale va pousser son chevalier servant à la trahison, à la colère, au péché, au reniement total de tout ce qu'il fut jadis et surtout à l'abandon des idéaux qu'il était censé servir, détruisant ainsi non seulement l'homme mais aussi le *miles christi*, le soldat du Christ.

Les conclusions de nos auteurs sur la gent féminine ne s'éloignent ainsi guère de celle du *Roman de la Rose*, qui mettait déjà en garde ses lecteurs de la plus alarmiste façon: "Seigneurs, gardez-vous de vos femmes, si vous tenez à vos corps et à vos âmes" (*Le Roman de la Rose* 869); toutefois, ces deux exemples nous prouvent donc que ces sombres dames du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle poussent encore plus loin le vice que leurs consœurs médiévales, plus souvent tentatrices que réelles destructrices.

Parvenus au terme de notre analyse, nous devons donc reconnaître que la persistance de clichés médiévaux est flagrante dans notre corpus, et que ces derniers ont même été considérablement amplifiés, allant parfois jusqu'à dénaturer la pensée du Moyen Âge au profit d'un

médiévalisme pittoresque. Les femmes n’y sont plus seulement des amantes funestes qui tuent l’âme et le corps, mais elles détruisent aussi les obligations familiales, militaires et religieuses, sapant les fondations mêmes de l’ordre social.

Avec elles, nous sommes bien loin des arguments du *Malleus Maleficarum*, le fameux Marteau des Sorcières (1486), ou du *Formicarius* de Jean Nider (1475) qui proclamaient certes le caractère maléfique des femmes mais reconnaissaient qu’elles étaient “plus faibles et influençables que les hommes” ainsi que plus rapidement “tentées et séduites par le diable” (Dumoulin). Or, dans nos exemples, elles sont bien plus puissantes et rusées que leur compagnon masculin, ce qui les rend infiniment plus pécheresses; de surcroît, elles ont pour elles aussi bien la jeunesse que la beauté et l’intelligence, ce qui n’était de loin pas toujours l’apanage des sorcières médiévales.<sup>87</sup>

Mais si ces tentatrices peuvent paraître, de prime abord, toutes-puissantes, elles n’en sont pas pour autant émancipées: ne sont-elles pas après tout l’instrument d’une force maléfique qui les dépasse et à laquelle elles demeurent étroitement soumises ? Leur pouvoir réside bien plus dans le fait d’influencer les hommes, de les pousser à agir qu’à agir elles-mêmes.

Parvenus au terme de notre analyse, nous pouvons constater que ces figures féminines apparaissent comme de véritables parangons de ruse maléfique, jouant tour-à-tour de charme, de dissimulation et d’intimidation pour infléchir leurs victimes. Leurs caractéristiques apparaissent en fin de compte comme un héritage de l’amour courtois, mais altéré-pour ne pas dire corrompu-par les influences du romantisme

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<sup>87</sup> Si les charmes physiques étaient susceptibles d’entraîner des accusations de sorcellerie, la vieillesse, la laideur, la marginalité ou “quelque autre caractéristique peu goûtée des gens” (Marguerite YOURCENAR, *Archives du Nord*, Paris, 1991, p. 990, cité in Martine OSTORERO et Étienne ANHEIM, “Le diable en procès,” *Médiévales* [En ligne], 44 | printemps 2003, mis en ligne le 02 décembre 2005, consulté le 01 octobre 2016. URL : [http:// medievales.revues.org/988](http://medievales.revues.org/988) ; DOI: 10.4000/medievales.988) constituaient aussi des facteurs de risque . . . Quant à l’intelligence, elle n’était de loin pas un critère de condamnation car comme le souligne Michelet, “beaucoup [de sorcières passant aux aveux] étaient de demi-folles” (Jules MICHELET, *La sorcière*, Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1966, p. 34).

noir, et ce malgré la distance qui peut séparer ce courant de nos auteurs.<sup>88</sup> Chez Barrès comme chez Maurras et Benoit, ces figures versées dans l'art du déguisement prennent donc les deux visages opposés mais complémentaires de la diabolisation et de la sanctification; à la fois anges et démons, ces femmes fatales n'ont finalement guère d'identité propre et incarnent plutôt la somme des peurs et des espoirs de leurs amants - ou créateurs - masculins.

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**De la traîtresse à la sorcière: imaginaire et représentations de l'héroïne rusée condamnée au bûcher dans la littérature courtoise médiévale.**

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Les procès pour sorcellerie, qui marquèrent les débuts de l'ère moderne, ont à jamais associé dans notre imaginaire condamnation pour hérésie et bûcher, tout particulièrement en ce qui concerne les modalités punitives infligées aux femmes.<sup>89</sup> Ces modalités punitives, et les représentations qui y sont associées, constituent en toute logique l'aboutissement d'une évolution des modalités punitives de la société médiévale. Mais le droit de punir est un processus à valeur hautement symbolique, qui peut donc être interrogé par le biais de la représentation que se donne une société dans ses productions culturelles.<sup>90</sup> Nous voudrions ainsi nous demander si certains aspects annonçant cette image terminale du Moyen Âge, le bûcher de la femme condamnée pour hérésie ou sorcellerie, peuvent être observés à l'apogée de la civilisation courtoise, que l'on pourrait grossièrement situer vers 1200. Surtout, nous voudrions interroger l'enchaînement de ces deux états de fait: d'une part la condamnation des femmes pour sorcellerie, ruses et autres tromperies au bûcher, d'autre part l'association de telles modalités féminines d'action à la sphère du diabolique. Ainsi, nous voudrions montrer qu'une tromperie historique

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<sup>89</sup> Le présent article s'inscrit dans le cadre de recherches menées avec le soutien du Fonds national suisse de la recherche scientifique.

<sup>90</sup> Pour une étude plus large sur l'imaginaire et le symbolique par le biais de textes littéraires médiévaux, voir Jacques Le Goff, 2005 (particulièrement 6-13).

est mise en place, qui aura surtout servi à trouver des prétextes afin de faire passer pour opposantes radicales celles qui simplement dérangeaient de par leur agir autrement.

### **Les modalités punitives, entre hagiographie et société courtoise**

Dans la littérature issue de la société courtoise, les femmes sont dépeintes sous un jour particulièrement favorable. Si cette idéalisation littéraire peut être taxée d'hypocrisie, le fait demeure que la valorisation littéraire de la femme connaît une apogée pendant à peu près un siècle, s'étendant des premiers romans composés sous le patronage d'Henri II Plantagenêt, vers le milieu du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle, jusqu'au retour d'une misogynie bien plus explicite dans la partie du *Roman de la Rose* attribuée à Jeun de Meun vers 1275.<sup>91</sup>

Malgré cette domination de la courtoisie, un certain nombre de scènes de punitions de femmes par les hommes apparaissent dans les textes littéraires. Les châtements s'exprimant dans la mutilation des corps apparaissent comme un motif davantage associé au féminin, et ayant ainsi fréquemment trait à la sexualité: cela s'exprime à travers tout un réseau de textes, allant du conte-type de la fille aux mains coupées—tels le *Philomena* de Chrétien de Troyes ou *La Manekine* (Foehr-Janssens 88-97), à l'immensité de la littérature hagiographique médiévale.<sup>92</sup> Rappelons que les plus anciens textes en langues française sont parfaitement symptomatiques de la dichotomie du phénomène: la sainteté masculine de saint Alexis s'exprime dans le dénudement et l'ascétisme, alors que sainte Eulalie connaît le martyre par la

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<sup>91</sup> Parmi les nombreuses synthèses à ce propos, voir plus spécifiquement Rita Lejeune, ainsi que la déconstruction de la littérature courtoise par Didier Lett.

<sup>92</sup> Soulignons que l'association de la violence sexuelle au martyre féminin marque davantage les récits circulant aux XII<sup>e</sup>-XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles, comme l'illustrent les textes réunis dans *The lady as Saint* (Cazelles), ainsi que l'étude *Carnal knowing* (Miles). Des analogies apparaissent aussi au contact des romans de chevalerie avec l'hagiographie, tel que principalement dans la *Queste del saint Graal* (Traxeler). Pour contraster avec la période antérieure, voir l'introduction de Felice Lifshitz au *Martyrologue* de Bède.

destruction progressive de son corps sous la torture.<sup>93</sup> Là comme ailleurs, le feu se révèle souvent un instrument inutile aux mains des païens qui la martyrisent; les flammes ne peuvent endommager le corps de la sainte, et c'est la décollation seule qui pourra la mettre à mort:

*Enz enl fou la getterent, come arde tost;  
elle colpes non avret, por o nos coist. (vv. 19-20)*

(Ils la jetèrent dans le feu afin qu'elle brûlât rapidement.  
Elle était sans fautes, aussi elle ne fut pas cuite.)

Or, dans la littérature courtoise, c'est justement le bûcher qui s'impose très largement comme instrument par excellence de mise à mort des femmes. Au point qu'il n'existe pas, à notre connaissance, de scène où un homme serait condamné au bûcher, après procès, dans les romans ou chansons de geste de la période considérée.<sup>94</sup> Il est ainsi des plus significatifs que dans *Le Roman de la Violette* de Gerbert de Montreuil, composé 1230, pour un même crime de meurtre, une femme, d'abord injustement accusée, est condamnée au bûcher, alors que le vrai coupable, un homme, sera lui *juste* condamné à la pendaison (vv. 4067 sqq).

La valence prêtée à la mort par les flammes paraît pourtant ambivalente: dans son *Scivias*, Hildegarde de Bingen interprète le feu lumineux de ses visions comme "*Dieu, brûlant partout, par le feu de sa vengeance, ceux qui sont en dehors de la vraie foi, purifie partout, par le feu de sa consolation, ceux qui restent dans la foi catholique, renversant ainsi les ténébreux projets du diable*" (78); tandis que pour l'historienne Valérie Toureille, au XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> siècles, "*le symbole en est clair: les flammes du bûcher*

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<sup>93</sup> La courte cantilène du IX<sup>e</sup> siècle ne mentionne que des "*empedementz*" (tortures), or les exemples de martyres féminins ne manquent pas où ces tortures ont signifié l'ablation de la langue ou, comme pour sainte Agathe, des seins.

<sup>94</sup> Il est toutefois possible qu'un homme meurt par le bûcher, y étant projeté à la faveur de la mêlée d'un combat, typiquement après avoir voulu y faire condamner injustement une jeune fille sauvée par le héros, comme dans *La Troisième Continuation du Conte du Graal* de Manessier (v. 35496).

*[surtout infligé aux hérétiques, aux sacrilèges, aux sorciers, aux incendiaires, aux homosexuels et aux bougres], anticipant sur celles de l'enfer, sont purificatrices" (257).*

Quelques glanures au hasard des textes viennent corroborer ces deux associations des flammes. Sous son aspect positif, elles s'avèrent l'instrument de destruction de la monstruosité, châtement des hérétiques, dont les cendres éparpillées seront privées de la résurrection des corps; ou encore, dans *Le roman d'Alexandre en prose* du XIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, elle sont le seul moyen permettant à Alexandre le Grand de tuer un monstrueux géant, et ainsi de soumettre les avatars sauvages du monde non civilisé (202). L'autre association, négative, est celle du châtement inique, il est ainsi fréquent que des Sarrasins menacent des Chrétiens de les faire pendre ou brûler vif: il s'agit par exemple d'une menace souvent faite à Guillaume d'Orange dans le *Charroi de Nîmes*—la formulation "*Ou ars en feu ou a honte livré*" (v. 1229, v. 1384) en démontre d'ailleurs le caractère humiliant et indigne pour un chevalier. Par ailleurs, dans *Anseïs de Carthage*, un bûcher est dressé par des assiégeants Sarrasins afin de décourager les Chrétiens retranchés (v. 2600). Or, le châtement du bûcher deviendra le passage obligé de l'héroïne médiévale condamnée à tort. Il convient ainsi de s'interroger sur la mise en scène littéraire de ce motif, afin de voir comment il devient un leitmotiv de l'héroïne injustement condamnée, et de quelle manière la représentation littéraire aura anticipé la réalité historique du bûcher, tout en tentant de prévenir à son encontre.

### **Lunete et Yvain: du héros féminin à l'héroïne**

Ainsi, quand les textes littéraires mettent en scène un procès de femme, aussi sommaire soit-il, mais aboutissant à une condamnation à mort, la punition toujours choisie est le bûcher, et l'accusation mentionnée celle de la trahison. Une illustration typique du cheminement qui mène à cet étiquetage de trahison est donnée par le cas de Lunete, dans le *Chevalier au Lion* (ou *le Roman d'Yvain*) de Chrétien de Troyes, vers 1180. Celle-ci est le personnage secondaire le plus important du récit, principale adjuvante du héros Yvain.

Vers la fin du texte, Lunete sera mise en mauvaise posture. Yvain n'a pas respecté sa promesse de revenir après



une année auprès de son épouse Laudine, dame de Landuc, dont Lunete est la principale conseillère. C'est d'ailleurs Lunete qui avait convaincue Laudine d'épouser le héros, bien qu'il vienne de tuer son mari le seigneur de Landuc. D'autres conseillers, menés par le sénéchal, jaloux de l'influence de Lunete auprès de Laudine, profitent de la situation pour surenchérir, ainsi que Lunete le raconte à Yvain:

*Et quant che seut li seneschaus,  
un fel, .i. lerre, .i. desloiaus,  
qui grant envie me portoit  
pour che que ma dame creoit  
moi plus que lui de maint affaire,  
si vit bien quë il pooit faire  
entre moi et lui grant courous.  
En plaine court, et voiant tous,  
Me mist sus pour vous l'oy traïe. (vv. 3663-71)*

(Et quand le sénéchal l'apprit, un traître, un escroc, un déloyal, qui était très jaloux de moi parce que ma dame avait davantage confiance en moi qu'en lui dans beaucoup de situations, il comprit qu'il pouvait provoquer un grave désaccord en elle et moi. En pleine cour, devant tout le monde, il m'accusa de l'avoir trahie en votre faveur.)

Résultat, elle subira les foudres de sa maîtresse et, considérée coupable de trahison,<sup>95</sup> elle sera condamnée au bûcher, comme elle continue de l'expliquer:

*On m'apele de trayson  
se je ne truis qui m'en deffende  
que demain on ne m'arde ou pende. (vv. 3600-2)*

(On m'accuse de trahison et je serai condamnée si je ne trouve personne qui, prenant ma défense, empêche que l'on me fasse brûler ou pendre.)

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<sup>95</sup> Le terme est utilisé de nouveau dans la déclaration d'Yvain avant l'ordalie, précisant que Lunete n'a commis de trahison ni en action, ni en parole, ni en pensée (v. 4432).

L'injustice apparente de la condamnation rend la punition par le feu d'autant plus négative qu'elle sera annulée par le héros salvateur, Yvain, qui sauvera littéralement toutes les dames de la cour. En effet, les conséquences de ce véritable coup d'état ne se limitaient pas à Lunete, car plus loin, on apprend des autres demoiselles de la cour que Lunete parlait toujours en leur faveur, et qu'ainsi plus personne ne défendrait leur cause une fois celle-ci envoyée au bûcher:

*Com or remaurrons esgarees  
qui perdommes si boine amie  
et tel conseil et tele aije  
qui a la court pur nous estoit ! . . .  
Mout cangera or li affaires,  
Qu'il n'iert mais qui pour li parot. (vv. 4356-63)*

(Comme nous allons maintenant nous trouver abandonnées en perdant une si bonne amie, qui était d'un tel appui, d'un tel soutien, pour nous à la cour ! . . . Maintenant la situation va énormément changer, car il n'y aura plus personne pour plaider à sa place.)

Laudine, nous seulement conseillère et confidente de Lunete, est donc révélée être également la porte-parole des autres demoiselles de la cour, celle qui plaide leurs causes. Elle semble donc, sur tous les aspects, être celle qui assurerait l'indépendance des membres féminins de cette société face à toute volonté patriarcale de domination ou de contrôle. Ainsi, en voulant à Lunete, responsable de la politique matrimoniale menée par Laudine, la finalité recherchée est de mettre fin à l'influence des femmes à la cour, en imposant une domination masculine tant sur la politique que sur la sexualité de Laudine—qui apparaissent être une seule et même chose pour cette dernière, qui ne peut se passer d'un époux-gardien de sa fontaine merveilleuse. Du point de vue de l'accusateur, le sénéchal, Lunete représentait donc une figure féminine doublement *non intégrable* à un monde de domination masculine: non seulement elle est la conseillère politique privilégiée de Laudine, mais surtout sa maîtrise d'artefacts magiques—tel l'anneau d'invisibilité avec lequel

elle sauve Yvain des hommes du seigneur de Landuc—lui donne une dimension féérique. Par ailleurs, il est bien précisé que c’est la jalousie, dirigée contre Lunete, qui était la motivation première du sénéchal félon. Ainsi, le sénéchal cherche à acquérir la première place à la cour du Laudine, et donc à remplacer autant Lunete qu’Yvain, celui-ci ayant été érigé par cette dernière à la première place. Lunete est donc constituée victime de par sa résistance propre, mais elle est également la victime collatérale d’une lutte de pouvoir entre hommes.

Le parcours de Lunete peut être résumé en termes d’archétypes narratifs. Dans son article “*Female Heroes, Heroines and Counter-Heroes*,” Maureen Fries souligne la dichotomie entre la figure de l’héroïne et celle du héros féminin dans les romans arthuriens.<sup>96</sup> Lunete également participe des deux catégories. Initialement, elle est un agent actif mais désintéressé au service du système patriarcal qu’elle aide à préserver, un *héros féminin*. Mais à la fin du récit, devant être secourue par Yvain, elle est rétrogradée en fonction d’héroïne du récit, à l’image de Dame Laudine, non pas *agent*, mais *instrument* sur le parcours du héros. Chez Chrétien de Troyes, le bûcher sert donc non seulement à victimiser, mais surtout à *passiviser* Lunete, qui ne peut plus agir, mais est instituée comme enjeu d’une lutte entre forces masculines, et en devient le dommage collatéral d’une façon—l’envoi aux flammes—dont l’horreur magnifie l’aspect inique.

### Les reines condamnées au bûcher

La situation menant à la condamnation au bûcher d’Iseut est similaire, après que la preuve de son adultère avec Tristan fut donnée par la ruse de la fleur de farine. Dans le récit qu’en fait Béroul dans son *Tristan et Iseut* fragmentaire, dans la seconde moitié du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle,<sup>97</sup> Iseut souligne bien

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<sup>96</sup> À tempérer toutefois par les réflexions de Margaret Burland autour du personnage d’Énide dans “Chrétien’s Enide: Heroine or Female Hero?”.

<sup>97</sup> La datation plus précise du récit de Béroul dans la fourchette 1150-1190 reste très débattue. De surcroît, des contacts intertextuels avec *Le Chevalier au lion* se laissent constater; il nous semblerait plutôt indiquer que le récit s’écrit, au moins pour sa seconde partie—s’il s’avère vraiment

que les barons félons ayant révélé leur relation adultère agissent “*plain d’envie*” (v. 106), jaloux ce que Tristan soit le préféré de Marc, qui pensait en faire son successeur. Un autre élément apparaît toutefois ici: Marc acceptera au dernier moment de commuer l’envoi de son épouse au bûcher en sa remise à des lépreux, après que ceux-ci eurent souligné que leur ardeur sexuelle de lépreux serait tout aussi insupportable pour Iseut que les flammes, sauf que cette punition-là durerait bien plus longtemps que la destruction par le bûcher. Le texte de Béroul emploie le terme d’*ardor* pour désigner la concupiscence des lépreux (v. 1195), ce qui renvoie directement au verbe *ardoir* employé à deux reprises pour désigner la menace du bûcher (v. 1098, v. 1166). C’est bien là le signe que la condamnation d’Iseut à l’ardeur est aussi une condamnation *de* l’ardeur sexuelle d’Iseut, inquiétante car ne pouvant être pleinement dominée par son époux. De surcroît, cette équivalence avec le projet des lépreux rendent les flammes du bûcher tout aussi sinistres.

Une situation similaire se présente pour une autre reine, Guenièvre, dans le roman en prose *La mort du roi Arthur*, vers 1230. L’adultère de Guenièvre et Lancelot est dénoncé par Agravain, non par loyauté envers Arthur, mais par haine pour Lancelot. Lancelot s’enfuit, mais la reine sera condamnée à mort par le jugement de la cour du roi, pour la “*grant desloiauté*” (§ XI, 4) qu’elle a commise en couchant avec un autre homme. Le roi Arthur choisit alors le bûcher comme moyen d’exécution de la sentence:

*Et li rois Artus, qui fu remés el palés, comande a ses serjanz que il facent en la prairie de Kamaalot .i. feu grant et merueilleus ou la roïne sera mise. “Car autrement, fet soi li rois, ne doit mie morir roïne qui desloiauté fet vers son seignor, puis qu’ele est sacree et enointe” (§XI,4)*

(De son côté, le roi Arthur, qui était resté dans la grande salle, commanda à ses hommes d’armes de bâtir dans la prairie de Camaalot un bûcher d’une taille extraordinaire où la reine serait placée, disant

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que deux moments différents de rédaction sont à y constater—en ayant connaissance du roman de Chrétien, donc dans les années 1180.

pour lui-même: “Car, une fois qu’elle a été sacrée et a reçu l’onction, une reine qui a commis une infidélité envers son mari ne doit pas mourir autrement.”)

Jalousie politique masculine et inquiétante sexualité féminine se mêlent à nouveau: la condamnation pour adultère suit immédiatement un procès pour empoisonnement par une pomme que la reine Guenièvre a remise à un chevalier, bien qu’ignorante du caractère empoisonné du fruit<sup>98</sup>, et la figure de la femme à la sexualité débridée est ainsi conjointe à celle d’Ève elle-même, dont le fruit a empoisonné l’humanité, provoqué la Chute, et rendu l’acte de chair nécessaire! A cela doit donc répondre le feu, qui, telle l’épée flamboyante des chérubins gardant l’entrée du paradis terrestre, se fait l’instrument du contrôle masculin par excellence. Mais ce contrôle, de nouveau, apparaît arbitraire et condamnable, car nécessitant l’intervention du héros pour sauver sa reine et amante d’un châtiment présenté comme inique et réprouvé par les récits.

D’ailleurs, dans son édition de *La mort du roi Arthur*, David Hult précise que la déclaration d’Arthur ne semble renvoyer à aucune pratique attestée pour l’époque, faisant le parallèle avec les observations similaires de Pierre Jonin quant au bûcher d’Iseut (59-108). Comme nous l’évoquions plus haut, le bûcher est normalement réservé aux crimes contre nature: sodomie, inceste, bestialité, ou encore infanticide et sorcellerie (Gonthier 163-6). L’adultère, normalement, n’est en soit pas punissable par la mort—tout au plus tolère-t-on que le mari mette les coupables à mort lorsqu’il les surprend en flagrant délit. Le bûcher, en France du moins, ne semble qu’anecdotique dans le panel des méthodes d’exécution des criminels (Carbasse 299; Toureille 247-268). Ainsi, Hult, à la suite de Jean Frappier (191, n. 4), suggère plutôt la piste littéraire, qui remonterait à l’Ancien Testament, en passant peut-être par un motif de la tradition celtique. Signalons toutefois qu’Hult semble négliger une étude menée par Armel Diverres, qui rappelle que dans l’Angleterre du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle le bûcher est la méthode

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<sup>98</sup> Guenièvre est donc coupable en acte, mais non pas en intention—dichotomie similaire à l’innocence que le philtre d’amour procurait à Tristan et Iseut.

privilegiée d'exécution pour les rares cas de femmes condamnées à mort pour trahison ou hérésie, c'est-à-dire respectivement pour crime de lèse-majesté envers le souverain ou envers Dieu (26-7). Néanmoins, la réalité historique n'offre, avant le roi Henri VIII, aucun cas de souveraine condamnée pour adultère.<sup>99</sup>

Si la condamnation au bûcher peut donc renvoyer à un certain réalisme juridique spécifique au cadre anglo-normand de l'œuvre de Bérout, la valeur symbolique du châtement choisi n'est pas à négliger. L'anthropologue Alain Testart remarque que ce sont en général des méthodes non sanglantes, comme la pendaison et le bûcher, qui sont privilégiées pour les représentations fictives de mort féminine, car il s'agit "*d'éviter l'épanchement sanglant, [cette façon d'agir] s'adresse au corps féminin dans son entier sans l'ouvrir, le couper, ni le déchirer*" (49). De plus, il est à relever que dans nombres de sociétés archaïques, la maîtrise du feu est exclusivement masculine et ainsi symbolisée dans la figure du forgeron, "*que ce soit dans les légendes allemandes des Nibelungen ou chez les Noirs d'Afrique*" (60).

Punir par le bûcher apparaît donc comme une compétence culturellement masculine, et il devient l'instrument de la domination patriarcale et même divine pour purifier cette ardeur vue comme inquiétante de la lubricité féminine. Une autre expression mythologique de cette symbolique de domination masculine par le feu est le cercle enflammé qui emprisonne Brynhildr dans le cycle des Nibelungen selon la *Völsunga saga* (fin du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle): il s'agit flammes d'Odin, roi des dieux, qui punit ainsi sa valkyrie pour lui avoir désobéi.<sup>100</sup>

Toutefois, dans les textes littéraires qui nous intéressent, le feu est certes présenté comme instrument de contrôle masculin, mais il est surtout dénoncé comme

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<sup>99</sup> Ce n'est qu'en 1352 que le roi Édouard III officialise (dans l'édit *Statute of Treason*) le bûcher comme châtement d'une reine adultère, bien que les seules condamnations effectives aient été commuées en décapitation par Henri VIII, souverain justement spécialiste de la condamnation inique de ses épouses sous de tels prétextes!

<sup>100</sup> Pour un point de vue d'ordre psychanalytique sur le rapport entre feu, humanité et masculinité, voir *La psychanalyse du feu* de Gaston Bachelard.

injustement détourné, devenant un instrument d'oppression, justement par ces hommes auxquels le contrôle échappe—autant contrôle politique face à d'autres hommes que contrôle de la sexualité des femmes.

### **De la sorcellerie à la trahison**

Ainsi, les femmes que la littérature courtoise montre envoyées au bûcher le sont pour un déplacement hors du champ d'activité que leur fixe la société: Lunette, Iseut et Guenièvre agissent en se soustrayant à la domination masculine. Les femmes refusant de s'y soumettre, que ce soit au niveau sexuel, matrimonial, ou politique, subissent donc une condamnation au bûcher qui est présentée comme une forme d'oppression, contraire à la justice. Il faut donc admettre que la société de l'aube de l'époque moderne persistera dans des pratiques punitives qui se voyaient déjà dénoncées comme iniques quelques siècles auparavant!

Mais qu'en est-il de la question des activités magiques et condamnables, de ces accusations de sorcellerie qui deviendront à la fin du Moyen Âge synonymes de bûcher? Un cas littéraire des plus instructifs à cet effet est celui de Josiane, la promise du héros éponyme de la chanson de geste *Beuve de Hamptone*, datée vers 1200. Telle Lunete, Josiane passe du statut de *héros féminin* à celui d'*héroïne*. Ce changement de statut est ici clairement marqué par le baptême chrétien de Josiane. Elle est confrontée, avant et après celui-ci, à une même situation, celle d'être épousée de force. Avec son premier mari égyptien, le Sarrasine démontre tout son savoir magique "*en enchaînement*" (v. 999), en confectionnant une ceinture qui éteint le désir en n'importe quel homme de coucher avec elle.<sup>101</sup> Plus loin dans le récit, c'est cette fois un comte allemand qui voudra épouser de force Josiane, désormais baptisée. Durant la nuit de noce, celle-ci va rompre le cou du comte avec sa ceinture (vv. 2211-16). Pour Josiane ramenée dans le monde chrétien et patriarcal (elle fut baptisée par l'oncle du héros), les modalités d'action ne sont plus les mêmes. Sarrasine, donc issue d'un Autre Monde telle Lunete et ses pouvoirs de fée

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<sup>101</sup> Pour une analyse détaillée de ce motif, voir "Nouer l'amour, nouer la mort" de Romaine Wolf-Bonvin.

dans *Yvain*, Josiane agissait guidée par son intelligence rusée, par l'entremise de ses pouvoirs magiques, illustrant une attitude active redoublée d'une grande mobilité physique—caractéristiques du *héros féminin* (Fries 67). Désormais *héroïne*, elle prend certes l'initiative—par ailleurs assez unique dans les scènes littéraires de l'époque—d'étrangler le comte,<sup>102</sup> mais ensuite, enfermée dans la chambre nuptiale, elle se contente d'attendre passivement le matin et se livre sans résistance aux hommes du comte qui la conduiront au bûcher, dont elle sera, évidemment, sauvée *in extremis* par le héros Beuve.<sup>103</sup>

En ayant à l'esprit les associations futures de la condamnation au bûcher, il faut d'autant plus souligner que son ancienne pratique des enchantements ne sera jamais reprochée à Josiane, et en cela elle s'inscrit tout à fait à la suite de la magie sanctionnée positivement comme merveille bénéfique. De tels *mirabilia* étaient par exemple déjà mis en œuvre par Fénice, l'héroïne du *Cligès* de Chrétien, laquelle put aussi conserver sa chasteté après un mariage forcé grâce à la "*nigromance*" (v. 3004) de sa nourrice Thessala, dont le nom programmatique est renvoyé à une magie païenne et diabolique:

*Si savoit mout de nigromance,  
Por ce fu Thessala clamée,  
Qu'ele fut de Thessaille née  
Ou sont faites les deablies* (vv. 2958-61)

Elle était experte en magie et on l'appelait Thessala parce qu'elle était née en Thessalie où les maléfices sont pratiqués.

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<sup>102</sup> Scène qui semble avoir été vue comme exceptionnelle, et potentiellement dérangeante, car là où l'adaptation galloise allonge la description de la manœuvre de strangulation de Josiane (*Ystoria Boun de Hamtwn*, ll. 2428-41), les trois versions continentales du récit français gommant la scène, en faisant intervenir Beuve dès la cérémonie du mariage forcé à l'église.

<sup>103</sup> Contrairement au récit biblique et quelque peu analogue de Judith, qui put fuir du camp d'Holopherne après le meurtre nocturne, mais cette dernière était-elle vraiment *active* par elle-même, ou bien agent accomplissant le plan divin ?



Néanmoins, ce que nous qualifierions, par raccourci quelque peu anachronique, de sorcellerie diabolique n'est jamais porté à l'encontre de Thessalie. De même, ce qui avait motivé la tentative d'anéantissement de Josiane par un bûcher—de nouveau présenté comme l'instrument des malfaisants voulant épouser de force une vierge essulée—était le simple éloignement de celle-ci de la norme, du zéro sur ce qui serait un axe "horizontal" de ce qui est autre, de ce qui relève de la merveille en ce qu'il y a éloignement des normes et institutions de références (Dubost 231). Cet axe est horizontal car il constitue un surnaturel "neutre" entre le surnaturel divin et le surnaturel diabolique (Le Goff 29, 1991), qui eux forment un axe "vertical" du surnaturel institutionnalisé comme divin ou diabolique.<sup>104</sup> En refusant de se laisser épouser de force, Josiane, intégrée au monde Chrétien, commettait l'erreur de ne vouloir pleinement s'y intégrer en voulant se défendre, faute effectivement plus durement sanctionnée que son passé d'enchanteresse sarrasine, qui pouvait alors faire montre d'un comportement différent car par nature hors des normes de référence de l'institution patriarcale chrétienne.<sup>105</sup>

Ainsi, et comme le soulignait récemment Aurélie Dumoulin quant à l'évolution du concept de sorcellerie à la fin du Moyen Âge, la pratique de la magie n'est guère condamnée avant le véritable changement de paradigme que constitue en 1326 la bulle *Super Illius Specula* du pape Jean XXII, que Demoulin qualifie "*d'obsédé par le diable*"

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<sup>104</sup> Pour ces notions d'opposition horizontales et verticales, nous renvoyons au schéma en double croix sur le merveilleux de Francis Dubost (236), qui propose deux axes verticaux: celui de "*la ligne Ciel-Terre-Enfer, [c'est-à-dire le] surnaturel reconnu par l'institution*" (les *miracula*), en position zéro sur l'axe horizontal, et la ligne du deuxième axe vertical, "*[le domaine des mirabilia] reliant un ailleurs indéterminé (féerie positive, magie blanche) au registre inférieur (féerie suspecte, sorcellerie préchrétienne)*", sur un axe horizontal du "faire" qui devient de plus en plus *autre* dès lors qu'on s'éloigne du zéro horizontal (231-2).

<sup>105</sup> Le monde sarrasin peut cependant aussi être dépeint exécuter une femme, comme pour le pieux traître Datien (ou Pirrus, selon les textes), futur baptisé, qui jette son épouse du haut des remparts d'Antioche lorsque celle-ci s'oppose à sa trahison de la ville en faveur des Chrétiens lors de la Première Croisade (Prost, 628-9).

(100).<sup>106</sup> Depuis lors, la sorcellerie est assimilée à une hérésie, une faute punissable—conception qui culmine avec le fameux *Malleus Maleficarum* en 1487, et les conséquences “horrifiantes” qu’il a eu (Enders ; Stephens II 49-58). Mais avant le XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle, la croyance en la magie est davantage conçue comme une erreur, une illusion, où le pouvoir prêté au diable est non celui d’agir sur la réalité physique, mais de tromper les prétendus pratiquants de sorcellerie en “*insér[ant] ces pensées dans leur imagination*” (Dumoulin 100).

En cela, la magie pratiquée par les héros féminins littéraires autour de 1200 est véritablement de la sorcellerie, mais en accord avec la conception de l’époque, c’est-à-dire une magie qui n’est que chimère, faites d’illusions, de tromperies, de suggestions qui influent sur l’imaginaire de ses victimes, et non comme le recours à des forces véritablement diaboliques. De manière plus générale, on peut constater que cette idée d’une présence concrète de la sorcellerie, qui explose aux XIV<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècles, participe d’un même phénomène, à une échelle anthropologique plus large: la tendance d’assimiler féerie et diablerie, à rejeter tout ce qui est *autre* dans une négativité, dont il faut détruire tous les avatars afin de préserver la société. En reprenant les axes horizontal et vertical que nous définîmes plus haut, pour les XII<sup>e</sup> et XIII<sup>e</sup> siècles que nous considérons ici, ou du moins dans la représentation littéraire qui nous en reste, nous demeurons dans un rapport d’analogie, mais qui n’assimile pas encore tout à fait, celle qui *est autre* (c’est l’opposition horizontale du merveilleux à la société de référence) mais en cela contribue à la société, avec celle dont les *agissements irréconciliables* avec la société (c’est l’opposition verticale de la diablerie) rendent la destruction nécessaire. Ce qui est mis en scène dans les textes consiste donc davantage à l’illustration des risques d’une assimilation par trop réductrice entre celle qui agit dans la sphère du merveilleux et ce qui relève du diabolique, bref, de prendre pour engance diabolique celle qui est fée ou celle qui *savoit mout de nigromance*.

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<sup>106</sup> Le développement de ces concepts dans l’Église médiévale est étudié plus en détails par Alain Boureau dans son *Satan hérétique*.

## **Dominer la femme: du corps étranger au corps diabolique.**

Au final, les agissements détournés des femmes, par le biais de leur intelligence, de la ruse, ou même des enchantements, sont présentés comme une forme d'opposition, modérée et permise, aux structures d'oppression masculine de la société médiévale des alentours de 1200—pour laquelle on hésite à savoir si les qualificatifs de courtoise et de patriarcale s'opposent, ou bien se complètent. La manière dont cette société se conçoit, ses structures, qui sont d'autant constitutives qu'elles sont souterraines, se laisse appréhender par le biais de la littérature, en tant que forme d'(auto-)représentation sociétale. Car le texte littéraire, en structurant l'imaginaire, en vient également à forger la conception du réel: il "*informe sur les structures de l'imaginaire*", tout comme il a la capacité "*d'informer à son tour les représentations ... [en] programm[ant] l'expérience, et, en particulier, le travail identitaire, avec ses modèles et ses anti-modèles*" (Heinich 342).

Les textes que nous avons abordés illustrent comment une volonté trop puissante de domination, de par des hommes, était perçue comme déplacée, et même erronée, destructrice, et donc du fait des antagonistes du récit, qui détournent injustement cet instrument de stabilité de la civilisation qu'est le feu.<sup>107</sup> Ceux qui veulent s'élever au-dessus de leur situation, en convoitant la position politique ou matrimoniale du héros, tentent de punir les femmes; celles-ci, en voulant échapper à ces volontés malveillantes de domination, deviennent alors les victimes d'une lutte pour la domination entre deux instances masculines. L'idéologie sous-jacente à ces textes prend donc souvent la forme d'une misogynie bienveillante: si les femmes ne sont que des victimes, *a fortiori* innocentes, il n'en demeure pas moins l'idée qu'elles ne pourraient pas par elles-mêmes prendre l'initiative de devenir des figures de domination.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> En cela, la Dame courtoise, et plus particulièrement encore la *pucelle* bienveillante comme Lunete, est symboliquement un analogue de la Vestale, gardienne du feu patriarcal du foyer (Fries 169).

<sup>108</sup> Et ce, même dans le jeu de la Dame Courtoise, qui, en étant finalement conquise, s'abaisse d'autant qu'elle élève son amant et sert à la célébration de celui-ci, ce que justement la littérature des siècles

On pourrait même ajouter que les femmes mises en scène dans les textes littéraires en tant qu'agents, se pensant libres et indépendantes, croient tout autant à des chimères que les sorcières – selon la conceptualisation médiévale qui ne voyait dans la sorcellerie que vaine illusion – mais ici il s'agirait de la chimère de pouvoir échapper aux structures d'oppressions masculines, alors que finalement il leur faudra servir la société, n'être que des *héros féminins* pour un temps, avant d'être réintégrées comme *héroïnes* passives. Les auteurs médiévaux mettent ainsi en scène une sexualité féminine *oppressée*, alors que la réinterprétation moderne et médiévaliste sera plutôt d'en faire une sexualité *oppressante*. Une illustration parmi tant d'autres de ce retournement des rapports de force dans l'imaginaire médiévaliste moderne est la figure d'Oriante, ô combien funeste aux hommes du récit, dans *Un Jardin sur l'Oronte* de Maurice Barrès.

L'étape intermédiaire entre représentations médiévale et médiévaliste est celle du Moyen Âge finissant, où *s'élever contre* la société, même modérément, sera réduit à *être* du côté monstrueux de celles qui s'y opposent fondamentalement, et qui doivent donc être détruites. Cette radicalisation atteint un point de rupture à l'aube à l'époque moderne. Alors se démultiplient les condamnations au bûcher pour sorcellerie de celles faisant *autrement*, laissant enfin percer dans la pratique réelle cette "*angoisse des hommes*" depuis longtemps ouvertement affichée dans l'imaginaire littéraire.<sup>109</sup> L'époque moderne ira amplifiant cette crainte, ce phantasme d'une femme n'étant plus simplement un instrument du mal – conception qui finalement profitait d'un féminin vu comme passif, *instrumentalisable* en actes, mais restant innocent dans ses intentions propres.

Il conviendrait ici de parler d'un retour du refoulé, lorsque cette crainte masculine d'une perte de domination sur cet Autre féminin, sur son pouvoir sociétale comme sur

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ultérieures dénonce, ainsi *La Belle Dame sans merci* d'Alain Chartier ou encore Christine de Pisan.

<sup>109</sup> "Derrières ces traits qui se figeront progressivement dans la figure de la sorcière, se lit l'angoisse des hommes menacés par la maîtrise d'un savoir d'où la plupart d'entre eux sont exclus, . . . terreur d'autant plus grande que ces femmes d'expériences [dans les textes littéraires] mettent généralement leur art diabolique au service du désir" (Gingras 134).

sa sexualité, conduit à fantasmer la femme comme véritable agent et source du mal, ayant pris de son propre chef l'initiative de détruire l'homme et la société. Là où la littérature médiévale n'hésitait pas à mettre en scène les risques de victimisation du féminin, les périodes ultérieures en viendront à se poser en victime d'une créature féminine qui sera tout aussi fantasmée que l'imaginaire, forgé aux XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles, des temps "moyenâgeux" et de leurs femmes tentatrices et fatales.

Pour la période médiévale qui nous occupe, une forme de réticence et surtout une réflexion critique quant à l'usage des châtiments et de la peine de mort surgissent dans les textes, qui peuvent de beaucoup s'éloigner des "fantasmes" avec lesquels le Moyen Âge est parfois représenté aujourd'hui (Gauvard 67). Les bûchers, qu'il se soit agi de la répression des courants de pensées contestataires labellisés comme hérésies, ou des chasses au sorcières, ont toujours été la marque d'une période d'extrême intolérance, allant de pair avec une volonté de contrôle totale, de domination de la pensée comme des actes. Aussi, quand nous nous représentons faussement un Moyen Âge qui torturerait et brûlerait sans cesse, et sans jamais se remettre en question, ne renvoyons-nous là pas plutôt à nos propres pratiques, où il n'est pas si rare que des opposants politiques se voit taxés d'ennemis de l'État, qu'il est nécessaire d'emprisonner ou de tuer, plutôt que de les laisser agir aux marges de la société? Le Moyen Âge finissant, et davantage encore l'aube de l'époque moderne, a eu ce moment où l'on assimilait tout agissement autre ou merveilleux à une manifestation du mal, où tout agissement marginal à la société était pris comme volonté explicite de la détruire, et qui requerrait donc une rétribution absolument destructrice.

L'un des biais d'action marginale des plus usuels aura été l'usage de la ruse et de la tromperie, et cela tout particulièrement pour les femmes, qui, n'ayant guère la possibilité de recourir à la violence armée, se défendaient et agissaient avec leur roublardise comme arme principale. Le paradoxe était que ce moyen d'action, souvent le seul possible, contenait en germe le potentiel d'association au Malin. Il apparaît donc que, dans une perspective d'évolution historique des mentalités, il ne faut pas voir la condamnation au bûcher des femmes dites sorcières comme une

conséquence de l'association de la sorcellerie à la diablerie, mais plutôt comme sa cause. Il s'agirait ainsi d'avoir trouvé là le parfait prétexte, en associant leur art aux pratiques diaboliques, qui permit de condamner les femmes rusées, celles qui agissaient à l'égal des figures masculines, par des biais et moyens leur étant propres—pour ne pas dire, plus simplement, celles qui agissaient indépendamment.

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**PART FOUR**  
**FINDING/DISGUIISING THE TRUTH**

## **Mining the Riches of Sylvia Plath’s Manuscripts: “Finisterre” as a Case Study<sup>110</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

Sylvia Plath (1932 - 1963) has often been read as a deeply confessional poet, whose writings, whether in verse or prose, are clear reflections of her life and her state of mind. Those who have less affection for the confessional poets in general, and Plath in particular, go so far as to claim, caustically, that these poets “competed with each other in madness as in art, and flaunted their illness as a leper shows his sores” (Meyers 13). Beyond doubt, Plath had endured years of inner turmoil, which left their traces in her poetry; however, reading her oeuvre as purely autobiographical might overshadow the creative talent she had been honing in the course of her literary life, short as it was. Hence, we would be well advised to consider aspects other than the narrowly confessional or personal dimension of her work as we try to get a full understanding of the forces that drive her poetics. Among these aspects are the social, cultural, and political realities that informed Plath’s era and influenced the lives of many women artists at the time.

When Margaret Atwood wrote that “[she] always felt a little like a wart or wen on the great male academic skin,” she

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<sup>110</sup> This paper was presented at GENESIS–HELSINKI 2017: Creative Processes and Archives in Arts and Humanities (7–9 June 2017), an international and interdisciplinary conference jointly organized by The Finnish Literature Society (SKS) and Institut des Textes & Manuscrits Modernes (ITEM).

might as well have been describing Plath's dilemma (46). Edward Brunner expresses a similar view when it comes to the situation of women writers in post-war America, arguing that:

Women poets looking back on the 1950s typically remember it as a time when the poetry they wrote was not what they wanted to write—when they were able to write at all. . . . At the University of Iowa, [Jane Cooper] remembers being told that “to be a woman poet was a contradiction in terms” . . . By pairing the experience of Rich and Cooper in *Stealing the Language* (1986), Alicia Ostriker could sum up the 1950s as a period in which the voice of the strong women poet had been effectively silenced. (95)

Plath's literary life is a journey in the fullest meaning of the phrase—a journey fraught with stumbling blocks that she needed to conquer so as to assert a voice of her own, thus reaching the fame and popularity to which she had aspired ever since she was a teenager.

In the course of this onerous yet rewarding journey, Plath had always wavered between her “outgoing guts” to write, on the one hand, and her wrestling with “self-doubt,” on the other, as she herself puts it in her journals (545). But to Plath, “self-doubt” was not the only impediment in her endeavor to maintain her own voice. Numerous factors affected the poet's writing experience and threatened to muffle her authorial voice, especially early in her artistic life. Apart from feeling diminished by her husband's poetic success (as she wrote in her journals, “He is a genius, I his wife”), Plath equally grappled with the political, social, and cultural ideologies disseminated in post-war America—ideologies that reverberated in many of her poems (*UJ* 420).

Following the evolution of a poem from first draft to published version, for instance, we find that the poet's critique of those ideological practices is often more pronounced in her drafts than in the final poetic product—a direct reflection of Plath's uncertainty and/or insecurity in voicing her thoughts and reflections. This sense of discomfort might account for the poet's feeling of dejection

that she expresses, starkly, in a journal entry dated June 20<sup>th</sup>, 1958, in which she writes:

I have been, and am, battling depression. It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative—whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it. I am now flooded with despair, almost hysteria, as if I were smothering. As if a great muscular owl were sitting on my chest, its talons clenching and constricting my heart” (*UJ* 395).

Indeed, during her short life, Plath went through multiple fits of depression, manifested in suicidal thoughts and, on several occasions, attempts to commit suicide. This personal dimension has often cast a bleak shadow over her poetry, for many readers still read it as dark, grim, if not “depressing.” “Finisterre,” the poem that this essay seeks to analyze, is one of those poems that Plath probably penned when that “despairing negative electric current,” to borrow her own words, “dominat[ed] her life.” The present paper endorses this idea, but only partly, as it also touches on the “joyous positive” pulse inherent in the poem, which can be felt even more when one looks at the rough drafts of “Finisterre,” specifically the entire stanza that Plath omitted from the final version of the poem.<sup>111</sup> Put differently, this remains concealed from Plath’s readers unless one examines the poet’s myriad drafts of the same poem.

### **“This Was the Land’s End”: The End of the Journey?**

In a poem she wrote one week prior to her death, “Edge,” Plath announces the end of her life, thereby anticipating the end of her literary journey. “We have come so far, it is over,” she writes (*CP* 272). Another gripping line from “Stings,” which she composed in October 1962, equally transmits this idea of a journey having ended: “It is almost over./ I am in control,” says the speaker (*CP* 214). In the poem under

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<sup>111</sup> Manuscripts of “Finisterre” are held as part of Plath Mss. at the Lilly Library at Indiana University Bloomington, USA.

examination, “Finisterre,” which Plath wrote on 29 September 1961, the end of the journey is imparted through the setting when the speaker says, “This was the land’s end” (CP 169). Nevertheless, although acknowledging the end, Plath’s speaker is still not fully in control of this unsettling situation. Quite the contrary, she seems immersed in “nothingness,” striving to “grasp . . . something valuable before having to let go” (draft [1] of “Finisterre”).

Critical reception of “Finisterre” has mainly drawn on the literal meaning of the title, setting the poem in “the westernmost tip of Brittany,” France, which Plath visited with Ted Hughes during the summer of 1960 (Brain 69). Later in the poem, Plath provides further evidence for the setting when she refers to “Our Lady of the Shipwrecked,” which, indeed, is in Pointe du Raz, Brittany, or what is currently known as the “Bay of the Dead.”<sup>112</sup> In my own interpretation, I equally acknowledge the importance of the setting, i.e., the land’s end, insofar as I relate it to the poet’s flow of inspiration while composing her early poems. Here, she seems to come to a dead end, confronted with outrageous thoughts symbolized in the disquieting sea imagery that she weaves throughout the poem.

References to “soldiers” and “messy wars” later in the poem seem to allude to the casualties of the two World Wars. In this connection, Plath, a passionate pacifist, seems to hint at the futility of war and its destructive effects. But most important, she is alluding to an inner war, an inner turmoil. Accordingly, I also read these soldiers as the poet’s own “dead words”—words that have ceased to please her, and poems she conceives of as almost dead. (Evocatively, the original title of her poem “Stillborn” is “A Beach of Dead Poems,” as evidenced in the first draft of the poem. This is a poem she wrote during the same summer she visited Brittany.) In this respect, the reference to those “messy wars” might also reflect the poet’s messy drafts, as it were, in which the early poems bleed so much ink before they turn into their final shape.

The opening lines of “Finisterre”—“This was the land’s end: the last fingers, knuckled and rheumatic, / Cramped on

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<sup>112</sup> For a historical overview of these names and their origins, refer to *Brittany* by Philippe Barbour (2005).

nothing”—overtly state the end of an onerous journey (*CP* 169). Interestingly, the poem also opens up with a sentence in the past tense, which reinforces the speaker’s distance and detachment, at least temporally, from “this land.” Had the poet chosen to use the pronoun “that” as in “*that* was the land’s end” (in lieu of “this”), the sense of distance would have been even stronger. However, the fusion of “this,” which signifies something close at hand, and the past tense in “was,” denote the speaker’s ambivalence about belonging to “this land,” as well as her mixed feelings about being, herself, involved in all the bleakness and gloom underlying the rest of the poem. In line with what I suggested earlier, “the land’s end” serves as an allusion to the end of the poet’s inspiration—a dead halt that the poet seems to reach after years of trying to compose poetry on par with that produced by her literary predecessors. However, although images of death and stasis are rampant in this first stanza, a sense of mobility and continuity is still felt through the stormy sea that keeps flowing back and forth, its raging waves embodying the poet’s state of mind. Albeit agitated, the roaring sea is what sets the pulse of the “joyous current”—which Plath evoked in her journals—racing (*CP* 395).

The image of “an ending” or “an end” is equally imparted through the speaker’s depiction of those “black / Admonitory cliffs” (*CP* 169). In a haunting yet compelling image, those last fingers seem to be the only parts remaining of a body that is now disintegrated. “Knuckled and rheumatic,” those fingers also impart an image of infirmity and increase the sense of doom and impending death conveyed by the poem—an idea that is enhanced by the enjambed first lines of the poem. “Cramped on nothing,” they go slack and eventually seem to let go of the reins of “this land” (*CP* 169).

If we return to the link I have proposed between the setting and the poet’s imagination, the land that the speaker/poet evokes in this poem might stand for the soil of her imagination that she hopes against hope to make fertile. In a similar vein, those last fingers might as well embody the fingers that penned the first poems, which Plath had been unwilling to read aloud. As a matter of fact, in an interview with Peter Orr, when asked about whether she “consciously

design[s] [her] poems to be both lucid and to be effective when they are read aloud,” Plath said:

This is something I didn't do in my earlier poems. For example, my first book, *The Colossus*, I can't read any of the poems aloud now. I didn't write them to be read aloud. They, in fact, quite privately, bore me. These ones that I have just read, the ones that are very recent, I've got to say them, I speak them to myself, and I think that this in my own writing development is quite a new thing with me, and whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them to myself, I say them aloud. (qtd. in Orr 170)

In this connection, the opening lines of “Finisterre” can be construed as an intimation of the poet's last grip or last control over writings she finds dissatisfactory. It is equally noteworthy that Plath's sense of insecurity, her dissatisfaction with her early poems, and her craving to emulate poets she deems of high caliber, are very conspicuous in her journals. She once wrote: “As always, coming unexpectedly upon the good work of a friend or acquaintance, I itch to emulate, to sequester” (*UP* 344). On another occasion, she wrote, quite poignantly:

I have nothing but a handful of poems—so unsatisfactory, so limiting, when I study Eliot, Yeats, even Auden and Ransom—and the few written in spring vacation to link me umbilically to a new-not-yet-born world of writing—only the five-year distant adolescent successes in writing: a gap. Will I fill it, go beyond? I am hamstrung. (*UP* 386)

Such resignation and sullenness are further conveyed through the poem's musicality. In fact, the soothing effect of the alliterative /l/ in “land” and “last” works to hypnotize both the speaker and the reader, almost lulling their senses during a journey that places them within the tight confines of “this land's end” (*CP* 169). The poet also enhances the overall impression of gloominess through the reference to the “bottomless,” “whitened” sea.



This ghastly tableau gets even more grisly with the presence of “the leftover soldiers from old, messy wars,” “the faces of the drowned” forming, quite appallingly, the froth of the sea itself (*CP* 169). Auditory effects further intensify this gloom, almost splitting the reader’s ears through the “exploding” sea that “cannons” the soldiers’ ears. Strikingly, despite the resonance of the waves hitting the rocks, the soldiers do not “budge” (*CP* 169). But their protest is in vain; their “grudges” are muffled by water: “Other rocks hide their grudges under water” (*CP* 169). *Rocks* here can literally refer to rocks on cliffs, but they can equally be construed as a metaphorical representation of soldiers who, once strong and robust, are now pathetically debilitated. Everything else in the picture seems to be frozen to death, which makes it seem the end of the journey, if not the end of life itself; but certainly, this is the beginning of an afterlife that the poet finds much more promising.

Despite the overt reference to “death” in the second stanza, “The trefoils, stars and bells” that “embroider” the sea make the reader forget, even momentarily, about the haunting picture that the poet draws in the first stanza (*CP* 169). But this cheerful note is soon to be discarded given that those are “too small for the mists to bother with” (*CP* 169). They are too small “for the mists to [even] obliterate,” as she originally wrote (Draft [1] of “Finisterre”). While in the previous stanza soldiers’ cadavers are compared to “a dump of rocks,” their souls are now analogous to “mists,” “rolled in the doom-noise of the sea” (*CP* 169). They are “Souls rolling, without voices or destination / In a place blank as a Godless heart” (Draft [1] of “Finisterre”). The fact that they have a destination to reach further intensifies the sense of loss and disorientation that the poet had felt when she first embarked on her literary journey.

Further confusion is created when the speaker superbly fuses life and death through the image of the mists, the souls that “bruise the rocks out of existence, then resurrect them” (*CP* 169). In their attempt to rise up, probably from the ashes of despair and oblivion, these souls remain “without hope” (*CP* 169). Once again, the blend of visual, tactile, and auditory effects is noticeable in this second stanza: the mists, once watery or vapory, are now “like sighs” (*CP* 169). The speaker/poet walks among these

souls, her former “dead words.” Her attempt at resurrecting them seems futile as they “stuff [her] mouth with cotton” in a murderous, violent gesture. Even if they might free her later, or act as a reminder of the fusion of despair and hope that we find in Plath’s poetry, they now leave her “beaded with tears” (*CP* 169).

In the third stanza, the emergence of a new persona, “Our Lady of the Shipwrecked,” endows the poem with a fresher feel. On first thought, “Our Lady” emerges as a redeeming power, a promise that the dead will be resurrected. Standing for salvation, she initially seems to bring a sliver of hope to the gloomy scene. Much to the readers’ dismay, far from lessening the doom so characteristic of the previous stanza, this last stanza intensifies the acid detachment conveyed previously. “Our Lady” seems as merciless as the rocks and the mists that “bruise the rocks out of existence” and “stuff [the speaker’s] mouth with cotton” (*CP* 170). Here we should note that the interference of some divine power, as incarnated by “Our Lady of the Shipwrecked,” has the potential to drive away the bleakness that engulfs the previous stanzas. However, “Our Lady” turns a blind eye and lends a deaf ear to the appeals of the sailor and the peasant: “She does not hear what the sailor or the peasant is saying—/ She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea” (*CP* 170).

In the fourth stanza, we witness an abrupt change of situation. A seller of shells enters the poem, explaining to tourists the origin of the sea ornaments he is selling. The speaker “is told” that:

These are the pretty trinkets the sea hides,  
 Little shells made up into necklaces and toy ladies.  
 They do not come from the Bay of the Dead down  
 there,  
 But from another place, tropical and blue,  
 We have never been to.  
 These are our crêpes. Eat them before they blow cold.  
 (*CP* 170)

This last part provides a stark contrast to the previous stanzas. The speaker, as well as the reader, are invited to move beyond the surface of dead soldiers, mists, and errant

souls, and to delve deeper into the sea until they encounter the “pretty trinkets the sea hides” which “do not come from the Bay of the Dead down there, / But from another place, tropical and blue” (*CP* 170). I read this as a hint at the literary place that Plath, an ambitious poet, strove to reach. This is a place “[she has] never been to”—a place where she can enjoy the recognition deserving a woman writer in the fifties and early sixties (*CP* 170). To Plath, this place is most enticing: “tropical,” “blue,” and teeming with inspiration, which would help her resurrect her early stillborn poems. Commenting on these last lines of “Finisterre,” Brain holds that, in this poem, “what is sold as indigenous proves not to be native” (69). Linking this idea to poetic aspirations, we can stipulate that for Plath to find her own voice, she need not be so much compelled by the charm of what is immediately available to her. On a more general level, this can also be the rigid formalism that crippled her early poems.

In a noticeable move, Plath goes from the past (“this was the land’s end”) to the present (“These are our crêpes. Eat them before they blow cold”) before her poem takes us back to the coldness of the previous stanzas (*CP* 169-170). If anything, this is an invitation to enjoy the present moment, to acknowledge the hardships and to strive to overcome them. This last line is very simple: this is the kind of poetry that Plath wanted to compose, especially later in her life—poetry that dispenses with the stifling confines of formalism and the poetic decorum it dictates. Read in this context, “Finisterre” becomes a poem about poetic inspiration and muse: “the land’s end” stands for the end of inspiration, and the stormy ocean stands for the poet’s dissatisfaction with her early works, “a tropical and blue” place where she wants to enshrine her poems and infuse them with the “joyous current of life.”

### **“Writing Is a Religious Act”: Finding Salvation in Writing**

As I have already suggested, “Finisterre” is emblematic of the journey the poet’s words have taken since she wished them to “go surprisingly far—among strangers, around the world, even. Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the

prescriptions of a doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime.” This is how Plath described her hope in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (99). In “Finisterre,” it seems as if the poet were standing on the rubble of her dead “words” (soldiers), on the debris of poetry she now finds wanting. Her more mature words will rise from the ashes of those that are “stillborn,” a nod to her poem “Stillborn,” in which she says: “These poems do not live, it’s a sad diagnosis” (CP 142).

In this section, I argue that, to Plath, writing is a redeeming journey, a “religious act,” as she once wrote in her journals (UP 436). She goes on to explain:

It is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass away like a day of typing or a day of teaching. The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world. People read it: react to it as to a person, a philosophy, a religion, a flower: they like it, or do not. It helps them, or it does not. It feels to intensify living: you give more, probe, ask, look, learn, and shape this: you get more: monsters, answers, color and form, knowledge. You do it for itself first. If it brings in money, how nice. You do not do it first for money. Money isn't why you sit down at the typewriter. Not that you don't want it. It is only too lovely when a profession pays for your bread and butter. With writing, it is maybe, maybe-not. How to live with such insecurity? With what is worst, the occasional lack or loss of faith in the writing itself? How to live with these things? (Emphasis added, 436)

In “Finisterre,” she announces the triumph of writing over religion when it comes to reaching salvation after being enmeshed in this “land’s end,” an idea that is conspicuous in the drafts of the poem. In fact, parsing Plath’s drafts of “Finisterre,” I was particularly drawn to the fact that the poet omitted an entire stanza from the final version of the poem, a stanza that she kept inserting time and again in successive drafts of the poem, only to discard it in the final typescript. It runs thus:

The chapel on the Pointe de Van is inhabited by birds,  
 And green as if it had been  
 Five centuries under water, and only just risen.  
 Inside, there were marigolds in a teapot,  
 And a lord and lady of painted wood, with pink and  
 cream complexions.  
 And I felt excluded,  
 Tiptoe, on my stone, at the broken window. The birds  
 Went on murmuring happily in spite of me, and the  
 statues had raised their hands,  
 In blessing, or in amazement, at the sea. (Draft [10] of  
 “Finisterre”)

At first blush, Plath seems to discard religion. However, closer inspection reveals that she is actually discarding references to her loss of confidence in the power of her words. By omitting this stanza from the printed version of the poem, Plath has come to recognize *poetry* as the one and only healing force in her life. Thus her poetry may not simply be considered a substitute for religion, but be revealed as a creative, life-sustaining force in its own right.

Interestingly, in a journal entry, Plath once wrote: “Writing is my health” (*UP* 523). Once a healing process, writing is now a redeeming force that the poet finds immediately available to her. Those fingers, once “knuckled and rheumatic,” are now in total control, tightly gripping the pen that will record and engrave the poet’s everlasting popularity. Put differently, a plausible reading of “Finisterre” presents it as featuring the end of land, and symbolically, the end of hope. When one loses hope, one clings to religion as a life-sustaining power. And in the final version of the poem, there are indeed references to religion. But Plath seems to reject that solution when she discarded an entire stanza that only features in the drafts of this poem. Strikingly, too, in this jettisoned stanza, the speaker plainly expresses her alienation, saying: “And I felt excluded, / Tiptoe, on my stone, at the broken window” (Draft [10] of “Finisterre”). In a symbolic act, she divests herself from this feeling of estrangement by obliterating that last stanza.

## Conclusion

Being stranded in that “land’s end,” placed amid the haunting cadavers of soldiers in a roaring sea, and invoking religion as a redeeming force only to discard this idea from the final version of the poem—all this attests to the fact that Plath finds her own poetics more potent and more redeeming than any other religious force. Even the saints she depicts in the final omitted stanza are raising their hands “in blessing, or in amazement, at the sea,” or, to be more precise, in amazement at the power of inspiration embodied in the image of the sea. Here, Plath seems to have found “the perfect world of [her] imagination” she once evoked in an early, unpublished poem entitled “I Have Found the Perfect World.”<sup>113</sup> This is a world where she is “the supreme conqueror,” as she puts it. In rejecting the power of religion over her words, Plath might be alluding to her rejection of the early formalism that informed many of her early poems.

The present paper sheds light not only on Sylvia Plath’s literary journey as she wrestled to resurrect poems that she finds “stillborn,” but also on the journey taken by readers as they work through the poet’s manuscripts to gain an insight into Plath’s increasing confidence in her own mission as a poet. Readers embark on this journey in order to gain better insights into the poet’s creative process and to have access, albeit small, to the antechamber of her creative mind by delving into her rich and enriching archival heritage.

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- \_\_\_\_\_. Typescript of "I Have Found the Perfect World of my imagination." TS. Plath MSS. Box 7a. Folder 12. The Lilly Library. Bloomington, Indiana.

### **Abbreviations:**

- CP*: Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Harper, 2008.
- UJ*: Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.

## **Men of Ice and Steel: Richard Kuklinski, Clark Kent, and the Fortress of Identity**

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This, too, was myself.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

One of the most enduring and well-known aspects of Superman's mythology is the utter plainness of his alter-ego, newspaper reporter Clark Kent. As Superman plies the gifts of his interstellar heritage for all the world to see, Clark Kent leads a life of modesty and restraint, paced by the unfulfilled romantic pursuit of his co-worker, Lois Lane. This divergence of identity, a required field for any caped crusader, does, on occasion, direct the behavior of mere mortals, though instead of using their secret lives to better serve humanity, these Janus-faced individuals are up to something far more nefarious.

The grossest example of this phenomenon, far surpassing the adulterous politician or bilking Little League treasurer, is the story of Richard Kuklinski, a Mafia contract killer who came to be known in the annals of true crime as the Ice Man. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Kuklinski is reported to have murdered over 200 men for the crime bosses of New York City, all while maintaining a regular suburban existence in Dumont, New Jersey with his beloved wife Barbara and their three children, none of whom knew about his other life as a hit man. The devoted father who slept at the bedside of his ailing daughter Merrick and loved to feed the wild ducks at Demarest Pond could, by downshifting to his reptile brain, transform into a highly efficient apex predator, "a supernatural, malevolent force



ready to come out of the shadows and create chaos” (Carlo 206).

When merely glanced at, Superman and the Ice Man look like unequivocal moral opposites, the one bearing the torch of a global, messianic mission, the other meeting the dark demands of Lucifer himself. But studied more closely, the two begin to exhibit a host of similarities, the most striking of which is the fragmentation of self that divides their separate personas and keeps them in a constant state of friction. Both men suffer from an anxiety of personality, and through close readings of Philip Carlo’s *The Ice Man*, John Byrne’s landmark graphic novel *The Man of Steel*, and a number of other supplementary texts, including Richard Donner’s *Superman: The Movie* and Park Deitz’s prison interviews with Richard Kuklinski that aired on HBO, I will explore the roots and rituals of their shared anxiety, and explain the social and psychological results of what amounts to an ongoing, obsessive masquerade. Ensuring that the twain shall never meet—that the ice is properly thawed when Richard gets home to Dumont, and that the steel is buffered when Clark punches in at the Daily Planet—serves as the dramatic draw of their balancing act, but, as I hope to prove, legerdemain of this sort can be exhaustive and isolating. Their internal conflict always stalemates in a fortress of solitude, where each man is made to confront an image of his father, the entity responsible for bequeathing so much power and yet causing so much pain.

## Origin Stories

Created in 1938 by writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster, Superman<sup>114</sup>, whose birth name is Kal-El, hails from the planet Krypton. In “Book One” of John Byrne’s *The Man of Steel*, Jor-El, Superman’s biological sire, describes Krypton as “a cold and heartless society, stripped of all human feeling, all human passion and life” (4). Its technological

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<sup>114</sup> Though Superman will always be the product of both historical context and the ideological perspective of his current creative steward, there is one trait that nevertheless remains consistent about his character: the bifurcated consciousness. This discussion will specify Byrne’s and Donner’s interpretations of that consciousness, accounting for how each one contributes to the drama of Superman’s legendary duality.

advancements (robot attendants, grand consoles, matrix orbs) have left the people emotionally paralyzed and the natural environment increasingly unstable. On the eve of Krypton's destruction, which has been triggered by a radioactive chain reaction deep in the planet's core, Jor-El sends his infant son to Earth in a rocket ship, safeguarding his life. He knows the child's dense molecular structure will derive god-like power from our sun, but his final hope is that Kal-El, once invested of this power, will not use it to rule mankind but to help us realize our potential for good.

After landing in Smallville, a generic town in the American Midwest, the last Kryptonian is renamed "Clark" by his adoptive parents, John and Martha Kent, who introduce him to a life of rural simplicity. Under their care, he experiences the "human feeling" he would have been denied on his home planet. He internalizes the Kents' old-fashioned values, learning what it means to be an honest, respectful, responsible American. But the cultural incubator in which Clark matures is too humble to contain his legacy, and by the time he reaches adolescence he is burning to unleash the full range of his alien prowess.

The tension between his genetic destiny and his normalized teenage state is no better demonstrated than in *Superman: The Movie*, released in 1978. Early in the first act, while working as the equipment manager for his high school football team, Clark is humiliated when his crush, Lana Lang, snubs him for a more popular suitor. As she drives off in the boy's convertible, Clark lets out his frustration by grabbing a football and punting it into the ozone. Later, on his way home, he successfully outruns a fast-moving train, thus putting the day's embarrassment behind him. These are quite spectacular coping mechanisms, but they are meant for much more than that, and Clark senses this deeply. The older he gets, the harder he finds it to deny the insistent message in his blood: You are the "ultimate immigrant" (Goodale 12). Little do his classmates know, the bashful loner scrubbing the quarterback's jock strap answers to a higher calling, one that will eventually uproot him from Smallville and cast him headlong into the wider world.

The environment in which Richard Kuklinski grew up differs sharply from Smallville, though it does bear a chilling

resemblance to the Krypton John Byrne describes. Raised in a housing project in Jersey City, Richard was the victim of almost daily physical abuse at the hands of his father, Stanley, a monstrous alcoholic who mercilessly beat “compassion and empathy out of his second-born” (Carlo 16). So cruel was Stanley’s wrath that he killed Richard’s younger brother Florian in a drunken frenzy, then, conspiring with his wife, told investigators that Florian had fallen down the stairs. In the words of psychologist Park Dietz, Florian’s murder taught Richard “nothing but hatred,” and confirmed Stanley as the boy’s archetypal bully. In addition to his father, Richard was tormented by the nuns at his catholic school and a pack of delinquent kids from his neighborhood, in particular a brute named Charley Lane, the first person Richard ever killed.

Charley Lane’s execution gave the 16-year-old Kuklinski a feeling of “invincibility,” and he began to act like “someone who merited respect . . . a force to be reckoned with” (Carlo 29-30). More than just an ego boost, Kuklinski’s early murders provided relief from the bullying he faced at every turn. “If you hurt somebody,” he tells Park Dietz, “they’ll leave you alone.” He discovered that the most effective antidote to barbarism was more barbarism, and he fashioned himself a “slayer of bullies,” eliminating anyone who pushed him around or made him feel inferior (Carlo 75). In a way, Richard had found his super-power.

At the conclusion of his interview with Richard at Trenton State Prison, Park Dietz diagnoses him with anti-social personality disorder and paranoid personality disorder, conditions having both environmental and genetic determinants. Born without a sense of fear and bred by a man who lobotomized his conscience, Richard could do very little to escape his frozen fate: he was doomed to become the Ice Man. Throughout his life, Richard neither trusted nor forgave anyone; vengeance was the governing principle in most of his relationships. A detriment to the average man, these traits turned out to be “major advantages in [Richard’s] line of work,” according to Dietz. But even as far back as Charley Lane, Richard admits to tapping into “something [he] couldn’t control,” an obscure and vicious energy that only grew in intensity after he was married, subjecting both him and his family to continual fracture and imbalance.

“Killing never bothered me,” claims Richard, “but if I had a choice, I wouldn’t.”

### **The Diminishable Man**

In *I and Thou*, the Austrian philosopher Martin Buber argues that human beings, if they are to achieve any level of understanding with their neighbors, must first learn to compose themselves as individuals. Unless a single subjective “I” is established on the part of addressor and addressee alike, the potential for meaningful contact and true reciprocity is limited. Here Buber discusses the composed self:

The unified I . . . occurs in lived actuality—the concentration of all forces into the core, the decisive moment of man. . . . The concentration of which I speak does not consider our instincts as too impure, the sensuous as too peripheral, or our emotions as too fleeting—everything must be included and integrated. What is wanted is not the abstracted self, but the whole undiminished man. (137)

A competing view of selfhood comes from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. “Man is not truly one,” writes Stevenson in the novella’s final chapter, “but truly two,” suggesting that the nature of identity is dualistic. Exemplified in the obscene binary drama of Stevenson’s title character(s), each of us is a battlefield upon which is fought “a perennial war among members” (73). If we follow this line of thinking, then even the most single-minded consciousness will fail to attain Buber’s “undiminished” state, and instead be left with a pair of “abstracted,” irreconcilable selves.

Clark Kent and Superman are just that: irreconcilable. At the ground level is a mild-mannered journalist whom Lex Luthor deems “a trifle unsure of himself” (Byrne 9; “Book Four”). Mocking Clark in “The Myth of Superman,” Umberto Eco takes things a bit further, calling him “fearful, timid, not overintelligent, awkward, nearsighted, and submissive to his matriarchal colleague, Lois Lane” (108). In Richard Donner’s film, Lois refers to Clark as her “pet,” and he doesn’t seem at all insulted by it; in fact, he rather enjoys the designation. If

he's not puttering around at Lois's feet, or being chided by his boss for a lack of zeal, Clark is sitting at his desk in the middle of the newsroom, proofing his stories for typos. John Kent tells his son that in order to sell his alias to the world he will have to make him "stoop a tad" (Byrne 22; "Book One"). Clark takes this advice to the extreme, behaving in public as an *Uberschlub*, meek and low-down.

Superman, on the other hand, is an *Übermensch*: assertive, confident, resourceful, strong. His physical exploits are myriad and legend, from catching a bullet in his bare hand to spinning the planet in the opposite direction to reverse the march of time. The son of Jor-El struts his stuff "within the context of extreme scientific possibility," aweing the masses while zipping through the air high above the city of Metropolis (Robinson 13). Suspended in that rarefied space, Superman is no longer chasing the scoop—he is the scoop. Midway through Donner's adaptation, Lois Lane invites Superman to her penthouse apartment for an interview, but after he takes her on a spontaneous aerial tour of the city (she remarks to herself that flying with him is "like holding hands with a god"), she becomes less interested in the scoop and more interested in the man. How does Superman respond to the sultry advances of Clark Kent's love interest? He remains a paragon of virtue, betraying not the faintest hint of carnal curiosity. He is able to keep the pet's urges in check because sex is not one of his chief planetary objectives. To perform the errand set forth by his father (helping mankind realize its capacity for good), Superman swears an "implicit vow of chastity," and sleeping with his first-ever groupie would surely break that vow, or at least wrinkle his skin-tight costume (Eco 115).

Richard Kuklinski and the Ice Man are another pair of selves that resists compatibility, or, as Buber says, "concentration." The one self, a six-and-a-half foot, 300-pound, homicidal polymath, was capable of liquidating a man in any number of ways: strangulation, torture, even poisoning. The Ice Man, writes Philip Carlo, was a "made-to-order killer" in whom "all the best physical traits of his bloodline seemed to manifest themselves" (142-143). He possessed highly developed faculties of hearing and smell, "could sit still for hours on end," and, despite his hulking frame, moved with the stealth and agility of a cat (162).

Working out of Roy DeMeo's Gemini Lounge, he prowled the streets of East New York by car and on foot, offering men for money, revenge, and sometimes just for sport. In conversation with Park Dietz, Richard says that the Ice Man was "a hard-working expeditor of sorts," which is little more than a retiree's euphemism for America's most prolific serial killer.

Just as Dr. Jekyll provides a "city of refuge" for the abominable Edward Hyde, Richard built for the Ice Man a haven in Dumont, where he was "safe of all men's respect, wealthy, beloved—the cloth laying for [him] in the dining room at home" (Stevenson 86-87). When he crossed the threshold between his two worlds, Richard would take off one mask and put on another, trading darkness for light, hate for love. In one instance, he killed a man named Paul Rothenberg and then drove home and watched TV with his wife while his children were upstairs sleeping. Dumont allowed Richard to forget (though not always fully) the heinous side of his personality, so that he could embrace in earnest the roles of husband, neighbor, parishioner, father. Below is the testimony of his oldest daughter Merrick:

I will never forget how he was always there for me, how he helped sick children who had nothing in the hospitals where I often was as a child. He couldn't see a child suffer without wanting to help, running to help—doing something. I saw him bring children he didn't know food and toys and clothes without ever being asked. No other dad ever did that! He was no Ice Man. He was a caring, giving man with a heart as big and warm as the sun. (Carlo 397)

How does a man stuff a dead body into an oil drum and then turn around and give presents to sick and needy children? It's easy if that man is two different people. Sharing his life story with reporters, Richard often used the first-person collective when referring to himself, since the "we" comprised both the helper and the hunter, the guardian and the ghoul. What prevented Richard from ever seeing himself as a unified "I," and what forces Clark Kent to always change costumes *sub rosa*, is Stevenson's "perennial war among

members,” a private skirmish that cannot go public, for if it ever were to, more than just the combatants would suffer.

### **The Hero without an Adversary**

“Superman,” states Umberto Eco, “finds himself in the worrisome narrative situation of being a hero without an adversary and therefore without the possibility of development” (110). Because he is nonpareil in his powers, Superman has never lost a fight. (Even man’s greatest foe, Time, is but a plaything to Kal-El.) Eco defines a typical Superman story as “circular, static, immobilistic,” and in both Donner and Byrne, the plot, following its petty surface complications, inevitably cycles back to the matter of Him, or, I should say, Them (122). Superman’s only true nemesis, the thing that gives him panic and pause, is the full disclosure of his double life.

“Book One” of *The Man of Steel* ends with Clark Kent summoning his blood to safely land a plummeting space plane. His mother has not yet sewn his red-and-blue costume, so he performs this feat in plain clothes, with nothing sartorial to distinguish the alien from the native. After a mob of onlookers surrounds Clark, inducing “the worst, the greediest, the most covetous part[s] of everyone,” he becomes convinced that the two identities must be segregated, not only to protect himself and the ones that he loves, but to bar the “wild animals” from abusing his service and descending into the madness of their demands.

The one character who knows his secret, aside from his parents, is Lana Lang. She tells Clark in “Book Five” that his revelation “tore open the seams of [her] life and left [her] empty” (13). Now his pining admirer, she wants him for herself, but considering his obligations to the world, such a union is impossible. By no means a “wild animal,” Lana nevertheless endures a madness of kenning, and confronted with her pain, Clark resolves to continue the ruse. The innocent must be spared this damning knowledge.

Vigilance on the part of both identities decreases the likelihood of Clark Kent and Superman ever being fused in the collective mind. The Man of Steel remains “constantly alert” when out in the world, eyes peeled for anyone who might try to snap a picture of his “Superman face” (Byrne 21;

“Book Four”). Clandestine dressing rooms—for changing into and out of costume—are always secured, if not scouted ahead of time. And Clark, reporting on Superman for the Daily Planet, often drags red herrings through his stories to deflect suspicion and scrutiny. As long as he makes use of these cautionary practices, the fortress of identity is safe.

It nearly implodes, however, in the penultimate book of Byrne’s graphic novel, “The Mirror, Crack’d.” A botched experiment by Lex Luthor and the evil Dr. Teng results in a humanoid that is half-Superman and half-Clark Kent. The creature wears black-framed glasses and a green suit jacket, but underneath this pedestrian layer one can see the flowing red cape and swirling “S” insignia. Invested with Kryptonian strength and ability, it shows up outside the Daily Planet’s downtown office, and a fracas ensues between the hybrid and the hero. Throughout the fight, Superman worries that the people of Metropolis will see the monster “dressed as both [his] identities . . . and put two and two together” (16). His anxiety peaks when the humanoid spirits away Lois Lane and surprises her with a mid-air kiss. The peck has the potential to finally resolve the matter of Them, but in lieu of epiphany, Lois is merely flummoxed, and the two selves carry on as remote and exclusive agents, “without the possibility of development.”

To the best of my knowledge, the Ice Man never squared off against an ill-contrived duplicate of himself, but if he had he probably would have killed it on sight. There was no one better than Richard at what he did for a living. He had no rivals, no challengers, no peers. Remi, an employer of his from Switzerland, “couldn’t believe any one man could be so . . . efficient at making people—problems—disappear” (Carlo 347). But the one problem he could not make disappear with either a pistol or a blade was the chronic matter of his double life. The deeper Richard became entrenched in the underworld, the more he wanted to shield his family from the threats it posed. Doing so would be difficult, since he himself was a consummate danger.

It cannot be overstated how much Richard prized his family, especially his wife Barbara, whom he nicknamed “Lady.” The product of a large and loving Italian-American clan, Barbara gave to Richard the life he had been deprived of as a child: Sunday dinners, birthday parties, exchanging



gifts at Christmas. Observing these traditions in Dumont, Richard felt “glad to be alive, at home and at peace” (Carlo 97). He understood that Lady represented the point of access to the “good” Richard; therefore, enshrining both her and the children became paramount. To this end, he “meticulously compartmentalized his life, never socializing with his employers in organized crime and taking care never to reveal anything to them about his family or where he lived” (Higginbotham 10). He never stored guns or weapons in the house, and spoke not a word to his family about the true nature of his work, using his day job at a film lab as a convenient cover. But even with these precautions, Richard still feared that someday the streets would come home, and that the people he cherished most would learn his secret. “If what he was doing came out it would be a terrible thing for them to have to live through” (Carlo 228).

Yet they were already living through it, albeit in snatches and glimpses. The measures Richard took to insulate his family from his other life did not extend to the temporary lapses in character he often experienced at home. While the identities of Clark Kent and Superman are set apart by a very rigid line of demarcation, those of Richard Kuklinski and the Ice Man were not as firmly fixed, and there were times when the latter would eclipse the former, and Dumont would be cast into darkness, flooded by a “more generous tide of blood” (Stevenson 82). In his frequent fits of rage, which were usually sparked by something as trivial as a sandwich that had not been made to his liking, the “bad” Richard would emerge to disrupt and dismantle. He flipped dinner tables and broke pieces of furniture, and when these brutalities failed to satisfy, he directed his anger at Barbara, the center of his universe. He broke her nose on more than one occasion, gave her countless black eyes, and once even held a knife to her ribs. Barbara Kuklinski, in an interview with the *Sidney Morning Herald*, said that she had always known her husband was a murderer. After his arrest in 1986, “all the odd things she had noticed about [him] tumbled into alignment” (Higginbotham 10). As the pillars of Dumont were falling at the hands of he who had erected them, Barbara saw the two Richards melting into one, and thus Lois’s epiphany—delayed by the serial continuity of comics—was Lady’s.

## The Singularity of their Situation

Until lead investigator Pat Kane exposed him as the Iceman, Richard Kuklinski was the only person who knew the truth about his double life. Grave circumstances prohibited him from communicating that truth to another, so he became its sole possessor. Superman, too, bears the burden of a sequestered gospel. Save Lana Lang and the Kents, he alone knows what happens when the phone booth closes and the miraculous switch begins. There is pleasure in concealing such pivotal autobiography, but there is also profound loneliness. Misdirection, artifice, retreat—the man who trods such a path may never have an honest relationship with anyone, except, perhaps, the progenitor of his seclusion.

At the end of the first act of *Superman: The Movie*, after John Kent dies of a heart attack, Clark finds a glowing green crystal buried in the floor of the barn behind his house, the last vestige of the rocket ship in which he flew to Earth. The shard guides him to a remote enclave in the wintry highlands of the far north. Following its implicit instructions, Clark throws the crystal into the deep snow, and from the shallow slot is heaved a grand and glimmering redoubt. Clark spends the next 12 years in this “fortress of solitude,” learning about his “special heritage” from a talking hologram of his father. Even after he has matured and logged considerable flight time as Superman, Clark returns to the outpost for special counsel, and Jor-El is always there to impart, in a sober yet loving tone, his oldest and most resonant bits of Kryptonian wisdom.

But Superman does not have the luxury of communing with the godhead on a daily basis. Most of the time he dwells in a “castle of separation where [he] conducts a dialogue with himself” about—what else?—himself (Buber 152). Here, Superman and Clark function as each other’s confidante, and while the arrangement yields some existential nuggets (“It was Krypton that made me Superman, but it is the Earth that makes me human!!!”), the castle of separation feels no less hermitic because of it (Byrne 22; “Book Six”). Which prompts one to marvel at how long Kal-El has gone on this way. If Superman’s ultimate problem is the full disclosure of his double life, then his most

outstanding accomplishment has to be keeping that life a secret. Umberto Eco points out that “Superman’s double identity . . . permits a suspense characteristic,” and I believe it is just this characteristic that forms the heart of the Superman Experience, if I may call it that (108). Those who have read the comics and watched the movies will admit that their greatest thrill comes from the anticipation of Superman finally baring it all. Yet he refrains, and the audience comes away with the same desperate irony: Superman loves the world unremittingly, but he can never be a part of it.

Detachment is likewise a theme in Richard Kuklinski’s life. Dating back to his early days in Jersey City, decades before he shot and killed mafia kingpin Paul Castellano in front of a Manhattan steak house, Richard had “always felt like an outsider, like [he] didn’t belong” (Carlo 192). Over the years, various accomplices tried to befriend Richard, to make him feel less like an outcast, but he rejected their sympathies, preferring to be alone. Friendship had such little value for Richard because he believed, as do so many who suffer from paranoid personality disorder, that the world was against him, that a handshake was no different than a punch in the gut. “I’m probably the loneliest person in the world,” Richard tells Park Dietz in the last of his HBO interviews. He cracks a smile as he says this, but it is the wry smile of the fugitive, the defector, the ghost—those whose social position is defined primarily by loss.

The only individuals with whom Richard had any significant contact were his victims. When Richard’s employers would ask him to make a target suffer, he would take the mark to a certain cave in Bucks County, Pennsylvania and feed him to the rats that nested there. Philip Carlo recounts the Ice Man’s sacrifice of a playboy who had crossed a Sicilian mobster:

Within two days Richard snatched the playboy and took him to the caves in Bucks County where he knew the rats lived. Richard had with him strips of rawhide . . . He stripped the playboy, wet the rawhide strips, wrapped one around each arm, one around his forehead. . . . As the rawhide grew taut, Richard watched the playboy suffering, amused, detached, telling [him] why this was happening. . . . He stayed

there for some time . . . watching him suffer, hearing his pleas. (192)

The Sicilian had not asked Richard to stay with the playboy, nor had he given him instructions to deliver an explanatory lecture. These things he did of his own volition, for his own private ends. Looking down at the mark, it can be imagined that Richard was not seeing the face of a whimpering lecher; he was seeing the face of the archetypal bully, Stanley Kuklinski. Since Stanley had died before Richard had had the chance to kill him, the cave became a torture chamber in which the Ice Man got to repeatedly stage, with the help of a colony of man-eating vermin, his father's metaphorical death. This explains why he would film the rodents feasting on the bodies and then watch the footage alone in his office. He wanted to make sure that Stanley had suffered, and that his younger brother Florian—who, had he lived, may have saved Richard from loneliness—was rightfully avenged.

### **Conclusion**

At the end of this discussion, there is a tendency to want to condemn our subjects for their respective hoaxes. The furtive manner in which they conduct their lives, always keeping half of themselves hidden from view, foments in us a passion for the truth. We accuse Richard Kuklinski and Clark Kent of duplicity, and call for them to raze the fortress of identity and aspire to Buber's undiminished man. But I would argue that these judgments are too high-minded, an effect of our insatiable need for transparency. Rather than chastise these men for their protean behavior, I am inclined to look at them as models of discernment and discretion. As they shuffle between selves, neither Richard nor Clark is motivated by an explicit urge to deceive; they are simply trying to salvage their privacy. To have a life outside their terrible and sometimes uncontrollable powers, they are forced to adhere to a code of silence. In an age where entire digital realms exist for the multitudinous proclamations of both saints and savages, perhaps there is something to be learned from Ice and Steel: the value of reticence.

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**The Gaze: Deception and Revelation of  
Hidden Truth in Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie  
de boy*, and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La  
Jalousie***

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The question of the gaze and the other, as both deceptive and revealing, has been widely debated in psychoanalysis and postcolonial studies. Such studies have addressed the issue of the gaze in *La Jalousie*, as well as in Oyono's *Une vie de boy*. There has also been a great deal of scholarship on the subversive role of the gaze in a colonial context, such as S. Rudolph's *Reversing the Gaze: Amar Singh's Diary, A Colonial Subject's Narrative of Imperial India*. The gaze performs many functions: it has been identified as an "instrument of testimony" ("instrument de témoignage") or "regard mémorant" (Bourgeacq) in the case of *Une vie de boy*, or as a way of "creating obsession" (Randi) in *La jalousie*. However, current scholarship has not emphasized how the gaze functions as a tool of deception and lies.

For this paper, I will be looking at two novels: *La jalousie* by Alain Robbe-Grillet and *Une vie de boy* by Ferdinand Oyono. I chose these two novels together because both main characters can see but are not visible to the outside. The narrator in *La Jalousie* is the spying husband that no one can see. Throughout the novel, he observes his wife and her potential lover behind blinds named *jalousies*. They are both not aware of being watched. In *Une vie de boy*, Toundi is invisible due to his servant position during the colonization era in Cameroon. He is invisible to the white French woman named Madame who, in a sense, considers

him as an invisible decor aimed only to respond her commands. She is also not aware of being observed.

Moreover, both authors present the gaze as witnessing adultery, thereby emphasizing the prevalence of lies and deception I will attempt to describe. Robbe-grillet and Oyono, both writing about a colonized context, have subverted the culture of the gaze in their works and have created characters that redefine the status of being either colonized or colonizer. The gaze is reshaped and is no longer coming from the dominant character but from the dominated, thus engaging in a 'reverse gaze' in which the colonizer is now the exotic object of the colonized's gaze. I argue that the gaze has different functions: it captures lies and deception; it reveals weaknesses of the self and the other's; it enhances resistance, and can lead to a loss of control.

Published in 1956, *Une vie de Boy* describes decolonization, at a time when the literary discourse produced by colonial ideology changed perspective, and when the dichotomy colonized / colonizer was still strongly present. The novel reflects the hegemony that France wanted to maintain over its colonies during and after the colonization; it also reflects the character's gaze that makes us aware of a deceitful reality of the colonial domination in Cameroon between 1946 and 1960. At the time, Cameroon has not been a true French colony but has been subject to a policy of assimilation that has established part of the country as a non French Equatorial Africa territory (FEA). To assimilate a country formerly under German protectorate, France eliminated all German influences and implemented the teaching of the French language. France imposed the French legislation, kept control on the judiciary and controlled the major part of agriculture. *Une vie de boy* tells the story of a young African named Toundi during the French colonization era of Cameroon who leaves his family and village and is adopted by a white priest whom he deeply admires. He changes his name to Joseph, becomes a Christian, and starts being aware of colonization in Africa. When the priest, Father Gilbert, dies, Toundi becomes the "Boy" of the *Commandant* of the colony at the Residence. Inside the Residence, Toundi's admiration for the colonizer diminishes when, precisely through his gaze, he sees the

truth of the awfulness of colonization and the hypocrisy of colonizers. Toundi witnesses the adultery of the commandant's wife, Madame, whose guilt makes her accuse Toundi of being a thief. Beaten and injured, Toundi escapes and dies, leaving behind his diary that tells the story of *Une vie de Boy*.

Likewise, published in 1957, *La Jalousie* is an exemplar of the *Nouveau Roman* genre. According to Robbe-Grillet in his manifesto *Pour un Nouveau roman*, one cannot provide a plot and must instead only "guess." In other words, le nouveau roman wants to break the tradition of naming characters and places. Characters are not engaged in a traditional plot. The reader must discover or create the plot. I suggest the following story. The story is set in a house on a banana plantation in a French Antillean island. The reader also guesses that the story happens during colonization due to the presence of indigenous servants. The narrator never names himself as an 'I' but as the imperonnel "il." The reader assumes that the narrator is a jealous and suspicious husband who spies on his wife A... during the whole novel, thinking she may be having an affair with their neighbor, Franck. The story of *La Jalousie* is a precise and detailed observation of A...'s interaction with Franck that ultimately provides a distorted vision of reality through what constitutes his eyes: the *jalousies* of the window.

Both novels question a conflict between colonizer/colonized that could be described through exchanged gazes or the absence of gazes that occur between them. However, what interests me here is how the gaze comes into play in the discovery of the truth. The gaze in Lacanian theory appeals to the uncanny sense that the object of our eye is somehow looking back at us. "Neither imaginary nor symbolic", the gaze enables the subject to be closer to the real. By distinguishing the eye from the gaze, Lacan claims that the truth is not beheld in someone's eye. "The truth sought is the one that is unavowable with respect to the law that regulates enjoyment" (72). To him, the semblance is what limits the real gaze from the true eye.

The split that concerns us is not the distance that derives from the fact that there are forms imposed by the world towards which the intentionality of



phenomenological experience directs us—hence the limits we encounter in the experience of the visible. The gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience, namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety. (72)

*Une vie de boy* challenges this Lacanian theory by showing that the truth is absolutely revealed in Toundi's eyes, unlike the husband in *La Jalousie* who thinks his jealous gaze already possesses the truth. However, they both experience isolation. The main characters Toundi and the narrator in *La jalousie*, because of their status of observers, find themselves isolated in a way that opposes them to their peers. Most of all, their gaze alienates them since it functions as a lie detector for both characters.

The African character, Toundi, presented during the year of Cameroon's independence, shows his power through his gaze and breaks the dichotomy because of his position. Toundi uses the gaze as both a tool to understand his environment and to reverse the power structure colonizer/colonized. He gains power because he can secretly and deceptively observe, which follows the Foucauldian idea that knowledge is power and reveals the truth. Toundi's gaze is innocently deceptive because he is undetected, but this then becomes a strategy of resistance and revelation.

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true.' Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations. (Foucault 27)

Kalisa, Toundi's friend, compares this gaze as a source of knowledge: "It is stupid but with white people, you will be the witch eye who sees and knows. A thief or someone who

has something to hide can never feel at ease in front of this eye” (67; my trans.).<sup>115</sup> Kalisa is the servant of the commandant, physically close to him, yet, psychologically distant from him. His black peers do not have access to this privileged position, but Toundi does, due to his status of a servant inside the house. Such spatial positioning gives him the privileged status of a viewer who is able to have white characters in his vision. He sees everything: their eyes and their actions. He observes everything in the Residence, which gives him a dominant position, a position different from his peers, whereby he notices the smallest action. In fact, Toundi has his eyes everywhere and it seems his gaze is composed of more than two eyes. During a dinner, Toundi notices before guests do, that something is missing. He says: “When the glass was half empty, I was rushing to fill it” (82; my trans.).<sup>116</sup> This special situation creates a “trichotomy” putting him on one side, his peers on another, and colonizers on yet another side.

The gaze again breaks the trichotomy in *La jalousie*. Even though the novel might seem to show a dichotomy between the colonizers (the husband, his wife and Franck) and the colonized (indigenous servants), the narrator is, also, alienated. He is omniscient and seems to notice every detail, as does Toundi. However, unlike Toundi, the narrator does not speak and cannot be seen. Yet, both are ultimately invisible due to Toundi’s subaltern status. Toundi’s invisibility creates an advantage for his gaze as a better tool with which to observe.

By contrast, the gaze in *La Jalousie* puts the narrator in a submissive position due to his motionless body and his lack of power over his wife and his feelings of jealousy. The indigenous servants in *La jalousie* are not the ones enslaved; rather, it is the husband, who is ruled by his jealous and obsessed gaze directed at his wife that traps him in a dominated position. He becomes the servant of his fixation. Concerning the relationship between the narrator and A..., the narrator observes from afar, and this gaze leads him to a

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<sup>115</sup> “C’est bête mais avec les blancs tu seras l’œil du sorcier qui voit et qui sait. Un voleur ou quelqu’un qui a quelque chose à se reprocher ne peut jamais se sentir tranquille devant cet œil là” (62).

<sup>116</sup> “Quand le verre était vide, je me précipitais pour le remplir.” (82)

loss of power over the indigenous servants and himself. Without a close look, the husband can neither hear, nor perceive, nor understand the servants. All senses have to function together. Without his senses, the narrator loses power: “He quickly disappeared and it was hard to remember what he looks like: the ear didn’t have time to hear . . . . Through the barely opened blinds—a little late—it’s obviously impossible to perceive anything” (170; my trans.).<sup>117</sup> Unlike Toundi, he does not have direct knowledge; he only infers that he can see lies; he thereby loses his power.

Toundi is more active in his observation. He refuses to be trapped in the colonial system when he starts questioning the colonizer, while the husband in *La jalousie* is motionless, as if he were trapped in a power system as well, which is his jealousy. The narrator and Toundi both see and analyze others’ reactions. The husband expects to witness a possible adultery between his wife and the neighbor. Quite the opposite, due to his innocence, Toundi does not expect to see the whites’ adulterous deception.

Toundi, by seeing the colonizer as flawless, believes in assimilation and to the *mission civilsatrice*. Toundi left his family to seek shelter at a pastor’s house, Père Gilbert, whom he calls his “bienfaiteur”:

Actually, I realized that, (God sending Toundi to Père Gilbert) only to be closer to the white man with hair similar of a corn beard, dressed with a female dress, who gave little sweet treats to black kids . . . . I owe what I became to Father Gilbert. I love him a lot, my benefactor. He is a happy person, who, when I was a kid, treated me as a puppy . . . . He introduces me to white people as a masterpiece. I am his boy . . . . I will be the white chief’s boy: the king’s dog is the king of dogs. ((16-32 ; my trans.))<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> “Il a disparu trop vite pour laisser un souvenir précis: l’oreille n’a même pas eu le temps de l’écouter. . . . Par les fentes d’une jalousie entrouverte-un peu tard-il est évidemment impossible de distinguer quoi que ce soit”(170)

<sup>118</sup> “A vrai dire, je ne m’y étais rendu compte que pour approcher l’homme blanc aux cheveux semblables à la barbe de maïs, habillée d’une robe de femme, qui donnait de bons petits cubes sucrés aux petits Noirs . . . . Je dois ce que je suis devenu au père Gilbert. Je l’aime beaucoup, mon

However, after he uses his gaze as revealing truth, the contact with the colonizer (the Commandant and Madame) makes him realize their flaws. Madame has a lover and chocks Toundi: “Ah! When these white folks are into their passion, nothing matters to them” (101; my trans.)<sup>119</sup> Her lies about Toundi to hide her own faults, corruption, and violence are other many flaws that Toundi attributes to the white colonizer. He was even more surprised when he saw the commandant not circumcised. This specific moment made Toundi feel fearless:

This discovery relieved me a lot. It killed something inside me . . . I was not afraid of the commandant any longer . . . It seemed that I heard his voice for the first time, I was wondering why I was shaking in front of him. My composure surprised him . . . I remained impassive facing this gaze that used to petrify me. (my trans.; 45)<sup>120</sup>

Thus, Toundi, without wanting it, catches the mistakes and lies of the other: the colonizer. Toundi sees the other in the act, just as the husband tries to see his wife’s infidelity at play. However, the reality that Toundi discovers is more valuable than the fiction that the husband perceives because of his jealous mind.

It is through the gaze of the other that the self is defined. By observing the intimacy of adultery, both main characters reveal human weakness, deception and lies through their presence. Toundi’s gaze mirrors the guilt of the other, whereas the husband’s gaze acts as a mirror for his own guilt and deception through spying on his wife, an act

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bienfaiteur. C’est un homme gai qui, lorsque j’étais petit, me considérait comme un petit animal familier . . . Il me présente à tous les Blancs qui viennent à la mission comme son chef d’oeuvre. Je suis son boy . . . Je serai le boy du chef des Blancs: le chien du roi est le roi des chiens” (16-32).

<sup>119</sup> “Ah! Ces blancs quand ils sont déchainés dans leurs passions, rien ne compte pour eux” (101).

<sup>120</sup> “Cette découverte m’a beaucoup soulagé. Cela a tué quelque chose en moi . . . Je sens que le commandant ne me fait plus peur . . . Il m’a semblé que je l’entendais pour la première fois, je me suis demandé pourquoi j’avais tremblé devant lui. Mon aplomb l’a beaucoup surpris . . . Je restai impassible sous ce regard qui m’affolait auparavant” (45).

that allows the gaze to speak. Lacan theorized that we construct our identities by looking at ourselves and each other. His concept of *imago*, ideal–perfect self, describes the person who sees his ideal version of himself. The colonizer sees the truly ugly version of himself not through a mirror but through the gaze of the colonized. This gaze represents how society perceives the colonizer with all his flaws. The husband perceives his imago through his own gaze as well, where the husband-colonizer sees his own guilt like the colonizer in *Une vie de boy*.

The colonizer must be perceived as such in order for him to maintain his superiority. The reverse is also true. The relation becomes unstable because the colonizer loses his authority through the other’s gaze. The African character, commonly absent in postcolonial literature by being the object of the gaze, becomes the subject who gazes. Toundi’s physical proximity to whites makes him discover their deepest secrets through witnessed adultery, but the colonizers want to “kill” this gaze that reflects their guilt and threatens their dominance. In the scene during which Toundi discovers Madame cheating, he thinks:

I quickly raised my eyes. They met Madame’s ones. I saw them shrinking. Then, they became wider as she witnessed a scary scene. I, instinctively, looked at my feet.<sup>121</sup> (My trans.)

In that scene, the gaze related vocabulary is very present: *eyes, looked at*. The main theme in this extract is the encounter of his eyes and Madame’s eyes. His eyes try to escape from Madame’s; her physical reaction is of someone just caught in a lie, or an extremely embarrassing situation. Her eyes narrow, reflecting anger and warning Toundi through her gaze that he is in danger after discovering Madame’s adultery.

Then, her threatening anger turns to fear, shown by her eyes becoming bigger. In this duel between Toundi’s gaze

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<sup>121</sup> “Dans l’espace d’un éclair, je relevais mes yeux. Ils rencontrèrent ceux de Madame. Je les vis devenir tout petits. Puis ils s’agrandirent comme si elle avait assisté à une scène d’épouvante. Instinctivement, je regardais mes pieds” (82).

and Madame's, there is also a struggle for domination. Toundi's eyes begin in an upraised position, but he ends by lowering his eyes. He feels guilty that his gaze sees what he is not supposed to see. Surprisingly, it is usually the person avoiding the gaze who is lying. In Toundi's case, since he is the reflection of Madame, the colonizer, his gaze becomes her gaze, he is the one who avoids the gaze instead. On the other hand, lowering his eyes clearly indicates his submission and guilt. Toundi represents Madame's bad conscious because he discovered the adultery, and, even more importantly, because his persistent, mute gaze constantly judged the adulterers. Here, the colonizer who is commonly present and voiced in postcolonial literature becomes the object of his own gaze.

The reversed-gaze phenomenon can also be observed in *La jalousie*, the husband is the object of his own gaze, which reflects his guilt: jealousy. Otherness and the gaze modify the self-perception of the character and deconstruct identity by making the viewer aware of who he is through the other. Regarding the relationship to his wife's gaze, there is none. The narrator only describes his wife's gaze as an empty gaze without expression "looking at emptiness" ("regardant le vide"). Above all, the husband's gaze is described through the window *jalousies* closed or left open by the wife. This means that she has the power of regulating her husband's gaze, vision and knowledge. She shows only what she wants to show, which considerably limits the husband's vision and therefore gives him a distorted reality. She closes then the two other windows. But she does not lower any *jalousies*" (119; my trans.).<sup>122</sup> "It would be easy to observe her through one of the doors, the one from the hallway or of the bathroom, but doors are made of wood, with no *jalousies* that allow to see through. As for the *jalousies* of the three windows, none of them allows any sight" (122; my trans.).<sup>123</sup> The deception comes, therefore, from his own gaze.

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<sup>122</sup> "Elle ferme ensuite les deux autres fenêtres. Mais elle ne baisse aucune des *jalousies*" (119).

<sup>123</sup> "Il serait facile de l'observer par l'une des deux portes, celle du couloir ou de la salle de bains, mais les portes sont en bois plein, sans système de *jalousies* qui laisse voir au travers. Quant aux *jalousies* des trois fenêtres, aucune d'elles ne permet plus maintenant de rien apercevoir" (122).

The gaze leads to the loss of control for the husband in *La jalousie* while, by contrast, in *Une vie de boy*, the gaze powerfully enhances Toundi's character and sets him free. Indeed, the gaze and the inability to see create a pathology of an over-controlling jealousy that the husband experiences in Robbe-Grillet's novel. The narrator feels threatened by darkness when he is unable to see. *La jalousie* can be read as a struggle between the forces of order and freedom. Indeed, the narrator feels threatened by the forces of order, which is the *ombre*- shade and shadow- when he is unable to watch that which reveals the power of the gaze. His eyes are represented by the window *jalousies*: "The *jalousies* are well-closed, they let only passing through thin lines of light" (105; my trans.).<sup>124</sup> The narrator is obsessed by having the power that he does not have. Freedom is represented by light and clarity. Only his precise sight makes his descriptions specific and detailed.

His wife, Franck, and the indigenous servants all destroy this power, a shade, a black stain. This is exemplified with the crushed centipede that appears many times in the novel. It is a metaphor of male power's inferiority due to the adultery's mystery. Indeed, the insect forms a question mark on the wall. The episode that follows the crushed centipede always demonstrates the wife breathing and squeezing a knife representing the phallus or squeezing a white tablecloth that could represent innocence. The crushed centipede represents the sexual act, surprisingly witnessed by the boy in *La jalousie* like in *Une vie de boy*.

The loss of control becomes intense when Franck and A... go away for hours, leaving the husband troubled by not being able to see: "The darkness of the night does not allow any sort of freshness that seems lasting for ever" (75; my trans.).<sup>125</sup> The fact that the narrator is not visible and not heard by the reader makes him also powerless. The night, which can be interpreted by the color of indigenous servants, is his biggest enemy. He cannot see during the night, and that makes him vulnerable. The narrator is fueled by his

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<sup>124</sup> "Les jalousies sont bien closes, ils ne filtrent encore les lames que de maigres traces de lumière" (105).

<sup>125</sup> "C'est la nuit noire figée, n'apportant pas la moindre impression de fraîcheur qui semble durer depuis toujours" (75).

gaze, and searches for an eventual deception, which turns out to be a truth. Without this vision, he is impaired because he is unable to detect his wife's cheating. One can comprehend better the origins of this jealousy, which, lies in the fact that he is not able to see, and only sees shadows without possessing knowledge. The narrator cannot observe and the invasion of the darkness/black symbolizes the ultimate fear of the colonizer: the rising domination and power of the colonized.

In *Une vie de boy*, knowledge of the infidelity gives Toundi power: he can control the situation through his gaze because he acquires knowledge. He reverses the colonial balance of power through his gaze. Seeing Madame losing her power allows Toundi to retrieve his own power, a prospect that constitutes the biggest fear of the colonizer. Indeed, she does not acknowledge Toundi's gaze. Considering him as an object, she refuses to be judged by him. This knowledge through the gaze is a power but also a freedom or deliverance: when he sees his master uncircumcised, "This discovery relieved me. This killed something inside me. (45; My trans.).<sup>126</sup> The gaze looks back at us. Here, the gaze highlights an important deviance: voyeurism. The voyeuristic ritual gives characters a sense of control. Freud claims the pleasure of looking becomes a perversion. He theorizes voyeurism as being associated with sadomasochism and exhibitionism: the voyeur wants to be seen looking. Toundi's gaze, in that scene, serves as a relief of guilt and ends the deception of domination.

The gaze always relies upon control and deception. By appropriating the other as image, the narrator-husband and Toundi make the image an object of pleasure, while remaining uninvolved in the other's intimacy. The husband is not looking for an exchange but gains pleasure by seizing the other's image against his/her will. His desire makes him inferior. His goal is to look at A... but most of all to dismember her body. The voyeur watches what is forbidden in order to destroy the physical integrity of the person by fragmenting his wife's body. This helps him to gain power back. The husband, through his voyeurism, reflects another

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<sup>126</sup> "Cette découverte m'a beaucoup soulagé. Cela a tué quelque chose en moi" (45).



deviance, which is fetishism. He mentions a hair, a leg, or items that belong to her. The perverse gaze eroticizes regular scenes to reach a psychological orgasm when he describes her sitting by the table looking at her, brushing her hair, etc. All these intimate gestures, where no one can see her, except the husband, increase his desire. She is only mentioned through her position “penchée, s’incline, assise, debout, allongée” (“bent, sat, stood up, laid down”; my trans.). She is fragmented through the window jealousies, “découpées en lamelles horizontales” (26) (“cut in horizontal slides”). “Son (A...) profil se découpe avec netteté.” (95) (“Her profile is cut with precision”; my trans.). The jealousies also reveal parts of her body, which the voyeur can fantasize about. Her body and especially her legs and arms catch his attention: “une jambe étendue, l’autre fléchie, croisée, un bras qui s’écarte, se replie et l’autre étendu” (95) (“a stretched leg, the other one bent, an arm that spreads”; my trans.) which reminds him of a sexual intercourse. Watching her has an effect on the narrator that is illustrated by A...’s posture that could be the metaphoric representation of the narrator’s erection: “A... est allongée, fléchie, étendue.”

The repetition of her position illustrates an obsession-perversion and allows the voyeur to understand the desired object in a different way through the eroticization of a regular scene. Moreover, her position also refers to a sexual intercourse. When she disappears, the voyeur cannot achieve his pleasure of watching her (or them?) anymore. He needs to see her to exist and his voyeur position helps him to survive. Her escape increases his desire. In the novel, voyeurism relies on the act of seeing repeatedly. Because the gaze makes this scene sexual and because the narrator and A...’s relation is an analogy of the dominant-dominated balance of power, Robbe-Grillet seems to describe the colonizer as deviant.

The pleasure of looking takes a different form in *Une vie de boy*. Toundi shows this pleasure of looking through *his* object of pleasure when he sees Madame for the first time: “Gosh, she is so beautiful! I was the first to see her . . . I admired her whites teeth” (73; my trans.).<sup>127</sup> As in *La*

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<sup>127</sup> “Mon dieu, qu’elle est belle! J’ai été le premier à la voir . . . J’admirais ses dents blanches” (73).

*jalousie*, the body of the other is also dismembered and reveals fetishism as well: “dents, taille de fourmi, cheveux ébène, yeux d’antilope, pantalon noir, chapeau de paille” (“teeth, tiny waist, dark hair, deer’s eyes, black pants, straw hat” [73; my trans.]). Fragments come from a reflection of the other that is fragmented. The husband enjoys each segment of his wife’s body only by dismantling it.

Unlike the narrator of *La Jalousie*, who is careful of not being seen, Toundi needs it: “I was in the other side facing her. She forgot that I was there. While I am writing those words, I feel even more sad” (65; my trans.).<sup>128</sup> With no gaze upon him, he cannot exist. He indeed only exists when she notices his disturbing presence. It seems to be pleasurable for the viewer to see what is forbidden to look at. He hides after he first discovers Madame’s affair: “I, furtively, came back to look through the living room window where the light came from. Mr Moreau kissed Madame on her mouth” (76; my trans.).<sup>129</sup> The scene echoes the one describing A’s... posture in *La jalousie*.

She didn’t close the door. She was sleeping with her open mouth, an arm hanging outside the bed and her legs were crossed. A fly was sucking her cheek. She had pants on and had her corset open, making visible her abundant breast under her pink bra (125).

When she caught Toundi watching her, “She buttoned up her bodice while looking at me with a suppressed anger” (73; my trans.).<sup>130</sup>

Violence, through the gaze, acts as both fantasy and trauma. According to David Marriott, a critical race theorist, “the violated body of the black men comes to be used as a defense against the anxiety, or hatred, that body appears to generate” (12). Here, the hatred is due to Madame’s guilt and her loss of power as a result of Toundi’s gaze. It will eventually cost him his life. Marriott sees voyeurism as a way of fixing the appearance and identity of the other through the

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<sup>128</sup> “J’étais de l’autre côté du carré en face d’elle. Elle avait oublié ma présence. En écrivant ces mots, je me sens encore plus malheureux” (65).

<sup>129</sup> “Je revins furtivement regarder par la fente de la fenêtre du salon d’où filtrait la lumière. M. Moreau embrassait Madame sur la bouche” (76).

<sup>130</sup> “Elle boutonnait son corsage tout en me regardant avec une colère méprisante contenue” (73).

gaze. Toundi's eyes observe the gap between two societies who cannot coexist and who are blinded by their stereotypes of the "Other." Toundi knows too much about Madame's affair, this knowledge makes Toundi as an "élément dangereux" (184) to the colonizer. This leads for Toundi to be accused of robbery's complicity. Toundi was isolated in a camp where he was tortured. After serious injuries, he decided to escape. Toundi here is the one who can describe the other in order to fix his understanding. His fascination with white people diminishes when he discovers their truth: lies and adultery are a metaphor for the hypocrisy of the *mission civilisatrice*.

The indigenous servants in *La Jalousie* are present in the background and they symbolize a *mise en abyme*, or a gaze within a gaze, as if Toundi were one of them, observing Madame A...s infidelity along with the husband-commandant, making these two novels intertwined in such a way that *La Jalousie* could be Toundi's diary. These two novels, so different at first glance—here again, a misleading gaze—show how similar they are in their display of the reversed gaze, creating a trichotomy and showing how the colonized individual is able to look while the colonizer is not able to do so, prevented by *jalousies*, his guilt and his loss of power. They also show how the act of looking is related to the act of knowing and owning the object of desire. The gaze loses its neutrality and finally reveals untold truths through a deviant voyeurism related to other sexual deviances: fetishism for Toundi and the husband, exhibitionism for Toundi, and sadomasochism for both who undergo mental and physical pain.

For both characters, the sight of adultery leads to their destruction: the gaze causes the mutual destruction of the object looked at, as well as the destruction of the subject voyeur. If we endorse the mirror stage advocated by Lacan, the viewer does not own the gaze; it becomes the property of the other. By closely examining how the gaze functions, this project sheds new light on the acknowledged power of voyeurism that confirms Sartre's view that *L'enfer c'est les autres* "Hell is other people" whereby colonizers could not bear this judgmental gaze and create their own hell through their own gaze. Other peoples' gaze, also, reveals untold

truth, deceptions and lies that make the gaze a great eyewitness. As Sartre states at the end of his play *Huis clos*:

All those eyes intent on me. Devouring me. What? Only two of you? I thought there were more; many more. So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the "burning marl." Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot poker. Hell is other people!<sup>131</sup> (93)

The revealing gaze can be everyone's worst enemy and leads to self-destruction. Even one look can destroy a person and can shed dangerous light on a person's deepest and hidden secrets. The gaze is hell because consciousness is never solitary. Consciousness rises when it is facing another individual. The judgment of the other leads to a self-judgment. Thus, being discovered secretly gazing by someone else leads to a shaming of the self before others. This has been seen in Toundi's case and in the husband's fear of being caught watching. The look of the other objectifies. Then, the person watched has to observe back the other, to objectify at his turn in order to reach liberation: that is what the jealous husband and Toundi both do throughout the novel. Since they are objectified, they both objectify the cheating wife by naming them A... and Madame.

Beyond the gaze, the silence of Toundi and the husband makes the gaze even more powerful for the individual. Toundi gives us this insight: "I see because I have my eyes. The eye goes beyond and faster than the mouth, nothing stops the gaze in its journey" (75; my trans.).<sup>132</sup> The gaze indeed has no limits and constructs an individual's history and History. Thanks to this knowledge, the colonizer gains power by presenting History without the colonized's

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<sup>131</sup> "Tous ces regards qui me mangent ... Ha, vous n'êtes que deux ? Je vous croyais beaucoup plus nombreuses. Alors, c'est ça l'enfer. Je n'aurais jamais cru ... Vous vous rappelez : le soufre, le bûcher, le gril . . . Ah ! Quelle plaisanterie. Pas de besoin de gril : l'enfer c'est les autres." Translation in full Sartre's text. [https://archive.org/stream/NoExit/NoExit\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/NoExit/NoExit_djvu.txt)

<sup>132</sup> "Si je vois, c'est parce que j'ai des yeux. L'œil va plus loin et plus vite que la bouche, rien ne l'arrête dans son voyage" (75).

recount. The narrator's jealous gaze in Robbe-Grillet provides a potential biased truth while the "long observation of Toundi's *oeil du sorcier* (the witch's eye) reveals the reality. By immersing readers in a character's innermost thoughts, they are forced to view events through a gaze that becomes their own in the quest for truth. Thus, the gaze ironically becomes a tool for discovering truth, even in the context of deceptive circumstances.

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## **Réalité et transculturalité dans *La Pharaone* de Hédi Bouraoui**

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### **Introduction**

Le transculturel est un mode de construction et de transmission de la pensée plurielle et transitive. En contact avec la réalité, il modifie le “donné de la réceptivité” (Vieillard-Baron 348) qui est attachée à cette dernière, en faveur d’une logique qui dépasse les binarismes.<sup>133</sup> L’idée de réceptacle, ouvert à des possibilités multiples, entraîne une confusion, dans le sens de brouillage des catégories de conceptualisation régies par l’habitude, réglées par l’intuition et la sensation. Considérée ainsi, la réalité devient un projet de dépassement où les contraires ne sont plus opposés, mais associés pour une vision complémentaire du monde (Verthuy 52).

À propos de *La Pharaone*, roman de Hédi Bouraoui, l’idée de réalité transculturelle désigne la volonté de vivre ensemble. La question de l’autre et du même, est alignée à l’acceptation de la différence. Même le temps et l’espace sont considérés dans des ouvertures qui développent les réflexes d’adaptation à l’environnement tout en préservant les intérêts personnels propres à chacun.

Au contact du transculturel, il n’existe pas de réalité unique et répétitive, parce que le passage au-delà des fixités et des frontières entraîne une mobilité qui ne s’arrête pas aux

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<sup>133</sup>Selon la même source, la conceptualisation en sciences philosophiques oppose réel et idéal, réel et formel, réel et imaginaire, etc. (347).

surfaces. La dynamique propulse vers les profondeurs. En considérant les changements de situations et d'états, les profils des personnages de *La Pharaone* se superposent les uns aux autres pour former cette épaisseur psychologique et humaine nécessaire aux formes de dépassement. Et c'est en épousant ce mode de représentation, synthétique et global, qu'il devient possible de comprendre les combinaisons d'ordre intellectuel et affectif favorables à la gestion des émotions et à la résolution des difficultés.

L'imagination synthétique est un composé de plusieurs réalités qui se rejoignent. Elle propose des ouvertures diégétiques de nature transculturelle. Les frontières avec l'imagination débordent les récits de rêves et de mythes pharaoniques. Ce débordement est à l'origine d'un processus d'hybridation où la réalité est dotée de référents multiples. Dans *La Pharaone*, les lieux autant que les personnages sont installés dans des prolongements temporels et spatiaux propres à la pensée universelle. Ils sont rendus à une transtextualité qui s'intéresse au récit des origines de l'humanité.

En définitive, étudier les connexions de la réalité et de la pensée transculturelle revient à apporter des réponses à la question fondamentale de l'universalité du savoir, selon laquelle la reconnaissance de "la diversité des sociétés humaines" est intimement liée à "une échelle de valeurs qui soit unique et fiable" (Todorov 17). À l'intérieur d'un tel contexte, il conviendrait plutôt de discuter d'une réalité éclatée, sensible à l'imposture des continuités. L'esprit fragmentaire qui préside à l'éclatement produit et maintient l'équilibre de la réalité et des contenus d'une pensée imaginative pour qui la perception, la conception et l'invention composent des centres de référence (Sartre 22).

Dans la présente étude, il faudra préciser qu'il s'agit moins de proposer un modèle de lecture qui dépisterait les représentations du réel dans le texte romanesque. Notre objectif est d'étudier les formes de réalités que présente *La Pharaone* au contact du transculturel. Il s'agit donc de déterminer leurs configurations et d'interpréter leur fonctionnement selon un mode de représentation interne, fidèle aux principes de la transculturalité.

## **Modulations de la réalité au contact du transculturel**

Barka Bousiris est en voyage en Égypte pour animer des séminaires à l'université du Caire. Ce récit fonctionne en noyau autour duquel gravite l'histoire d'Ayman, un Copte<sup>134</sup> qui travaille à bord d'un bateau de croisière et que le narrateur/globe-trotter rencontre lors d'une randonnée de touriste. La conversion d'Ayman est incontournable pour la réalisation du projet de mariage avec Imane, une jeune fille animée par de fortes convictions religieuses musulmanes. Le couple est décidé à surmonter la résistance que leur opposent aussi bien l'entourage que les idées de clan. Le cheminement du couple en cours de constitution est sinueux et les obstacles sont multiples à l'intérieur d'un environnement où les destins sont arrêtés par les coalitions.

Jusque-là, les éléments de la narration présentent un cadre homogène qui répond à la répartition logique des rôles. D'un côté, un couple fragile, ciblé par les assauts de l'entourage, qui se présente en victimes d'une structure sociale et imaginaire bien déterminée. De l'autre côté, la résistance aux mouvements de changement, soutenue par la famille d'Imane et la tradition entre autres. Une telle configuration présente une réalité alimentée d'un parti-pris et de son opposé. En considérant les écarts entre la volonté individuelle et le pouvoir de la norme qui président à cette configuration, la structure narrative transcende l'événement brut pour produire un sens plus profond qui prend en compte l'organisation de la société égyptienne dans sa diversité. Elle s'intéresse également aux structures mentales de ses citoyens. La réalité se trouve ainsi doublement écartelée pour pouvoir traiter les problèmes de cohabitation des minorités et des majorités à l'intérieur d'un pays qui s'accroche à ses origines archéologiques. En enrobant l'événement de départ de couches interprétatives, qui soulèvent de grandes thématiques propres au transculturel, la réalité est présentée dans des accompagnements sans lesquels le récit perdrait de sa qualité première. Il ne serait qu'une suite de contingences. L'enchaînement logique initial

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<sup>134</sup> Chrétien d'Égypte.



craquerait sous des positions immotivées, qui souffrent de platitudes.

La résistance à la banalité événementielle fait que les personnages autant que les faits ne soient plus considérés dans une linéarité à sens unique. Ils sont propulsés dans des parcours produits de l'instant et qui changent d'un moment à un autre. L'effet d'instantanéité offre la possibilité d'ajustement continu des perspectives pour trouver des solutions aux situations problématiques. Afin d'explicitier ce propos, il faudra observer de plus près le parcours d'Ayman et d'Imane orienté par la résolution d'aller jusqu'au bout de leur rêve et contracter une union multiconfessionnelle. Cette décision courageuse oppose une subjectivité unique à la norme (Beggar 2). Mais la réalité dont il s'agit ici est alimentée de positions simultanées, qui ne sont en aucun cas exclusives. Elle entraîne un ajustement continu grâce à des attitudes flexibles. Ayman et Imane persistent à cultiver leurs convictions individuelles et intimes tout en continuant à se ressourcer dans la proximité avec leurs familles et leurs communautés respectives. Le comportement inclusif adopté ici permet de contourner les conflits de "la réalité collective" et de "la réalité individuelle" (Roussel 2).

À la suite de ces positions réconciliatrices et fondamentalement transculturelles, l'équilibre entre l'objet affectif et le besoin de l'appartenance est négocié en permanence. Il accompagne une évolution pour qui l'enjeu de l'altérité est capital. Dans une telle entreprise, vivre et exister revient à relever le défi de l'autre. Cela correspond à la résolution de s'allier en partie aux symboles qui composent l'appartenance, ceux créés et installés par l'esprit communautaire des Coptes d'Égypte d'une part, et des musulmans de l'autre. L'obligation de se fondre dans le paysage unifiant de l'ipséité est écartée en faveur d'une attitude réconciliatrice, dont l'aboutissement est le dépassement des tensions de nature culturelle.

La concentration de la narration autour d'une réalité négociée, qui s'adapte aux besoins personnels en matière d'identification, tout en admettant les différences inhérentes à tout un chacun, est une version positive de l'esprit transculturel. La volonté d'aller au-delà des praxis culturelles, adoptées par la société traditionnelle, se concrétise dans nombre de résolutions, parmi lesquelles

l'acceptation de l'autre dans sa différence et le respect de la diversité. L'assimilation de ces attitudes se produit dans la conscience des origines (*Transpoétique* 9).

La réconciliation préserve la "consistance de l'être du soi" qui, selon l'expression de Ricœur, revient primordialement à la capacité de réappropriation de son identité et de son espace (351 et *infra*). Dans le cas du couple Ayman et Imane, la formule du parachèvement de l'être réel est un condensé de la récupération de l'espace de l'altérité sans perdre celui de la même. C'est ce qui est affirmé dans l'un des passages auguraux du roman où la remontée vers les origines prend l'aspect d'un rappel de la mémoire des lieux, accompagné d'un aperçu de l'étymologie des mots:

Égyptien pur sang, il [Ayman] l'est sans déchiffrer les incertitudes, car son nom remonte à la racine même de l'origine du mot 'Copti', forme arabisée qui désigne à la fois l'habitant et le pays: Copti qui louvoie à même ce sol cinq fois millénaire, histoire jetée par-dessus bord dans le tohu-bohu des vivants qui fourmillent leur destin cascasant, le Nil (*La Pharaone* 15).

Dans les plis de la collectivité et à la surface de l'individualité, la réalité est translucide. Elle glisse par-delà les origines historiques, étymologiques et émotionnelles, pour composer une identité fragmentaire (*Transpoétique* 68). Celle-ci correspond à des entités imaginées ou réelles qu'il faudra emmagasiner et intégrer au quotidien. L'autre, qui "appartient à la constitution intime . . . [du] sens [du même]" (Ricœur 380), est l'une de ces entités. Il est infiltré par les brisures.

Pour vérifier la nature de ces brisures et leur composition narrative, il faudra considérer le cadre diégétique où évoluent les personnages (Genette 238). Au moment où la volonté de combler une passion naissante et difficilement acceptée semble préoccupante, Ayman consomme une relation de trait sexuel avec Margaret, une touriste canadienne en manque de dépaysement et de distractions (*La Pharaone* 59). L'aventure est une tache sombre qui avilit le portrait-modèle installé à forte raison depuis le départ. Mais en fait, l'acte inexplicable, qui prête même à la confusion, appartient à la configuration de la

brisure, identifiée dans le revirement introduit dans l'événement central. L'intention du lecteur, focalisée au départ sur Imane, est réorientée vers Margaret qui surgit pour favoriser l'interchangeabilité des rôles dans la concurrence. Admettre ces partenaires, c'est affirmer que les ressources du plaisir répondent à la logique de la combinaison.

La configuration combinatoire du désir revient à associer le "désir en attente," qui caractérise le rapport à la première femme, et le "désir assouvi," relatif à la deuxième. Cette idée est synthétisée par le langage psychanalytique dans la formule suivant laquelle le fantasme est "l'écriture du non-rapport sexuel" (Bousseyrroux 156). La vision du couple total, éternel et infatigable est dès lors dépassée en faveur du relativisme sentimental. Au-delà des choix ouverts sur le hasard des rencontres, la seule dualité préservée, d'ailleurs pour demeurer dans l'esprit de la combinaison, est bien celle de l'esprit-corps. Les figures représentatives du dualisme sont alignées des deux côtés: Imane, qui impose une relation amoureuse disciplinée de chasteté, et Margaret, avec qui l'amour est un consommable instantané. Les deux femmes entourent l'objet de leur passion passagère ou durable, selon le cas, pour participer à une réalité synthétique, qui rejoint le passage par l'inconnu et l'implication dans l'imprévisible.

Du fragment à la combinaison, en passant par le relativisme, l'univers romanesque traverse des vérités mobiles, présentant des dimensions multiples. C'est là une qualité qui relève de l'essence du transculturel. En effet, dans la perspective du transculturel, la réalité est installée non seulement à partir du mouvement, à l'intérieur et au-delà des espaces assignés primitivement aux situations diégétiques, mais également à la suite de la déconstruction des continuités. Dès lors se pose le problème de la ligne constante à l'intérieur de laquelle il faudra établir des cassures. Il en résulte des histoires qui s'insèrent favorablement dans une réalité discontinue. Pour maintenir la discontinuité dans l'harmonie, les personnages sont précipités dans un tourbillon d'événements qui font oublier leurs engagements initiaux. La réaction hostile du frère à l'encontre du futur beau-frère, considéré en étranger, est tempérée par la suite. De même, la fuite d'Imane est relayée par la réintégration du giron familial. La folie du père est

traitée comme un cas qui précède et prépare la situation irrésolue de son meurtre/suicide, pour ne citer que ces quelques cas.

### **Autres modulations de la réalité**

Nous l'avons bien compris: la réalité romanesque de *La Pharaone* présente des aspects multiples, voire controversés, qui durent pour reprendre ailleurs, sous des horizons nouveaux et avec des conditions revisitées. Pour suivre ce mouvement intense et incessant, l'événement est considéré à partir d'un ensemble de dimensions qui l'entourent du haut et du bas, de l'avant et de l'arrière. Prises dans un étau temporel et spatial, les occurrences sont rondes de ce contour. C'est exactement l'effet produit par la Pharaone, qui prête son nom au roman. Elle change de lieu et de temps pour remonter en amont, et s'identifier à Hatchepsout, la reine; puis elle redescend, en aval, à la rencontre de son sosie actuel, Imane. Ce voyage, de la source vers l'affluent et vice versa, reprend métaphoriquement la coulée du Nil, considérée dans ses directions opposées. La trame narrative, propulsée par un mouvement de navette, déborde l'unité fixée uniquement par l'opposition des actants principaux. L'expression de "l'éternel retour" (*La Pharaone* 177) est utilisée pour rendre et expliquer subtilement cette dynamique qui rappelle la résurrection du Phénix qui renaît de ses cendres.

Pour une idée plus concrète de ce mouvement, considérons le déplacement du Caire à Assouan, un voyage inscrit au départ dans un programme touristique. Barka Bousiris quitte les sentiers battus des circuits touristiques. Son expérience de l'ailleurs est gonflée de réalités, dont la substance est plurielle, et qui se joignent toutes pour produire une conscience globale. La globalité, dans ce cas d'étude, est le produit de plusieurs visions qui entourent le fait. Le contact humain avec les Nubiens, vendeurs de bibelots, l'aperçu historique et technique à propos du barrage d'Assouan, ou encore la description de l'obélisque (174-175) sont à considérer en affluents de la même histoire, celle qui reprend les gloires de la reine pharaonique. Grâce à ce traitement, où le temps pharaonique est rendu à son éternité, le lecteur a l'impression d'assister à la genèse de

l'histoire, dans la coexistence de plusieurs moments ramenés vers le présent.

À l'intérieur d'un espace où les équilibres sont fragiles, l'effet de l'immédiateté est soutenu par une tension dramatique, provoquée en permanence, pour apporter des réponses au doute. Par exemple, lorsque Francine Castel, directrice de l'institut français du Caire, renoue avec son vieil ami, Barka Bousiris, les retrouvailles sont brimées par un dialogue qui élucide le malentendu. L'ancien ami oppose le refus aux attentes de Francine. Il préfère sa liberté:

-Pourquoi ne m'as-tu pas suivi ?

-Je voudrais encore scribe-voyager libre et dans la joie.

-C'est pourtant le vaisseau des sources que je t'ai proposé ?

-Non, il est toujours ancré à l'incertitude. (87)

La réalité, représentée ainsi, ne constitue-t-elle pas finalement une leçon de gestion des "charges émotionnelles et relationnelles" (*Transpoétique* 67)? La réponse est affirmative du moment que l'imagination romanesque reprend la complexité des rapports humains dans l'objectif de les adapter à la volonté du sujet. L'homme allergique aux actions de l'enracinement est préoccupé par sa liberté fondamentale. Entendue comme le "pouvoir de la volonté" (Goglin 3), cette forme de liberté nécessite une adaptation renouvelée à l'espace, aux circonstances et aux gens. Et c'est ce qui compose la nature essentielle des nomades de la vie. En effet, dans la perspective du transculturel, le nomadisme est une attitude réfléchie, assumée au quotidien. Le concept de "nomaditude" explique l'allure soutenue du mouvement à travers l'expression "mobilité de l'élan vital" (*Transpoétique* 6). Dans *La Pharaone*, le dynamisme s'insinue dans l'intimité des rapports interpersonnels pour les moduler en conformité avec les principes de l'universel.

Considérée comme la capacité de s'entendre au-delà des spécificités personnelles, "la logique universelle" (Beziau 1944) est à expliquer essentiellement par l'unification nécessaire des modes de pensée. Ce crédo est vécu à une échelle locale, lorsque les scènes de bon accueil se transforment en des réceptacles de dialogues. Barca Bousiris

est invité chez les parents d’Imane. L’interaction est un bon exemple de la ” vivance transculturelle ” (*Transpoétique* 60) quand elle est adoptée pour le besoin de l’universalité:

La maison prend un air de fête. Les bibelots sont dépoussiérés, les quelques tableaux de calligraphie arabe—souvent des citations du Coran—sont réajustés pour ne pas faire tanguer les esprits. Je remarque, dans la salle de séjour, cette ouverture coranique: “*Bismi-Allah Er-Rahman Er-Rahîm*” et, sur une commode, en plein centre d’un miroir, le mot: “WELCOME.” Le mariage du profane et du religieux. (*La Pharaone* 39)

Dans une première étape, l’intérêt de l’intercommunauté prend du regain, à la suite de la reconnaissance de la formule liturgique de “*Bismi-Allah Er-Rahman Er-Rahîm.*” Pour une famille égyptienne moyenne, cette reconnaissance prend en vitesse le sens du mot international “welcome”.

Dans le même ordre d’idée, la formule “exogamique” raffermi l’idée de l’universel à travers les alliances contractées avec l’étranger. Béchir, le frère d’Imane, est convaincu de son pouvoir séducteur. Il prend pour cible Betty, venue accompagner sa mère, Margaret, dans ses errances touristiques. Et c’est dans le musée du Caire qu’il lui propose le mariage, une proposition à laquelle elle adhère volontairement (120).

Nous venons de le constater; les lieux changent d’un espace clos, relatif à l’intérieur du foyer familial, à un espace public, plus ouvert, identifié dans le musée. Qu’il soit adapté aux fermetures ou aux ouvertures, le multidimensionnel, évoqué au début de ce chapitre, est allergique aux lois de l’absolu. Il est le produit de la coalition réalité / transculturalité, pour qui l’être a à gagner en optant pour l’individualité transgrégatoire.

### **Synchrétismes de la réalité, du mythe et du rêve**

Soumettre les représentations de la réalité au modèle transculturel revient à traiter celles-ci dans l’horizontalité, c’est-à-dire en fonction d’une lecture qui considère les

combinaisons synchroniques qui les organisent et qui visent principalement à mettre les personnages à l'épreuve de leur milieu, de les confronter à leurs ambitions et attentes. Le modèle transculturel est à étudier également dans la verticalité, la géométrie qui prend en compte les constructions narratives où les écarts avec l'imagination entrent en friction avec la réalité.

*La Pharaone* est un texte de la transitivity fictionnelle. Les histoires sont propulsées au-delà de leurs frontières logiques et spatiales. Dans une telle conception, nul besoin de maintenir la réalité dans les limites du réel. Cette forme de "réalité augmentée" (Quéau 39) correspond à la superposition de deux, voire plusieurs dimensions de représentation. Le syncrétisme fusionne l'élément capital de la narration et ses avatars, un ensemble de récits adjacents dont le rôle est essentiellement de combler les vides, de rendre les dimensions sans lesquelles l'imaginaire sera démuné de ses formes nécessaires. Cela se voit dans les récits où l'avant de la scène est confondu avec son arrière-plan comme lorsque le personnage est apprêté d'un profil qui sied au "sujet éclaté et pluriel" défendu par les valeurs du transculturel (*Transpoétique* 68).

C'est le cas lorsqu'Imane, lors d'une promenade en felouque, tombe dans l'eau. Elle surgit des flots du Nil avec une nouvelle identité, à l'intérieur de laquelle la réalité réelle est superposée à la réalité fictionnelle. La vision syncrétique est produite par le regard de Barka Bousiris qui s'étonne: "Ne vois-je pas surgir, en face de moi, la naïade en fleurs, la statuaire de Hatchepsout, en granit noir, trouvée à Thèbes, mais aujourd'hui propriété du Musée de Rome?" (*La Pharaone* 30). Ici, la métaphore de la nymphe survient à une confusion optique recherchée dans l'objectif de fragiliser les frontières avec l'imagination. Comme à la suite d'un rêve qui fusionne avec la réalité, le personnage est subtilisé à l'actualité narrative, celle accrochée aux détails d'un événement anecdotique, pour passer vers une scène romanesque qui accepte les ouvertures transtextuelles. Plus que de les accepter, les renvois transtextuels, introduits par la référence à la représentation statuaire de la reine pharaonique, sont intégrés au profil pour former une seule épaisseur. Le personnage Imane est identifié par un regard pluridimensionnel, qui concentre l'effet immédiat, celui

orienté par le présent de la narration, tout en le transplantant dans l'imaginaire pharaonique. La "plongée dans l'histoire et dans le réel" (30) vise à reproduire l'essence de la rébellion, dans sa version féminine, au-delà des ancrages dans des périodes historiques spécifiques et en dépit des degrés d'implication dans la fiction.

Principe du transculturel, l'hybridation culturelle cherche à ébranler, voire supprimer les frontières entre les cultures. Suivant une logique identique, le syncrétisme textuel installe des espaces médians à l'intérieur desquels il est toujours possible d'harmoniser les niveaux de narration. C'est le cas lorsqu'il s'agit de créer des correspondances narratives où fait divers et mythe peuvent cohabiter, s'allier, s'alimenter mutuellement. Si l'histoire de la femme qui vient de tuer son mari, découpé ensuite en petits morceaux puis jeté dans le Nil, occupe le niveau immédiat de la narration, le mythe égyptien d'Osiris ressurgit pour opérer une disjonction avec la banalité anecdotique d'une action criminelle. La biographie royale est résumée dans ce qui ressemble à un cours d'histoire abrégé:

Si j'ai entendu cette boucherie macabre racontée par plusieurs bouches avides de partager et propager les morceaux de succulence et de rêverie morbides, mais narratives, personne n'a songé à faire le lien avec le mythe égyptien célèbre d'Osiris, roi de la terre, bénéfique et généreux, jalouxé par son frère Seth le mauvais, symbole de la stérilité foncière des déserts. Envieux et furieux, Seth découpa le corps de son frère en quatorze morceaux qu'il éparpilla dans les sillons de la terre d'Égypte, comme des graines à germer après les labours. (*La Pharaone* 33)

Le référent de la réalité est consolidé par le détail. Il est soutenu par le lien avec le présent de la narration. Qu'en est-il du référent mythologique dont la substance est un composé de l'imagination et de l'idéalisation de la réalité? Le récit qui s'occupe de produire et de conserver les symboles où l'humanité puise ses modèles les plus récurrents trouve une ressource dans les voix narratives lorsque celles-ci accompagnent la remontée vers la source de l'humanité.



En effet, les voix narratives alternent à la suite des rêves de Barka Bousiris et des passages au discours direct. Ces récits, identifiés visuellement par un script italique, se succèdent, installant des brèches à l'intérieur de la continuité du récit-noyau. Une série de métamorphoses où le dieu Soleil prend la parole par exemple (*La Pharaone* 63), ou encore le rêve érotique qui dresse un visage de femme dépourvu de nez, à l'image du Sphinx de Hatchepsout amputé du sien (73), offrent la possibilité de dépassement des univers ancrés dans le réalisme brut. En fait, ces formes de substitution du réel romanesque, sont implantées dans le récit pour reproduire des alternatives au contenu mythologique. Elles prouvent que nous sommes en présence d'un phénomène mimétique fonctionnel.

Pour suivre les orientations de ce phénomène, il faudra rappeler qu'un récit identifié dans une réalité dépourvue d'arrière-plans, qui reconnaît le présent comme temporalité unique (Auerbach 13), présente un horizon d'imagination réduit. À ce titre, les ouvertures sur le mythe et sur les formes de substitution qu'il présente sont inscrites dans un processus de réappropriation des valeurs qui font l'humanité. La voix du dieu Soleil est celle d'un appel pour le regain de "la dignité démocratique" (*La Pharaone* 63), une attitude absente de l'âme égyptienne aujourd'hui. De même, l'énigme du nez du Sphinx est le premier pas vers une quête dans les vestiges d'une archéologie dont les objets rares sont pillés au quotidien. Ces positions, dont l'essence est une attitude transculturelle, défendent les crédos d'un monde pour qui la réalité fictive est une représentation améliorée de la réalité réelle.

## Conclusion

Si le transculturel alimente des positions et des attitudes où la fixité autant que le binarisme réducteurs sont exclus, il en est de même pour les représentations de la réalité dans *La Pharaone* de Hédi Bouraoui. Tel que nous avons pu le constater, il n'y aurait pas une réalité plate, fragile, figée par des référents qui la renvoient immédiatement et automatiquement au réel. Deux grands éléments sont concernés par cette ouverture. L'espace et le temps. Leur unité supposée est maniée de manière à offrir à l'imagination

une étendue dépourvue de frontières. Dans l'illimité spatiotemporel, les personnages sont libres. Ils sont fidèles à leurs envies affectives sans pour autant courir le risque de l'exclusion. Ils sont préservés de l'abomination.

Explorer les univers que présentent les interactions de la réalité et de la transculturalité c'est pousser la réflexion autour de concepts critiques habituels pour les impliquer dans une vision novatrice. Nous voulons par cela chercher l'effet de la pensée transculturelle, un effet cerné essentiellement à travers les conceptions majeures de la nomaditude et de la multiplicité, de les interpréter par la suite au reflet des continuités homogènes que présente le traitement romanesque de la réalité. C'est en osant une telle manœuvre qu'il a été possible non seulement d'aligner réalité, mythologie et récits de rêve, mais également d'inviter à penser une méthode de lecture qui pourrait servir à d'autres textes de Bouraoui.

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**PART FIVE**

**ALTERNATIVE ARTS FOR ALTERNATIVE  
TRUTHS**

## **Alternative Realities in the Arts or the Impossible Proof of Aesthetic Perception**

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### **Introduction: The Need of a New Research Paradigm**

The current research paradigms of aesthetics are actively renewing themselves: each new artwork studied requires the invention of a method derived from its own subtle mechanism. The unique creative process and its outcomes can be captured only by full immersion in their singular aura. Thus new questions arise, especially when researchers are confronted with multicultural art sources, in order to stir the tradition of Western aesthetics. On the one hand, there are attempts to apply cognitive and scientific tools to the field of art research. The interdisciplinary Labex<sup>135</sup> projects multiply in France, with a series of encounters, such as Cognitive Futures in Arts and Humanities, mixing different kinds of expertise, trying to bring a fruitful dialogue in Europe; on the other hand, the post-qualitative research novelties work with new kinds of aesthetic data, difficult or even impossible to describe so far, blossoming in laboratories such as SenseLab, a laboratory for thought in motion founded in France in 2004 by the Canadian philosopher Erin Manning.

Western aesthetics has a long history of evolution dating back to its theoretical foundations: the concept of beauty, inspired by the ancient Greek legacy of perfect

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<sup>135</sup> Labex stands for Laboratories of Excellence.

symmetrical (or very slightly asymmetrical) visual and kinesthetic organization of the world, enlivened in the 18th and 19th century, has long been criticized, but the new tendency to judge its reflexivity by the criteria of ‘scientific proof’ seems to bring new intellectual and ethical trouble to the field as the same debates and polemics occur each time. Is it possible to approach aesthetic research with the intention of objectifying or quantifying artworks and creative processes? Is it possible to know in a cognitive way how heuristique takes place and makes its way? Is it possible to obtain aesthetic “results”? This study will investigate the impossibility of proving *anything* about aesthetic perception by differing critically from some current art/science productions, combining qualitative and quantitative data, and first- and third-person points of view, which have become a commonplace.

I would rather focus on the emergence of new research methods in contemporary aesthetics, such as the use of *creative writing* and *poetics* on the edge of academic essays, the immediacy of radical perception in the process of distanciation, the increase in research creation, practice-as-research projects, and the new way of presenting artistic and creative phenomena. The selection of artworks and the ways they are aesthetically approached will shape our personal experience as researchers. Our reflection will be completed with quotes and comments from PhD theses and hybrid approaches developed by other researchers and artist researchers. I would also like to question the need for renewing contemporary aesthetic research methods: from where do they come and to which needs do they respond? What are the alternative realities of aesthetic perception they try to match?

### **The Researcher’s Posture or Avoiding Judgement**

The researcher’s academic posture has been modified in the PhD research creation project, developed by performer researcher Pauline Le Boulba in *Watching Dance, Dancing*

*Its Perception*,<sup>136</sup> supervised by Isabelle Ginot at the University of Paris 8. Le Boulba has decided to renew the art critique method, and even to transform it into a performance practice. She gives a different—or even avoids giving any—account of dance performances seen; instead of watching a performance, followed by a process of writing about it, she has decided to dwell on the kinesthetic traces and echoes she’s experiencing after the phase of active perception of the artwork, responding to it with a selection of other art works: a song, a quote from a book, creative writing, a dance solo, even a quote from another dance performance by a different choreographer. She somehow connects it all to what she has seen and experienced during and after the show. The art critique’s comment, which may imply what a dance performance is about, how it works, and even how it is perceived by an audience or an art expert, is discreetly replaced by a polyphony of other voices. Through a new creative process, these voices (belonging to other artists as well as the researcher herself) are linked and inspired by the artwork perceived, staging aesthetic perception anew, opening it to more interpretation instead of fixing its meaning.

The issue with this approach is the total abandonment of both first- and third-person authority voice, which can influence the distribution of power or even research funding. This also leads to a refusal of defining aesthetic perception in a fixed form, while preserving the presence of a sensitive and sensible reactivity. Thus Le Boulba claims to escape any expectation of proving anything about the work, because her essential need is to keep connected and enlivened by the aesthetic experience. At a research seminar in 2017, Le Boulba said, “writing and talking about dance performances, after assisting to them was just not enough. I kept feeling there is something inside I need to develop otherwise. That is why I even began dancing, without really trying to copy any of the performers observed, but to go under their skin.”

Part of Le Boulba’s research creation project is to pick up bits of choreography—a phrase, a way of walking, a way of

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<sup>136</sup> *Regarder la danse, danser sa réception*. Le Boulba has staged three performances, based on practice/theory inquiry, under the title *The Broken Tongue*.

talking—and study them until she is capable of interpreting them on stage. These parts are used as transitions, giving some clarity to the choices she makes for adding other material, which initially has nothing to do with the dance performance. The dramaturgy set by the artist researcher acquires a full aesthetic place and meaning, which can be grasped only intuitively, and which does not claim to prove anything about the artwork.

### **The Researcher's Perspective or Avoiding Certainty**

In a similar way, in an essay about the invention of a new kinetic model for watching visual arts and choreography, I have explored the concept of creating a visual and kinesthetic arts atlas, along the lines of that proposed by German art historian Aby Warburg in 1929. This atlas affords dance scholars the ability to enhance their perception by applying a mapping strategy that links artworks, including visual art objects, choreography, images, and video. Special attention is paid to detecting subtexts across a range of kinetic metaphors, symbols, and motifs in works by Ohad Naharin, Sharon Eyal and Gai Behar, Roy Assaf, Noa Zuk, and Ohad Fishof.

In this essay I demonstrate a new application of an earlier mode of research derived from the field of art history, mostly based on work with visual data, though often combined with the analysis of literary sources, far from any strategy of conveying in an objective way a subjective artistic point of view. This application, renewed by contemporary art scholars, was inspired by the atlas of anachronous images of Aby Warburg (1929; Rev. ed. 2012) and the study of optical inventions and their impacts on movement perception by Walter Benjamin (1931, Rev. ed. 2012). In proposing his atlas, Warburg provided a mechanism for scholars to escape the dangers of an essentialist or ethnocentric point of view in Western anthropology by juxtaposing visual materials across continents, cultures, and arts without implying any hierarchy of space and time. This anti-hierarchical format allowed arts researchers to broaden their perspectives by disregarding provenance, and to conceive new links between representations of gestures and body states. In analyzing units of movement in such a way, scholars found keys to



better perceiving how a specific movement is performed, and to detecting its effect and meaning, among other aspects. The philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1927-1940) showed how enhanced technological inventions such as photography and the cinema modify our visual perception and, as a consequence, impact our way of thinking. Having marveled at the invention of the kaleidoscope, Benjamin was inspired to provide art historians with new strategies of identifying visual motifs, by tracing them in various combinations across works of art, playing with logical connectivity to reveal new meanings. Benjamin's strategy also helped viewers to perceive patterns, inviting them to pay specific attention to fragments and their articulation in an increasingly decentralized urban space. Thus the idea of knowing by means of the visual arts, instead of scientific tools, can be seen as an almost post-qualitative quest to reach new thresholds of perception, find meaning between art forms, and detect carefully constructed understatements when exploring the perception and performance of artworks.

This method of deploying the various art forms in relationship to each other serves to enhance our perception of the individual disciplines, but not to prove anything. They can pass through many layers, and open new ways of connecting what seems incompatible or far away, if not out of reach. The researcher's point of view becomes fractal; it works by associations, offering a large perspective, but again avoiding any certainty or empirically quantified data of an audience's perception of the artworks studied.

### **The Multiplicity of Aesthetic Perception without Proof**

More than just tracking down details that might prove something, artists themselves comment on the unsettling freedom with which visual narrative avoids all traditional iconography (especially when used as a research or creation method), and how relating painting and performance to each other can lead to an unfettered venture into the realms of the imagination. Is applying phenomenology of perception and sense in order to identify visual motifs in an artist's work necessary to reveal a coincidence between what's brought to our attention and what's quoted by the artists themselves?

Does the aesthetic experience of an artwork have to coincide with the artwork itself? Or does the very notion of truth in art and in aesthetic perception exist only as a multiplicity of manifestations?

It seems that the artists themselves vote for the freedom of aesthetic perception, both as a lack of necessity of one truth, and as an option for freestyle interpretation. For each of his pieces, the Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin<sup>137</sup> creates codes or rules for his dancers to follow during the choreographic process, such as certain situations (swim through one meter of river) or predefined characters to create movement. At the beginning of the process, he tells his dancers to embody one or all of the characters. “I don’t care at all if you realize it when you watch the piece,” he says. He incorporated the idea as a means to find emotion and essence. “Why do we do this step? What is the texture? What is the flow of energy? How much effort do you put into it? How does your skin feel? How does the scope of sensations connect to what you feel?” (qtd. in Kourlas).

In a similar way, Lin Hwai Min, choreographer and artistic director for the Cloud Gate Dance Theater<sup>138</sup> in Taiwan, discusses mapping connections through kinesthetic

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<sup>137</sup> Naharin’s choice of choreographic artworks is based on the creative use of a particularly expressive movement language called Gaga. The Gaga movement language focuses on and explores the sensation of lively flesh in many layers (thick, soft, tight, silky), with multiple interweaving options, such as quick shifts in movement, the coexistence of different body states, studies of effort, and connections to pleasure. This language is expanded beyond the realm of Naharin’s personal choreography through its transmission to emerging choreographers such as Sharon Eyal and Gai Behar (*Bill*, 2010; *House*, 2012), Roy Assaf (*Adam*, 2016), and Noa Zuk in collaboration with Ohad Fishof (*Garden of Minutes*, 2016). The atlas linking their choreographic work is completed by some correspondence as well as comparisons and analogies between other contemporary arts. For more details refer to Vassileva’s “Dramaturgy of Gaga Bodies: Kinesthesia of Pleasure.”

<sup>138</sup> Cloud Gate Dance Theater (雲門舞集) is a modern dance group based in Taiwan, the first of its kind in Taiwan and Asia. It was founded by choreographer Lin Hwai-Min in 1973. The organization has two branches other than its main dance company. One, called “Cloud Gate 2,” tours communities and works with and helps develop young dancers and choreographers. It was founded in 1999. The other, Cloud Gate Dance School, was founded in 1998 with a view to making dance education more broadly available.

sensation, which reveals the multiple levels of spectatorship involved in the creation and witnessing of his pieces. This includes the gaze and the presence of the spectator and the performer, as well as those of the choreographer in the process of composing and staging the dance. He works with breath and the concept of chi as empirical experience of specific vital energy, which is one of his main sources of creative inspiration. In a 2009 interview, Lin Hwai Min explains, “Western dance is extroverted, while we concentrate on our inner energy; we don’t dance for an audience, we simply invite an audience to watch us perform our movement and breathing.” He adds that breath is the key factor in sharing the company’s movement with the audience. Sometimes he and his dancers can feel how their patterns of breathing—worked out through a daily routine of tai chi,<sup>139</sup> meditation, and martial arts—are reproduced in an identical way by the spectators. “It gets so quiet,” Min said in 2013, “that the audience breathes with us. We feel the same waves of breathing, we can sense it.”

This specific kind of somatic tuning with the audience is described as a phenomenon of aesthetic perception by the dancers themselves, who somehow “know” for sure when it happens during a performance. We may argue that this intuitive knowledge, beyond any technological proof (for the dancers’ breathing is an extremely complex physiological process, characterized by a sophisticated pattern of modulations impossible to track with scientific tools), has real roots in the highly qualified body-mind expertise of the intensely trained performers. Each of them describes his or her personal daily work with chi in a different way: “You feel something,” says one dancer. “The air comes through inside. I think it’s chi because it comes from the outside and gets through inside and flows through the body.” “Chi is different for everybody,” says another dancer. “You do the movement, and you feel your heartbeat, and after you feel the chi.” Even though many of them have explored it for many years in the same working context and within the same group of dancers, there is a strong differentiation in each description of what

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<sup>139</sup> Lin Hwai Min’s choreography is derived from the graceful Chinese martial arts of tai chi. The quote, “Energy flows as water, while the spirit shines as the moon,” describes the tai chi practitioner’s ideal state.

chi is and how it works. But there is no need to “agree” upon only one version of it.<sup>140</sup> Artists express no need for a singular truth or one version of “chi results”; rather, they seek the natural freedom preserved for each of them to keep his or her aesthetic perception open to act, change, evolve, shift, diverge.

### Science as Imagination

In *Now That We Know*<sup>141</sup>, the choreographer Matthias Sperling stages the absurdity of scientific proof linked to aesthetic perception through a monologue performed by the “personage” of a self-indulgent scientist, who elaborates a theory about movement in laboratory conditions. He slowly appears as a solitary figure from the darkness, in constant motion, which consists of a series of small gestures illustrating his gradual understanding of what perception is and how it works. In an ironic way, the necessity of proof is immediately eliminated by the absence of doubt (as the character does not seem to be keen on self-inquiry) within the perpetual repetition of the statement, “Now that we know,” followed by all kinds of recognizable clichés and dogmas contained in Western scientific theory about travelling molecules and emerging patterns of neurons at work. The narrative starts each time from the same phrase, “Now that we know,” and gradually reveals a collection of rational statements made by the dancer/choreographer playing the role of a “scientist in the process of

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<sup>140</sup> In a similar way, Senior Gaga teacher Yaara Moses claims that though having practiced Gaga for many years, she cannot yet define it: “What is Gaga? After so many years, I cannot say what it is” (Gaga Summer Intensive Course, Tel Aviv, 2016).

<sup>141</sup> Premiering in 2016 at London’s Sadler’s Wells Lilian Baylis Studio, *Now That We Know* attempts to answer the following question: “What will change, if and when science discovers how our minds arise from our bodies?” Choreographer and performer Matthias Sperling furthers his investigation into the relationship between mind and body in a new performance lecture exploring a hypothetical future in which that connection is clarified. How will dance and choreography be expanded by this new understanding of the body? And how will our society be altered? This work of science fiction builds on recent findings, taking a choreographic perspective to freely imagine plausible, absurd, thrilling, or worrying scenarios.

discovery.” These statements are turned into delirious hallucinations deprived of any objectivity, and often follow the self-centered and selfish desires of a single individual.

The politics of scientific proof are also criticized in the depiction of the laboratory’s narrow working space, worldwide conflicts, poverty, the funds granted to Western scientific research centers, and the maintenance of the program in spite of humanitarian emergencies elsewhere.<sup>142</sup> After 45 minutes of quite surprising interpretations of a huge number of common truths about respectable science, the spectators’ growing disbelief in any evidence of what actually is, or could be, leads more and more to wild laughter at consensual meaning and the “scientifically proven.” Some of the scientific discourse is almost imperceptible, transformed into a parody of indecent proposals, such as, “Now that we know that we are moving, let’s mingle our perceptions and massage our epistemology horizon,” addressed to the audience with discreetly floating thumbs or lustfully softened knuckles.

### **Art as Tacit Knowledge**

As mentioned above, the choreographer and the dancers from the Cloud Gate Dance Theater claim to “know” when the somatic connection with the audience has been successfully established, without any rational, objective, or scientific measure. The truthfulness of this particular kind of perception, the shared breath, is not even questioned. In their aesthetic perception of the performance, it just happens at certain moments, and they ride the reassuring certainty of it, during the flow of movement.

More and more performers are building their improvised actions and ever-changing quality of presence through a similar kind of tuning with the audience. Take for example the performance of *Sponge*<sup>143</sup> by the

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<sup>142</sup> A critical study of how Western science is funded points out that the subsidies given to any outstanding neuroscience laboratory for just a few months would be enough to feed a starving African country for the same number of years.

<sup>143</sup> *Sponge* premiered in 2018 at the Théâtre de Bagnole’s Festival Choreography Encounters. Of the work, Lin reflects, “I remember one teacher I had when I was a child often said, ‘I hope you can learn like

dancer/choreographer Yu-Ju Lin, who graduated from Lin-Hwai Min's dance school and has performed for the ensemble of Cloud Gate 2. According to an interview with Lin, the dancer/choreographer is "sponging" the audience for "dark places" to "pierce with light." She engenders this by listening to the smallest reaction, gesture, or emotion coming from the process of tuning with the chosen spectators. What intrigues us in her approach is a lack of any scientific proof of the established connection with the spectators. Her wish is to go for "what is difficult to sense," to reach out for those who need to be stirred that way.

More than a mere question of cultural background, the impossible proof of aesthetic perception can steer anyone from a straightforward path or a single, narrow truth and open new possibilities and options of being, connecting and interacting with a sensory and imaginary life, alternative realities, and resourceful engines of enhanced creativity.

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sponges, absorbing, then discharging what you absorb, absorbing again and discharging, continuously repeating the process.' After I grew up, I realized that, as an organism, a sponge animal does not have nervous, digestive, or circulatory systems. It needs sea water flowing through its body to be able to bring in nutrients and push out waste products. It is passive in its survival. This is a transition from one thing to another, a story told from collapse to reconstruction represented via body language."

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## **Stand-up Comedy as an Alternative Theatre Reality in Nigeria**

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### **Introduction**

Since the rise of modern Nigerian drama in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the machinations of indigenous theatrical forms, the Onitsha Market literature tradition, the concert party experiments of Hubert Ogunde, and the institutionalization of drama in the then University College, Ibadan, theatre practice in Nigeria, have experienced growth in leaps and bounds. In its earliest beginnings, Nigerian theatre and drama were made manifest in the various traditional festivals and celebrations performed in the respective Nigerian communities. Interestingly, Nigerian theatre and drama evolved from the unscripted performances to the literary tradition following the rise of the elitist class in Lagos—those who have acquired Western civilization either as a result of their sojourn in Europe in search of education or as freed slaves of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The consistent replication of the Western form of concerts and entertainments by the Nigerian elitist class from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century down to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century gave room for the intermingling of indigenous theatrical dynamics with Western themes and dramatic forms. History has it that the robust patronage which theatre enjoyed during this period (i.e. early to mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century) gave rise to the integration of drama and theatre into the tertiary educational curriculum in Nigeria. Expectedly, this integration brought about a tremendous outburst of theatre business in Nigeria both in theory and practice. This integration also engendered the



rise of such indigenous playwriting maestros as Wole Soyinka, James Ene Henshaw, J.P. Clark, Wale Ogunyemi, Zulu Sofola, Ola Rotimi and Femi Osofisan among others. It is the plays of these indigenous playwrights and those of the latter generations that provided a large chunk of the primary source materials and theoretical foundations for the scholarship of Nigerian theatre and drama to date.

The integration of theatre and drama into the tertiary educational curriculum in Nigeria brought about some form of theatre consciousness amongst the literate and non-literate classes in Nigeria, since most literary dramas are presented in both pidgin (common language in Nigeria) and indigenous languages. It is unarguable that since the proliferation of both public and private universities offering theatre and drama courses in Nigeria, theatre practice has enjoyed overwhelming patronage with university arts theatres serving as playhouses for both educational and commercial theatre purposes. The overwhelming patronage of theatre productions in Nigeria, which began with the concert party experiments of Hubert Ogunde and lingered into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century following the recognition of theatre arts as an academic discipline in Nigeria, witnessed an unprecedented decline in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This decline is attributed to several factors; prominent among them is the introduction of television broadcasting in Nigeria. The fascination of television broadcasting instilled in the theatre practitioners of the period a fresh sensation and new vision to inject new realities and interpretations of theatre and drama. The result of this fascination was the emergence of television drama. The robust patronage, which television drama enjoyed, popularized the theatre practitioners of the time as a result of the mass appeal associated with the mass media.

History has it that by the mid-1980s, some overzealous electronics marketers at Alaba market in Lagos, Nigeria have begun the experiment of recording bits and pieces of drama with the aid of VHS cameras. The first major first fruit of this experiment was the production *Living in Bondage*, the first video film in Nigeria, directed by Kenneth Nnebue and produced by NEK Video Links in the year 1992. As expected, the huge box office success of Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* triggered the production of more Nigerian video

films. Hence, the birth of the Nigerian film industry. Ironically, while the entertainment concern shifted largely to the film industry, the live theatre component of entertainment floundered between the dark and the deep. One of the major factors responsible for its decline was the poor administration and attention given to the arts and culture industry in Nigeria. By this period, all the playhouses in Nigeria including the state councils for arts and culture and the national theatre have declined from active theatre practice in accord with the stipulations in the nation's *Cultural Policy*.

Furthermore, the country also witnessed severe security challenges as a result of lingering political instability. The security challenge of the period gave the video film industry more edge, as most families found it safer to sit back at home and get theatrically entertained with the Video Compact Discs of the films rather than be exposed to security risk in a theatre house which would be far from home. Such was the fate of live theatre entertainment in Nigeria until the mid -90s when some entertainment entrepreneurs, especially Opa Williams, reinvented it through the medium of stand-up comedy. The factors responsible for the impressive reception given to stand-up comedy are not unconnected with the feelings of aliveness, ephemerality and immediacy which live theatre infuses in its audience. The immediate and overwhelming acceptance that stand-up comedy enjoyed made it possible for the emergence of the stand-up comedy industry as not just an integral part of popular entertainment in Nigeria, but as a super alternative to conventional theatre practice, which was gasping for breath. It is for the foregoing that the paper examines stand-up comedy as an alternative theatre reality in Nigeria.

### **The Concept of Theatre**

Such prolific theatre historians and critics as Oscar Brockett and Robert Ball have identified theatre as a complex art that has undergone changes and followed diverse paths. For them, every theatrical offering is usually the product of the culture within which the theatre was created. In an attempt to further buttress the nature of theatre, Brockett and Ball

state that theatre achieved its own distinct identity at least twenty-five hundred years ago:

In ancient Greece, it was performed for the entire community at religious festivals financed by the state and wealthy citizens. At other times, theatre has existed on the fringes of respectability, as it did from the fifth to the tenth century A.D., when small bands of itinerant performers travelled around playing wherever they could for whatever they could collect from those who came to watch. In other times, theatre has been forbidden, as it was in England between 1642 and 1660 when the Puritans then in power considered it not only morally unacceptable but also an activity that tempted people away from more honest work. During its long life, theatre has as often been denounced as praised, and its value—even its right to exist—has frequently been questioned. (5)

Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb corroborate Brockett and Ball's position when they state that theatre is an activity that we use to describe how we live (3). They argue that though we may not be aware of it, each time we see a performance we are taking part in theatre history:

At the heart of the theatre experience is the performer–audience relationship: the immediate, personal exchange whose chemistry and magic give theater its special quality. During a stage performance the actresses and actors can hear laughter, can sense silence, and can feel tension in the audience . . . the audience can affect, and in subtle ways change, the performance. (5)

Similarly, Worthen notes that social attitudes are reflected in the theatre in the sense that during performance, the theatre constructs its own “society” of performers and spectators. In Worthen's analogy, staging a play puts it immediately into a dynamic social exchange: “the interaction between dramatic characters, between characters and actors who play them, between the performers and the audience, between the drama onstage and the drama of life outside the theatre” (1).

The points that have been canvassed so far in this review are that theatre, like other art forms, is not only something we find desirable and enjoyable but an absolute necessity for human survival and also that the audience affects the theatre in many ways, perhaps most clearly through the immediate feedback it provides the performers. “Continuous interaction occurs not only between stage and auditorium, but also among spectators involved in a communal experience” (Brockett and Ball 8).

### **Historical Briefs on Stand-up Comedy**

Records at our disposal indicate that there has been a long history of solo comic art performances among the primitive tribes before the christening of the art form as stand-up comedy. Up until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, anybody who got a laugh in any medium was called a comic. It was in 1966 that the sub-genre of stand-up comic came into being (Mendrinós 1). Available historical sources trace the roots of stand-up comedy to America in the mid-1800s. Up until that time, comedy was the exclusive domain of theatre. The unintentional grand-father of stand-up comedy was Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice, the man who is credited with inventing the minstrel shows. The minstrel shows were probably one of the most grotesque forms of entertainment in existence because it was built on negative racial stereotypes, and the mockery of a race of people who were already subjugated. It started well before the Civil War, and continued far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Zolten corroborates Mendrinós’ account when he informs us that the minstrel shows of the early 1800s reflected America’s social history as it ridiculed and caricatured African Americans, thereby portraying the racism of the time. “White performers blackened their faces with burnt cork, exaggerating the eyes, noses and mouths of the African Americans they parodied” (Zolten 1). Interestingly, minstrel shows remained popular well past the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery; though by the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, they begun to fade as the era of vaudeville kicked in. In the days before microphones, comedy was less subtle, and a more physical comedy known as “slapstick” was particularly popular (Zolten 2). Bromley also recounts that stand-up comedy which had gained

prominence in the 1970s, nearly disappeared from the cultural landscape only to bounce back stronger than ever. He conceived the 1970s as the decade that marked the birth of modern stand-up comedy and also the decade that changed stand-up comedy forever following the appearance of a new generation of comedians due to the rise of the comedy club (Bromley 1). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, stand-up comedy is flourishing not just as an entertainment variety, but as an alternative theatre reality in both developed and developing nations of the world.

### **Pre-Colonial Origins of Nigerian Stand-up Comedy**

History has it that comedy holds a central place in the day to day social existence of pre-colonial communities in Nigeria. Such comic manifestations as witty phrases, comic blabs, tongue lashings, and verbal fantasies have been identified as weapons utilized by the traditional societies to checkmate, lampoon or ridicule eccentric and anti-social behavioral dispositions. Izuu Nwankwo informs us that before the colonial experience, communities in Nigeria had unique performances akin to the contemporary stand-up comedy. Prominent among these performances are those of the “. . . *Efe* in the southwest, *Yan Kama* and *Wawan Sarkin* in the north, and *Njak?r?* in the southeast of Nigeria” ( Nwankwo 48). Drawing mainly from the ridiculous and yet liminal performance varieties of the *Efe* within the Yoruba communities, the burlesque and vituperative comic blabs of the strolling *Yan Kama* and *Wawan Sarkin* comics of Northern Nigeria, and the highly loquacious and sarcastic comic phrases of *Njak?r?* among the Igbo comic tradition, Nwankwo notes that “. . . finding a direct originary link between contemporary stand-up comedy and these pre-colonial performances is not an easy one” (51).

Besides the unique comic dexterities of the *Efe*, *Yan Kama* / *Wawan Sarki* and the *Njak?r?*, stand-up comedy in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, also grew out of the storytelling tradition whereby members of lineages and families in the respective communities gather in a moonlight setting to listen to carefully crafted and neatly woven stories by men or women that are believed to have possessed special gift of the gab. Agoma Awaritoma affirms that in Africa and

most parts of the world, the story telling tradition amidst moonlight is predominant (35). He adds that:

Every community had its own master storytellers who were considered perfect in their art. In some villages, because of their dexterity and creativity, because of his powerful control of language, melodious use of voice, his masterful gesticulation and facial expressions, his dynamic and realistic exploitation of characters to achieve his messages. His ingenious application of arresting sounds, very captivating interjections and other literary devices, his vehement narrative and descriptive demeanor, his distinctive ability to really entertain not only children but the adults around . . . stands him out. (35)

Tony Allen amplifies Awaritoma's position when he notes that the storyteller selects the bare bone of an existing story and then customizes it to suit his own style (3). This is quite synonymous with Nwankwo's analogy that "*njak?r?* often comes up under informal situations, mostly unplanned, in less serious social gatherings where people do it in a manner of showing off their prowess at inventing tales that may not be exactly true. . . ." (51). The *njak?r?* comic tradition is synonymous with the character delineation of Wodu Wakiri in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* who functions as a village wag at liberty to cast aspersion or ridicule upon any person in the community, the person's social status notwithstanding. However, in whatever form or content the story is delivered, it is pertinent to note that in a typical African storytelling experience just as we find in most pre-colonial Nigerian communities, the storyteller is the text, for he possesses the skills and complete attributes of the present day stand-up comic. Little wonder, he is often referred to as a precursor to full scale stand-up comic.

It is pertinent to mention that in course of our historical excursion into the emergence of Nigerian stand-up comedy, there is no clear demarcation in terms of exact dates as to when one phase begins and ends. What this paper has done therefore is to identify the periods in terms of decades as well as the transition in the mode of comic performances.

## **Nigerian Stand-up Comedy as a Product of Indigenous Civilization**

Stand-up comedy came into prominence as a full scale professional enterprise in the late 80s into the early 90s following the box office successes of John Chukwu and Mohammed Danjuma's *Comedy Cafe* experiments and Opa William's *Nite of a Thousand Laughs*—a period when live theatre culture in Nigeria had dwindled largely due to lack of creativity and innovation amongst theatre practitioners in Nigeria. At that time, Nigerians were gradually getting adjusted to the home video pastime which makes it possible for them to get entertained in the comfort of their homes. Thus, the appeal for live theatre had dwindled and so the emergence of stand-up comedy concerts reawakened the interest of Nigerians towards the appreciation of live theatre culture. For most theatre enthusiasts, stand-up comedy is a reinvention of live theatre culture with its unique appeal for aliveness and immediacy—qualities which are lacking in the video-films. Stand-up comedy was therefore conceived as an alternative for the declining live theatre. Onyerionwu puts it thus: “For those who have been disheartened by the continuous decline of the Nigerian theatre tradition, the advent of an avant-garde alternative in the emergent stand-up comedy culture has largely compensated for a truly sad loss (1).

The history of the storytelling and jesting traditions in Africa reveal that African entertainers were driven by the passion and instinct to express their innermost feelings and perception of their universe. Hence, storytellers, clowns, wags, go-about-towns, jesters and fools see it as their communal cum civic responsibilities to entertain and thrill the people to some good laughs.

Similarly, the star syndrome attached to such notable Nigerian comics as Ali Baba, Julius Agwu, Basket Mouth, I Go Dye, Gordons and AY among others in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are reflections of the status accorded such veteran Nigerian comic characters as Baba Sala, Baba Suwe, Zebrudaya, Gringory, Jagua, Jegede, Samanja, Madam Cash and Clarus among others who also doubled as comperes and Masters of Ceremonies in social events in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It cannot be overemphasized that present day Nigerian stand-up

comedy draws its root from the earlier experiments of the community fools, simpletons, buffoons, drunks, minstrels and wags, as is evident in the parodies and loquaciousness of the Yan Kama of the north, Efe of the southwest, Njakiri of the southeast and the Igbeke and Awilija traditions of south-south all in pre-colonial Nigeria.

However, while we argue that stand-up comedy in Nigeria sprang up out of a human's innate passion to create laughter *ab initio*, the need arises that we note that its practice today is economically and entrepreneurially-driven. The current drivers of the Nigerian stand-up comedy industry are, perhaps, conscious of the weak commercial attachment put on stand-up comedy by their predecessors. They must have come to terms with the harsh reality that veterans such as Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala), Chika Okpala (Zebrudaya), late James Iroha (Gringory) and late Claude Eke (Jegede) could not boast of robust economic status that could complement their social standing as screen icons since the economic benefits of commercial theatre practice was often paltry.

Through their knowledge of the discouraging economic history of the comic art in Nigeria, such stand-up comedy promoters and performers like Opa Williams, Ayo Makun, Richard Mofe-Damijo, Julius Agwu, Bunmi Davies, Bisi Olatilo, Tee A and Basket Mouth among others have taken stand-up comedy to greater heights such that its economic turnover can be equalled to any other lucrative business venture in Nigeria. Our historical excursion so far in this paper demonstrates the Nigerian professional stand-up comedy is an offshoot of the civilization processes of the respective Nigerian cultural milieus.

### **Stand-up Comedy as an Alternative Theatre Reality in Nigeria**

Our recourse to stand-up comedy as an alternative theatre reality would imply the preponderance of such theatrical elements as drama, costume, make-up, performance space (stage), music, speech arts, dance and audience among others. For purposes of clarity and precision, we shall highlight some of the theatrical elements identified so far in Nigerian stand-up comedy.



- Drama as the Soul of Stand-up Comedy

Nigerian stand-up comedy is anchored mainly on drama. The dramas presented in Nigerian stand-up comedy are mostly satirical pieces drawn from the anomalies in the nation's body polity, ethnic/tribal rivalry, religious hypocrisy, pretentious life style and other manifestations of social deviations. Ayo Makun's (AY) *AY Live*, Bunmi Davis' *Stand Up Naija* and Opa William's *Nite of a Thousand Laughs* among others are perfect examples of Nigerian comedy concerts that integrate drama into the very nucleus of their performances. Through dramatic treatments of the everyday livelihood experiences of Nigerians, stand-up comedy filled the live theatre vacuum that was occasioned by the decline of theatre practice in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century into early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In an attempt to illuminate drama as the theatrical soul of stand-up comedy, the comics themselves assume unique character delineations as well as mannerisms to drive home the dramatic import in their performances. Klint D' Drunk, for instance, is a popular Nigerian stand-up comic who stereotypes his art as a drunk given to vituperations, foul language and automatism. His comic verve lies in his constant abuse of the audience in a call and response manner. He also devalues language in an attempt to underscore his drunken state. Similarly, Julius Agwu, another notable Nigerian comic thrives on automatism as he sings and dances like a robot all in an attempt to thrill his audience. Ayo Makun (AY) is known for mimicking false prophets especially of the white garment stuck as he dishes highly comic and weird prophecies to members of his audience. He laces his prophetic utterances with songs and dances highly suggestive of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church. In their respective styles of presentations, these comics, through the medium of characterization, make conscious effort to move from one unit character to another, thus, transporting the emotions of the audience from one dramatic world to another. This is in consonance with James Styan's position that "All values in art depend upon the power of communicating them, making them a wholly felt, breathing force to the recipient" (165).

- Evocation of the Theatrical Atmosphere through Music, Songs and Sound Effects

Music is one of the key elements of drama and by extension theatre. Stand-up comedy concerts in Nigeria are often organized as variety shows where comedians, musicians and dancers are fused in some form of artistic eclecticism. Often times, the producers and managers of Nigerian stand-up comedy include top flight musicians in their concerts in order to market their events effectively. *AY Live*, for example, has become a testing ground for popularity amongst Nigerian musicians. The quality of musicians that feature annually in *AY Live* has helped in projecting the brand as one of the most patronized (if not the most) comedy concerts in Nigeria. The consistent integration of music, sounds and sound effects into comedy concerts in Nigeria underscores the inevitability of music to the theatrical experience. Brockett and Ball acknowledge that “Although sound has always played an important role in theatrical production, it is the most recent design area to be recognized as its own independent art” (432).

In a typical Nigerian stand-up comedy, music and sounds are used not only to evoke mood and atmosphere, but also to reinforce the thematic thrust of the concert as well as support the actions and punch lines of the comedians. Above all, music serves as the life wire of comedy concerts in Nigeria because of the central place it occupies in the totality of the existence of the African. One way by which Africans express the comic spirit inherent in them is by listening or dancing to good music, be it indigenous or foreign.

- Creating Simple and yet Functional Stage Design

Just like music, “A stage setting can help establish the mood, style and meaning of a performance” (Edwin and Goldfarb 90). Against the backdrop that Nigeria does not have a generous number of play houses and theatre edifices at the moment, the managers and producers of stand-up comedy concerts host their shows in big hotels and event centres where they make efforts to convert multi-purpose halls to a theatre auditorium through the machinations of in-depth

stage design. Apart from reflecting the title of the concert on the cyclorama, most stage designs also embody motifs that suggest the character and overriding philosophical projection of the performance. In present times, most stage designs accommodate the use of slides alongside live performances. Drawing their cues from some of their Western counterparts, some Nigerian stand-up comedy concerts create stage designs that host just a single seat, a table with a glass of water and a microphone stand hosting a microphone. Such designs are conceived most often when the host comedian is doing a solo performance. The single seat and glass of water serve multiple purposes namely; to enhance the overall composition and spectacle of the performance space; to help the comedian in characterization especially in the actualization of dramatic pause through drinking water from the glass or sitting on the seat intermittently thereby breaking the flow in his delivery; the seat and the glass of water also serve illustrative purposes often times especially when the comedian intends to reenact some unit dramatic actions in his/her joke that involve the actions of either sitting down or drinking water. Comedians who engage in this style of performance and stage design include Ali Baba, I Go Dye, Gandoki, Dan D' Humorous and Bovi among others.

- Audience as Basis for the Theatrical Experience

Stand-up comedy is, basically an art form that is openly devoted to getting immediate laughs from an audience. In stand-up comedy, feedback of the audience is instant and crucial for the comedian's act. Audiences expect a stand-up comic to provide a steady stream of laughs, and a performer is always under great pressure to deliver (*Wikipedia*). Quirk notes that stand-up comedy is a battle between audience and performer and that from a comedian's point of view, an audience can be an intimidating and frightening beast (219). In Quirk's analogy, when an audience does not laugh, the act fails and the experience becomes thoroughly unpleasant, for the audience as well as the performer. Audiences are threatening because they are powerful. The stand-up act may appear a solo, but the input of the audience is necessary to its

success. Carr and Greeves corroborate the position above when they state that:

The audience's laughter is essential to the rhythm of the comic's set; although they aren't talking to him (except for the red-faced drunk in the front row), for the set to be successful it must still function with the to-and-fro rhythm of a conversation, albeit a rather one-sided one. (Qtd. in Quirk 220)

The social essence of stand-up comedy lies in the fact that it draws its raw material from the incongruities and eccentricities that arise from man's inability to adapt to the living codes of an ever changing society. Irrespective of any form the theatre takes, the audience remains the most vital element. In the process of performance, the artist conceives the audience not as a group of men and women seated in an auditorium in anticipation of a performance but as members of a corporate society who have come to share their social experiences and common humanity. As a theatrical enterprise, stand-up comedy draws largely from issues of social concern—issues that ignite the risible not on account of tribe, religion or social status but because of our identity as members of the same human community. Harbidge recognizes the sense of bonding and social interaction which stand-up comedy occasions when he posits that:

The live and informal nature of the comedian's performance, as well as the venue itself, can facilitate a performer/audience relationship unlike that found in most conventional theatre: in stand-up, personalized address and candid geniality intended to strike up rapport with the audience combines with a relaxed, social environment to generate distinctly free—wheeling, organic art form. (129)

As part of the creative process, the stand-up audience's consolidated presence, its vital responses and actions are seen to help feed a performance which is as reactive as it is active. Auslander avers that the stand-up comedy audiences are more crucial in shaping the performance than rock and pop audiences. According to him:

Music audiences may sing along, even take over temporarily as the singer extends the microphone toward them. Yet stand-up may be even more dialogic: audience and comedian sharing both a physical and a diegetic space, the performance is more than that which unfolds onstage: it is that which unravels at the intersection of audience and comedian. (Qtd. in Harbidge 129)

The conviction behind labeling stand-up comedy a social art lies in its characteristic tendency to draw from the anomalies, inversions, deviations and repetitions of human actions. It lies in its ability to occasion a gathering of men and women who have come to ease off the tensions of life through intermittent outbursts of boisterous laughter as well as enjoy some form of social interaction. Apart from absurd or incongruous ends to stories, there is usually the feeling of superiority, which good comedians evoke in their audiences when talking about the stupidity or undesirable qualities of other tribal groups or individuals. That may explain the ready success comedians have enjoyed from telling jokes about poor or ugly (wowo) people. Everybody tends to laugh at these jokes and this is ironic in a country such as Nigeria where poverty (real or relative) is rife. It is against this backdrop that the social essence of Nigerian stand-up comedy is couched.

Adeniran asserts that the creative art, in whatever form, is a product of the artist who operates at a level higher than the ordinary mind. He conceives the creative act as a complex phenomenon capable of practical implications. As he puts it “Art represents power, a medium of influence and mode of communication.” (1). Barzun reinforces Adeniran’s assertion above thus:

Art is power. It influences the mind, the nerves, the feelings, the soul. It carries messages of hope, hostility, derision, and moral rebuke. It can fight material and spirited evils, and transmit the ideals of a community now living, long past, or soon to be born. In a word, Art is deemed universally important

because it helps men to live and remember. (Qtd. in Adeniran 21)

Barzun also notes the inherent danger in arts as a medium for the expression of man's intuitive feelings and experiences. The deduction to make out of his analogy is that beyond the potency to dignify and exalt a civilization or political system, arts could weaken it or destroy it. It could also precipitate a revolution or betray a struggle by the way citizens are sensitized and tuned. This is made manifest in the comedies of Aristophanes (*The Frogs*, *The Clouds*, *Lysistrata* for example) where the writer ridicules the excesses of the political class and advocates for the oratorical prowess of a moderate poet who would counsel the Athenian citizenry on how best to stop the lingering Peloponnesian War. At the level of stand-up comedy, Zolten, in a bid to recount the history of the earliest manifestations of the vaudeville, informs us that comedians had to watch what they said and that some vaudeville theatres even posted signs backstage of prohibited words. He adds that during a time of intense immigration, vaudeville comedians also popularized humour based on ethnic stereotypes (2).

## **Conclusion**

In this research endeavour, we have made conscious effort to make a strong case for stand-up comedy as a burgeoning alternative theatre reality. It has been documented earlier in this paper that stand-up comedy in Nigeria is a child of necessity. Its emergence was propelled by the decline of live theatre practice in Nigeria towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It suffices also to mention that stand-up comedy in Nigeria has enjoyed quite a robust history that spans from pre-history down to the 21<sup>st</sup> century where it stands out as a major theatrical form as well as a robust source of livelihood for the teeming population of Nigerian youths. Ironically, today, the audience of the live theatre in Nigeria who declined from its patronage some decades ago for reasons bothering on security and economic constraints, are the same audience that fill in the huge event halls for stand-up comedy concerts even at gate fees that triple those of the earlier theatre performances. In our opinion, the reason for

this consistent overwhelming patronage of stand-up comedy shows is largely as a result of the aesthetic appeal, topical issues unraveled in dramatic and joke forms and the cumulative pomp and pageantry imbued in these shows through the generous unveiling of accomplished stage and screen actors (stars), veteran and in vogue musicians and celebrities as guest appearances.

It is stating the obvious that stand-up comedy in Nigeria is growing in leaps and bounds as it constitutes one of the chief theatrical exports of Nigeria. However, since artistry characteristically requires consistent review in order to guarantee improved performance, it becomes imperative to advocate for the need for stand-up to be prominently integrated into the secondary and tertiary educational curricula in Nigeria as a special area in the Theatre Arts discipline. Also, the Nigerian government should also see in stand-up comedy a veritable platform for the engagement of the youths especially those of the Niger Delta and core North so as to curb militancy and insurgency respectively. This requires huge and sustained investments in the areas of sponsoring the youths in stand-up comedy seminars, workshops, symposia, retreats and conferences among others both abroad and local. Similarly, multi-nationals and corporate establishments operational in Nigeria should also be encouraged to invest in the arts rather than float grants and scholarships in only science and engineering based research. It cannot be over emphasized that the Nigerian arts industry especially stand-up comedy needs firm and dedicated governmental support in order to develop rapidly like those of her counterparts in the world.

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**Crossing over the *come-no-go* divide  
A Historical Discourse on Relations between  
the English speaking Regions of Cameroon,  
1996- 2017.**

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**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to examine the relations between the two English speaking regions of Cameroon; how it was manipulated by different actors in the colonial and post-colonial periods. Cameroon is an erstwhile German protectorate, 1884-1916. With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Britain and France attacked the Germans in Cameroon and sent them out of the territory in 1916. This was followed by the Anglo-French partition of Cameroon with Britain obtaining one-fifth and the French four-fifth of the territory. Britain further divided her portion of Cameroon into two: British Northern and Southern Cameroons. In a plebiscite vote in 1961 the former voted in favor of independence by integration with the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the latter by unification with the independent Republic of Cameroon (the former French sphere of Cameroon). This gave birth to the Federal Republic of Cameroon (1961-1972). During this period the former British Southern Cameroons became known as the State of West Cameroon and the former French administered territory, East Cameroon. Following the abolition of the Federal system in 1972, the State of West Cameroon was divided in the North West and South West provinces. These two provinces (now regions) make up the English speaking region of Cameroon. The colonial administration constructed

differences between these two regions that were later exploited by the political elite during the era of decolonization and the post-colonial regime to stay in power. Mounting pressure for democratic reforms led some African rulers to resort to ethnicity and exclusivist politics as a safety escape valve (Konings and Nyamnjoh 218). The invention of the *come-no-go* by Mr. Peter Oben Ashu, the Governor of the South West Province (now Region) of Cameroon in 1996, was the landmark of the manipulation of relations between the two English speaking regions by the post-colonial regime. The Governor made attempts at refusing the North West settlers in the South West franchise (Awasom 283; Jua, 2004:310).<sup>144</sup> Oben Ashu's coinage was a restyling of the British colonial 'native strangers,' a label for the Bamenda laborers resident in the coastal plantation towns of the South west Region (Bongkorog 27).

The British colonial administration invented *otherness* among their colonial subjects in the British Southern Cameroons. They separated their subjects between the 'natives' (indigenous coastal inhabitants), the 'native strangers' (people from the other parts of the British Southern Cameroons), and 'native foreigners' (migrants from the French Cameroons) and were treated as such (Bongkorog 55). The 'native foreigners' were not British subjects and so, were excluded from political participation in the territory. They did not have the franchise nor could they be voted into the local councils prior to the appointment of Mr. Mandoline, a 'native foreigner' of Yaounde origin to the Victoria Federated Council in 1942 (Monono74). The dichotomy between 'natives' and 'native strangers' was to mobilize labor. This also influenced the development pattern in the territory. Mark Delancey argues that the British deliberately neglected the development of the Bamenda Division to maintain the region as permanent supplier of labor to the coastal plantations (308).

The insider/outsider divide was further reified by the British with the use of stereotypes: 'lazy natives' and

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<sup>144</sup> Come-no-go literally translates a person resident in a foreign land and unwilling to return home. It was a pejorative word for the Northwest settlers in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. Inherent therein was, divide and rule, which was manipulated by the post-colonial regime to trivialize and demonize the Anglophone problem.

'hardworking strangers' for the former and latter categories. The stereotypes to some extent were internalized by the insiders and outsiders and encouraged the former to keep a steady supply of labor to the plantations. In furtherance of the constructed divide, the Bamenda outsiders were referred to as 'backward' as opposed to the more 'advanced' insiders (Vubo 159). In a letter to the Resident of the Cameroons Province on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1948, the Senior District Officer for Bamenda Division asserted:

The Grassfields people have nothing in common with their sophisticated brethren in the South. Economic circumstances and social problems are entirely different, and again language operates as a bar to the successful discharge of public business. (Vubo 158)

As already discussed the 'backwardness' (at least, in terms of development) was purposeful, to guarantee a regular flow of labor from the Division to the coastal plantations. Evidently, *otherness* or difference between the North westerners and South westerners, the two English speaking regions of Cameroon was a colonial construct, useful for the recruitment of labor for the plantations.

The instrumental differences established by the colonial administration were manipulated by the political elite to garner votes during the period of decolonization. The victory of the Kamerun National Congress (KNC) in the 1953 elections was thanks to the ability of Dr. E.M.L. Endeley to exploit the fears of the indigenous insiders against Ibo domination (Eyongetah and Brain 142-43). Endeley's *volte face* from the initial political platform of the KNC which was, secession from Nigeria and reunification with the French Cameroons led to the formation of the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) by John Ngu Foncha in 1955 (Ngoh 62). The KNDP presented itself as a strangers' party and quickly found an alliance with the Kamerun Union of Settlers (KUS), an association dominated by the outsiders of the 'native strangers' and 'native foreigners' categories (Monono 80). Foncha of the KNDP exploited the already existing divide between the North West strangers and the South west insiders to canvass for votes in the 1959 elections

and eventually emerged as the second Prime Minister of the Southern Cameroons.

Power was transferred from the KNC with its base in the forest zone to the KNDP a Grassfield dominated party. Foncha's KNDP was accused of victimization, nepotism and tribalism at the expense of the people of the forest zone. This led to the founding of VIKUMA, an acronym for Victoria, Kumba and Mamfe by Walter Wilson Mesumbe in 1959 (Nkwi 100-101). VIKUMA was founded as a political movement to defend the interest of the people of the Cameroons Province which later became the South West region against the KNDP and the people of the Bamenda Province that became the North West region in the former province. VIKUMA fanned the cleavages between the two provinces of the Southern Cameroons. The dichotomy between the two regions dominated the political rhetoric in the territory as it moved towards independence. Foncha skillfully manipulated the differences and won the United Nations organized plebiscite of February 1961 in the Southern Cameroons. Foncha's victory led to the independence of the British Southern Cameroons and unification with the Republic of Cameroon, 1st October 1961 (Ebune 150).

In the post-independence era, the regime manipulated the constructed rift to thwart Cameroon Anglophone struggle against marginalization by the Francophone majority (Konings and Nyamnjoh 218; Awoh and Nkwi 11; Fonchingong 44). In 1991, VIKUMA reincarnated as the South West Elite Association. Its aim was to distance itself from the view of the Anglophones as a homogenous community where they suffered the same level of marginalization. They considered themselves as having suffered greater disadvantage than the North Westerners in the distribution of political power and saw in regional association greater chances of accessing state power than in the promotion of Anglophone identity (Nyamnjoh and Rowlands 327). Central to SWELA was resistance against the purported domination of South Westerners by North Westerners resident in the South West region. These cleavages were encouraged and promoted by the post-colonial regime to derail the Cameroon Anglophones in their struggle against assimilation by the French majority.

## **Assimilation of Anglophone Cameroon by the French Majority**

Since reunification in 1961, there has been a gradual but a systematic assimilation of the Anglophone Cameroonians by the Francophone majority. Shortly after reunification, Ahidjo divided the country into six administrative units undermining the federal character of the state and downplaying the powers of the Prime Minister of West Cameroon (the former Southern Cameroons) as the Federal Inspectors were answerable to him (Fonchingong 225). In 1966, Ahidjo created the one-party state enhancing his dictatorship. In 1972, Ahidjo unilaterally, against the provisions of Article 47 of the Federal Constitution issued the notorious proclamation DF72-270 of 2/6/72 which abolished the Federal System and created a Unitary State (Mukong 94). From the abrogation of the Fouban Accord, one illegality followed the other. By decree No. 84-001 of 4<sup>th</sup> February 1984, President Paul Biya changed the name from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon, the name of *La Republique du Cameroun* at the time of unification (Fonchingong 227). This was followed by an almost gradual annihilation of Anglophone cultural values and institutions. It created an Anglophone consciousness and feeling of recolonization and marginalization (Konings and Nyamnjoh 192). The Anglophone minority deeply regrets the vote for unification in 1961 (Fonchingong 43). The Anglophones complain of political marginalization and exclusion from key political positions; economic neglect and abandonment of West Cameroon projects and Francophone domination of *Societe nationale de raffinage* (SONARA); culturally, the gallicization of the English speaking regions (Konings and Nyamnjoh 192-93). With the relative political and economic deprivation of Anglophone Cameroonians, all that was left to give them a common sense of belonging was their legal and educational system. The continuous attempt by the Francophone majority to wipe out the English Common Law practice and the English Educational system led to the October 2016 Lawyers and Teachers strike which morphed to involve students, pupils and the civil society.

## The Lawyers and Teachers Strike

Some 700 Common Law Lawyers met in Bamenda on Saturday, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2015 in the All Anglophone Lawyers Conference and observed with great dissatisfaction the gradual erosion of English legal system in the North West and South West regions, the two English Speaking regions of Cameroon. At the end of the deliberations they wrote a memorandum to the Government on issues affecting the practice of the Common Law in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon. The Government was given six months for a redress (Abah 6). The memorandum *inter alia* called on the Government to call for a Constitutional Conference or Referendum for the amendment of the Constitution; translate the main text of Business Law (OHADA) into English. This is the principal reference for business law in UDEAC (translated in English as the Economic Community of Central African States); replacement of French speaking magistrates in the North West and South West who in the most parts cannot express themselves in English and conduct cross examination in French; creation of a Common Law department in the Advance School of Administration and Magistracy (ENAM); only Common Law magistrates should be sent to North West and South West Regions; no Notaries be appointed in North West and South West and; the creation of a Law School (Mbunwe 3; Ngwoh 180).

The Teachers, through their Trade Unions had tabled a series of complaints to the Government officials on the fate of the English Educational system and the plight of Anglophone Cameroon students' way back in December 2015 (Ngwoh 180). In June 2016, they wrote another complaint to the Prime Minister reminding him of their earlier grievances. Top on their list of grievances were: the redeployment of teachers of French expression sent to teach in English schools; the preponderance of Francophone lecturers in English Universities who have no mastery of the English language; the alarming number of Francophone students in English Universities who lack a mastery of the English language while English speaking students cannot have admission; Anglophone students are forced to write end of course examination poorly translated from French (Mukong and Afanou 2).

The Government snubbed both the Lawyers memorandum and the Teachers petition. Their frustration became sufficient and prolonged which degenerated into violence. The Presidents of the constituents associations that make-up Common Law Lawyers: Barrister Felix Agbor Balla, President Fako Lawyers Association (FAKLA); Philip Atubah, President Meme Lawyers Association (MELA); Harmony Bobga, President Northwest Lawyers Association; and Emilien Sobseh of Manyu Lawyers Association (MALA) met in Bamenda on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2016 and declared a four-day sit-down strike action from 11<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> October 2016 renewable until the Government provides a satisfactory solution to their demands (Abah 6). Instead of harkening to the demands of the Lawyer, the Government rather rained down verbal grenades on them with the Minister of Justice and Keeper of the Seals, Luarent Easo dismissing them as ranting Anglophone Lawyers who will not hesitate to go back to the Courts when battered by hunger (Abah 6). From Bamenda the lawyers moved to Buea and the other towns of Anglophone Cameroon. The Government responded with reckless brutality with some lawyers sustaining injuries. The brutality meted on the lawyers did not daunt the Teachers who declared an indefinite strike action from 21<sup>st</sup> November. During the strike there shall be complete shutdown of schools from Nursery to University level, public, private and confessional in the English sub-system until practical steps are taken to solve the Teachers' grievances (Ngwoh 180).

The Lawyers / Teachers strike sooner than later degenerated into a civil strife. It was poorly managed by the Government and so was hijacked by civil society expressing deep-seated grievances calling for federation and in some instances outright secession from the *La Republic du Cameroun*. It created an avenue for political parties to showcase either support for the ruling Government or ability as peace mediator. The Social Democratic Front (SDF) of Ni John Fru Ndi took the lead holding rallies in Bamenda and Buea, the capitals of the two English speaking regions of Cameroon. The ruling Cameroon People Democratic Movement (CPDM) followed suit organizing rallies in Buea and Bamenda. The rally in the former was successful as it went peacefully. The rally in Bamenda on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2016 turned violent. The population of Bamenda viewed it as a

provocation; Paul Atanga Nji had declared in a televised programme that there is no Anglophone problem (Abah 6). Just before the rally started, the population attacked the CPDM men and the police responded with teargas and guns. The situation escalated and went out of control leading to much damage and loss of lives (Mukong and Afanou 3).

Over the weekend of 26- 27<sup>th</sup> November 2016, the Prime Minister, Philemon Yang visited Bamenda to seek solutions to the Teachers' and Lawyers grievances. In Bamenda he held separate meetings with traditional rulers, politicians, teachers and lawyers. Nothing substantial filtered from the meeting as the Teachers and Lawyers were still resolved to continue with the strike action until the Government starts providing practical solutions to their demands. The involvement of traditional rulers, politicians and political parties-led rallies was the beginning of the politicization of the Lawyers and Teachers strike and revoking the North West-South West divide.

### **Politicizing the Lawyers and Teachers Strike**

The Lawyers and Teachers strike was a momentous event in the history of Cameroon. It afforded an opportunity for many, particularly, the marginalized Anglophone Cameroonians to express their long-seated grievances against the local authorities and the state government at large. Political profiteers saw in it a chance to garner support for forthcoming elections and, some out rightly demonized it for personal interest.

The history of the Anglophone crisis would hardly be complete without the mention of Mancho Bibixy, the author of the "Coffin Revolution." On 21<sup>st</sup> November 2016, the day the Teachers started their strike, Bibixy, a famous radio presenter in Bamenda in the North West Region of Cameroon launched the Coffin Revolution at the Bamenda City Chemist Roundabout. He vented out frustration on the Bamenda Government Delegate and the Biya regime in general for the neglect of a once vibrant and clean city of Bamenda (Mbunwe 2). A Coffin Revolution was strange phenomenon in contemporary strike actions in Bamenda and Cameroon as a whole and quickly attracted the population who joined him in a peaceful march to the



premise of the Bamenda City Council. The march turned violent with the intervention of the forces of law and order resulting in the arrest of many of the protesters (Mbunwe 2). The coffin revolution was totally and absolutely unconnected to the industrial demands of the Lawyers and Teachers. It was a digression that awakened Anglophone feeling of marginalization quickly drifting the concerns of the lawyers and teachers to the orbit of the general Anglophone problem.

Some Bakweri chiefs of Buea Subdivision led by Chief Njombe took exception to the Anglophone problem as they demonized it for personal reasons. On 24<sup>th</sup> October 2016, these Chiefs rallied themselves and took advantage of Prime Minister Philemon Yang's visit to Buea to evaluate the state of preparedness of the city to host African Women Cup of Nations (AWCON) and imposed an audience on the Prime Minister. These chiefs needed the Prime Minister's support for their craving for part of University of Buea land (Abah 1-2). In their desperation, they backstabbed the common Anglophone cause, dissociated themselves from the demands of the Common Law Lawyers and Teachers. It was an effort in futility.

The leading political parties in Cameroon, the CPDM and the SDF also exploited the crisis to make political capital. The crisis started on the eve the election year, 2018. Municipal, Legislative, Senatorial and Presidential elections were expected in 2018 and political profiteers seized advantage of the crisis to win support from the electorates. The SDF took the kick-off on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2016, with a rally in Bamenda. The SDF Mayors, Members of Parliament and Senators marched to the office of the North West Governor, Adolphe Lele L'Afrique and condemned the brutality of the Security forces on the citizens (Fokwen 6). The SDF won the sympathy of the people as it identified itself with the disenfranchised masses. From Bamenda, the SDF moved down to Buea. The local CPDM party leadership was not comfortable with the quick political gains of the SDF and blocked the latter's MPs and Senators in the Parliamentarian Flat Hotel (Fokwen 6). However, the planned rally at the Molyko stadium went on unperturbed. The SDF's party Chairman, Ni John Fru Ndi addressed the burning issues of the moment, the lawyers and teachers concerns. The rally re-assured the party's followers and

sympathizers the unwavering support of the party to be reciprocated at elections.

The CPDM also organized rallies in Buea and Bamenda. The Buea rally went on peacefully. The rally in Bamenda on 8<sup>th</sup> December 2016 turned violent. The population of Bamenda viewed it as a provocation since elite of the region (Paul Atanga Nji) had declared on the state owned Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) that there is no Anglophone problem (Mukong and Afanou 3). Before the rally started, the population attacked the CPDM militants and the police responded with tear gas and guns. The situation escalated and went out of control leading to much material damage and loss of lives. It turned sad for the CPDM and the party became even more unpopular in the area. Other parties too manipulated the crisis for political gains. Providing a solution or solving the Anglophone problem became a buzzword for political parties. Professor Maurice Kamto of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC) accused the International Community of silence in the face of the Anglophone problem. Edith Kah Walla of the Cameroon Peoples Party (CPP) joined the political narrative in the twist and turns of the crisis (Fokwen 6). Another element of political manipulation was, whittling the Lawyers and Teachers' concerns.

Over the weekend of 26<sup>th</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> November 2016, the Prime Minister was in Bamenda to hold meetings with the Lawyers and Teachers and some other concern stakeholders. He held separate meetings with traditional rulers, politicians, teachers and lawyers. The meetings with traditional rulers was whittling the crisis as these authorities were surrogates of the state administration and in some instances lacked the savvy of the judicial and educational issues a stake. The meeting with the politicians was just to diffuse and derail the people from the focus of the struggle. At the end of the weekend nothing substantial filtered from the discussions except the lawyers and teachers resolve to continue with strike until the government starts providing practical solutions to their concerns indicated earlier (Mukong and Afanou 4).

A historic event one would scarcely omit in the historiography of the Anglophone crisis is, the address of the Parliament by the MP for Jakiri constituency, Honorable

Joseph Wirba at the December plenary sitting in 2016. The parliamentary session was going on in the heat of the crisis in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon and the legislators, particularly, those of the two regions were silenced over it, partly, for party discipline. Honorable Wirba in anger broke the silence as he exploded:

I am angry and incensed, almost at the point of losing my mind, that police tortured, raped and maimed children in Buea and you are here talking about budget. Our ancestors trusted you but you have betrayed them in this union. We (West Cameroonians) will resist you. (Abah 7)

Even the Speaker of the house Cavaye Yeguie Djibril could not stop him as he carried his speech to the end. From the parliament in Yaounde, Honorable Wirba organized a rally in Kumbo, the divisional headquarters of Bui in the North West region where he called on resistance against oppressive forces [Cameroon Forces]. From Kumbo, the caravan was to move to Kumba and then to Buea both in the South West region. By December 2016, the industrial strike of the lawyers and teachers had almost morphed to a political strife demanding a change of the form of government with a call for the return to a two-state federation and in some instances outright secession. It caused panic down the spine of the government who revived its divide and rule policy of fueling division between the North West and South West, the two English speaking regions.

### **Re-birth of the *come-no-go* syndrome**

The *come-no-go* divide had petered out in political rhetoric since 2002 when the CPDM took over all the Councils in the Fako Division and in most parts of the South West Region. With the establishment of the supremacy of the CPDM, some relative calm returned in the region. The relations between the insiders (South Westerners) and the outsiders (North westerners) improved. The escalation of crisis in the two English speaking regions of Cameroon revoked the divide and rule policy to fuel division between a people with a common culture and historical heritage. Political

entrepreneurs and party leaders manipulated the masses against a common Anglophone cause by renewing instrumental difference between the two English speaking regions. On the 6<sup>th</sup> December 2016, CPDM militants of the South West region met at Bongo Square, Buea in what was styled “CPDM South West Grand Rally” denounced federalism and calls for secession. The placards and banners at the rally carried different messages with one central theme; the South West condemns violence as a method to solve problems. The people of the South West are for dialogue and mutual understanding (Adams and Nsoseka 3).

The emphasis on the ‘people of the South West’ insinuates division; people of the South West condemn violence as opposed to the people of the North West [emphasis mine] who are pruned to the use of violence as a solution to problems. The stress on the non-violent and peace loving South Westerners was re-echoed by the ‘South West Living Forces’ led by Peter Mafany Musonge, Emilia Lifaka and Victor Mengot Arrey Nkongho at a meeting in Yaounde on 19<sup>th</sup> January 2017. They condemned what they termed violence, intimidations, destructions and threats meted out against peace loving South Westerners by negative forces (Nsoseka 4). All this was deliberately directed towards fueling hatred between the inhabitants of the English speaking regions resident in the South West and thus thwart their resolve for the protection of the legal and educational system inherited from the British.

The strike of the lawyers and teachers triggered so many meetings of the South West elite. On 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2017 the ‘South West Forum’ brought together a cross section of the region’s elite to crusade for schools resumption. This had in record many hate speeches drawing lines of division between the two English speaking regions. Worthy of mention is the hate speech of Professor Nalova Lyonga, Vice Chancellor of the University of Buea:

This is a generation that is so used to violence because they have been oriented by their own caretakers, their mentors who are from the North West. People are talking about marginalization, have they asked themselves how many North Westerners we have in the University of Buea? How many of those who teach

are South Westerners? They say most of the students in the University of Buea are francophones; can they prove that? But how many graffies (sic) [North westerners] are in the University . . . (Ekema 3)

Nalova clearly labeled the North Westerners as violent and as the earlier elite had it, blamed the latter for the destructions in the South West region. Unfortunately for the South West elite, the younger generations have outgrown the elite manipulation and are convinced in the solidarity of Anglophone Cameroonians as the ammunition against the marginalization of the latter.

The first reaction to the xenophobic speeches of the South West Living Forces and the South West Forum came from a purported Fako Youth Council led by Wolete Evelyn (Secretary General) and Ekema Divine (Public Relations Officer). Some twenty two youths of Fako Division of the South West region of Cameroon under the banner of the Fako Youth Council met shortly after the South West Forum of 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2017. They condemned in very strong terms the language of hate, the xenophobic attacks by the South west elite on the North Westerners whom the elite styled as the perpetrators of violence in the South West. They declared:

We hereby condemn such statements in the strongest terms . . . the youths of West Cameroon want to make former Prime Minister [Musonge] and his cohorts to understand that such words from them make us stronger and more united than ever. (Nsoseka 9)

They asked the elite to stop the North West-South West divide. They concluded “you can never split us again” (Nsoseka 9). Evidently, *come-no-go*, divide and rule, the constructed North West-South West dichotomy has lost manipulative charm.

The next reaction against the South West Forum came from Senator Mbella Moki, elite of the South West. A pre-occupation to the elite in the North West and South West regions was, the crusade for schools reopening. The South West elite had accused the North Westerners resident in the region for disrupting schools thereby, preventing children

from freely going to school. The Senator exonerated the North Westerners and blamed the failure of schools reopening on lack of leadership, the failure of the elite to play their role to get their children back to school. He stated:

I travelled to Mamfe and in an interior village without a single Bamenda man I see students and parents religiously respecting the ghost towns. Here in Buea go to the most interior villages and ask the children why they are not going to school, the whole thing is about threat of what is not existing. There is no leadership, let us be real. (Ekema 3)

It was clear the manipulation of difference between the North West and South West had outlived its usefulness as it crumbled in the face of rising Anglophone Cameroon nationalism. In spite of the difference, instrumental or primordial between the English speaking regions of Cameroon, they always act in unison in defense of their common Anglophone culture incarnated in the legal and educational system. The restoration of the Cameroon Anglophone solidarity has yielded some dividends as evaluated from the on-going Anglophone crisis.

### **Fruits of Anglophone Cameroon Solidarity**

The lawyers and teachers have reaped some successes from the united front in the on-going crisis. The Government has made some concessions to the Anglophone Cameroonians. The OHADA business law has been translated from French to English, creation of a specialised Common Law division in the Supreme Court, a Common Law department in the Advance School of Administration and Magistracy (ENAM), and creation of Common Law Department in the state Universities (Kinsai 11). The last concession, however, fell short of the Lawyers demand as they wanted a Law School in the University of Buea.

In the Educational sector, the Government through the ministry of Secondary Education made a total of 4.3 billion fcfa subsidy to lay private and confessional schools as part solution of the demands of the teachers. In Higher Education, the Department of French Modern Letters was

created in the University of Bamenda (Kinsai 11). Concessions in the educational sector are largely recommendations and not concrete reforms. Where such recommendations were effected, they remain clouded as the civil strife unfolds.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the relations between the two English speaking regions of Cameroon between 1996 and 2017. In 1916 the British took over the administration of the Southern Cameroons and introduced labels like 'lazy natives' and 'hardworking strangers' for the coastal insiders and Bamenda immigrants respectively. This established the dichotomy between the South West and North West intended by the colonial administration to ensure a regular supply of labor to the plantations.

The colonial construct was manipulated by the political elite during the decolonization of the territory to win votes from the electorates by fueling division. In 1961 Southern Cameroons gained independence and unified with *La Republique du Cameroun*. The North West-South West divide seemed to have hibernated in the long spate of the monolithic state. The rebirth of multiparty politics in 1990 and the Anglophone Cameroon struggle against marginalization revived the old divide between the two English speaking regions with the *come-no-go* syndrome. It was used by the post-colonial regime to trivialize and demonize the Anglophone problem. It was revoked in the current Anglophone crisis in Cameroon to derail the two regions from their focus, the protection of Anglophone culture. The study concludes that in spite of the difference, primordial or instrumental between the two English speaking regions of Cameroon, they are united in defense of their cultural colonial heritage—legal and educational system.

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## ABSTRACTS

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**David Amadio**, *Men of Ice and Steel: Richard Kuklinski, Clark Kent, and the Fortress of Identity*

This essay compares the duality of Clark Kent and Superman to that of Richard Kuklinski and the Ice Man. Because of the extreme nature of their public lives, the superhero and the hit man create separate identities that they assume when in private—one a journalist, the other a family man. They expend a great deal of energy holding the line between their two selves, enduring personal anguish and social isolation to preserve the front. Though they reside at opposite ends of the moral spectrum, both are driven by a fear of disclosure, which, as their personas mature, becomes the overriding problem of their lives. Truth, for them, is anathema, yet it is a weight they carry as the sole possessors of the secret. For Superman, unburdening that weight—coming clean, so to speak—would subject him to the trifles of a rabid citizenry. Clark Kent at least gives him a chance to hide. For the Ice Man, it would have jeopardized the only thing that had ever made him happy: his family. Richard Kuklinski allowed him to love and be loved. Of course, some will say that such behavior is evasive, duplicitous, cheap, and that these men are nothing more than con-artists. Seekers of truth and transparency will want an explanation from both men, and this essay means to give it to them.

**Laurent Balagué**, *Mythe et vérité : la discussion d' Ernst Cassirer par Maurice Merleau-Ponty*

This paper draws a parallel between Ernst Cassirer's approach of mythical thought and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's. Its main focus is to show that mythical thought has been rehabilitated by the critique of Cassirer in his *Philosophie*

*der symbolischen Formen*. This has been made through a questioning of the symbolic approach. The main problem is that a myth cannot be considered as something that belongs to truth understood as fact, neither can it be considered as something that is completely unreal. The discussion between the two philosophers focuses on the methodological approach of the myth. We have to know whether the myth is an object that can be described or if science has to change its object in order to describe it. Considering the second option, Maurice Merleau-Ponty shows that this understanding of myth changes the essence of truth: truth cannot only be considered as the report of fact or fiction; it has also to consider how we are opened to the world. This question relates to what the philosopher calls the “flesh.”

**Julius Bonkorog**, *Crossing over the come-no-go Divide: A Historical Discourse on Relations between the English-Speaking Regions of Cameroon, 1996- 2017*

This study examines the relations between the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon in the light of the ongoing Anglophone crisis. Through a qualitative analysis of secondary sources and newspaper reports, the paper argues that the *come-no-go* politics of exclusion and its inherent *divide et impera* has lost its manipulative charm. The North West and South West make up the two English-speaking regions, former British territories of Cameroon. The relations between the two regions have been manipulated by different actors in different historical periods. The colonial administration constructed *otherness* between the two regions to ensure a steady supply of labor to the coastal plantations. The constructed differences were exploited by the political entrepreneurs during the era of decolonization to garner votes from the electorates and drive through their political platforms. The post-colonial regime fanned the embers of division to thwart an Anglophone Cameroon common front against assimilation by the French majority. In October 2016, the Lawyers of the Common Law extraction started a strike action and were joined by Teachers of the English expression in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2016, against what they consider as a gradual erosion of the English legal and

educational system in the afore regions. The strike action revived the North West-South West cleavages, an elite manipulation to derail the struggle. The paper concludes that in spite of difference, primordial or instrumental, the two English speaking regions are united in the protection of their common cultural heritage.

**Eimma Chebinou**, The Gaze: Deception and Revelation of Hidden Truth in Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (1956), and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* (1957)

The question of the gaze and the other has been widely debated in psychoanalysis and postcolonial studies. There has also been a great deal of scholarship on the subversive role of the gaze in a colonial context. However, current scholarship has not yet described how the gaze functions as a tool of deception and lies. For this project, I choose two novels: *La jalousie* by Alain Robbe-Grillet (1957) and *Une vie de boy* by Ferdinand Oyono (1956). My presentation addresses the issue of the gaze as deceptive and as a witness of deception. By observing the intimacy of adultery, the main character in both novels reveals some weaknesses and, most of all, Truth. In *Une vie de boy*, Toundi's gaze mirrors the guilt of the other, his innocent gaze is a bit deceptive. Truth owned by the eye-bearer is never revealed. In *La Jalousie*, the husband's gaze acts as a mirror of his own guilt. His gaze turns as a tool of obsession that makes the husband and the wife both deceiving. Otherness and voyeurism modify the self-perception of the character and deconstruct his identity by making him aware of who he is through the other. The gaze plays a role in enhancing the power of Toundi's character, while it leads to the loss of control for the husband in *La jalousie*. Nevertheless, the husband and Toundi are both oppressed. In conclusion, by closely examining how the gaze functions, this project sheds new light on the neglected power of the deceiving gaze that reveals hidden truth, which confirms Sartre's view that "Hell is other people."

**Raymond Delambre**, Mythologie du féminisme et du socialisme accouinés sur les écrans en République populaire de Chine: 古為今用

This paper centers 古為今用, *Gu Wei Jin Yong*: the past to serve the present. Alongside the impressive growth of the domestic market, the second largest in terms of box office performance, in recent years the People's Republic of China has promoted its productions abroad under 走出去, *Zou Chu Qu*. Going out policy. Export a view of the world. The article deals with lies, if not half-truths, through PRC's movies, Sun Yu and Feng Xiao Gang, examining the interaction between history and fiction, and showing how disciplines are affected. Fake feminism, buzzword as a "cover story", reframes. Visual arts, political science are specifically engaged. Entertainment, illusionism, and manipulation converge: communists have more fun. Leftist masquerade rewrites facts. *No res ipsa loquitur*: the thing doesn't speak for itself among non-Chinese, unlike Hollywood. Cultural discount is (great) wall, not exclusively due to the missing background knowledge, but also the way the story is told. The essay unfolds an exegesis of specific materials, especially 乘风破浪 and 一九四二. The geopolitics of cinema is endogenously and externally determined. Factors, intertwined, overlap each other: what the author calls Soft Cold War, jolly significant.

**Camille Duplaa**, Evolution of a Myth Live: the Poppy Project Example

Poppy is an American pop singer who has become viral since her debut in 2014. She started with a YouTube channel called "That Poppy" in which she shares her songs as well as short format videos. She talks about her love for money, celebrity and technology as well as other diverse and varied topics. She could be confused with the countless pop singers of her time. But Poppy has found a way to get away from it and share cryptic and critical content about the world of pop culture. Because Poppy is not only a singer with an offbeat universe, she is a character from an artistic project, played by an actress named Moriah Pereira. She embodies pop culture and its values, including its taste for consumer products and social networks. But this incarnation goes beyond a mere allegorical representation. By investing the fundamentals of popular culture, Poppy's character makes a mockery of them

and thus makes it possible to question the lifestyle of this pop culture. This questioning takes the form of parodic content which is part of a narrative fiction highlighting the identity evolution of Poppy's character. From the girl who dreams of breaking into the world of music, Poppy gradually changes behavior. Her identity evolution as well as its growing glory go hand in hand with a more and more lively representation of elements stemming from modern mythologies: the world of the Illuminati and the androids.

**Samira Etouil**, *Réalité et transculturalité dans *La Pharaone* de Hédi Bouraoui*

This paper is about the transcultural approach to reality in *La Pharaone*, a novel by Hédi Bouraoui. Transcultural values, as reflected in this creative work, imply a multidimensional reading of reality. In this sense, concepts such as “nomaditude” or “vivance transculturelle” are studied keeping in mind how they modulate processes related to othering and synthetizing while avoiding normative meaning. That is why Egyptian mythology as well as dreamlike worlds are treated as mechanisms of substitution of a multi-layered reality. As part of a story, these narrations follow a synchronic movement. Its study can help understand their complementarity and also explore the multi referential reality they translate. The transtextuality phenomenon is of interest in the sense that it allows examining how the relation between the mythological and the diegetic is essentially reciprocal.

**Ikram Hili**, *Mining the Riches of Sylvia Plath's Manuscripts: “Finisterre” as a Case Study*

Sylvia Plath's intricate poetry has fascinated generations of readers. While we now recognize that her work lends itself to multiple readings, the initial critical reception of her work consisted almost exclusively of confessional and biographical approaches. Less sympathetic readers have, therefore, viewed her work as an insipid outburst of oozing abreactions, a pathetic venting of unrelenting anger, and an egregious depiction of domestic failures. Recent reappraisals of her art, however, have shown that Plath's works lend themselves to

cultural and political readings as well, laying bare the difficulties that a woman writer faces in a sexist and patriarchal society such as that of post-war America. In this paper, I propose a reading of her poem “Finisterre” (1961) as an allegory of the poet’s literary journey in search for a genuine voice of her own. Beginning with the printed version of the poem, I show the speaker/poet stranded in a “land’s end” littered with dead soldiers, which I take to represent the words of a poet aspiring to make herself part of the “great” male tradition of writing. An archeology, as it were, of Plath’s manuscripts of poems helps reveal a great deal about things that the poet felt reluctant to share with her reading public at the time. Parsing the poet’s drafts of “Finisterre,” specifically the last stanza that she omitted from the final poetic product, I show Plath announcing the triumph of writing and imagination over religion—evidence that I was able to dig out from Plath’s boxes of manuscripts through a close scrutiny of the poet’s creative energy at the time she was composing the poem.

**Edward Egbo Imo, Stand-up Comedy as an Alternative Theatre Reality in Nigeria**

The paper examines stand-up comedy as an emergent and alternative theatre reality in Nigeria. The paper is set against the backdrop that stand-up comedy in Nigeria is a child of circumstance which origin was necessitated by the decline of live theatre practice as a result of the failure of the government to implement the stipulations in her cultural policy. Stand-up comedy is therefore conceived as a consolation for the loss of live theatre entertainment in Nigeria. The argument put forward in this paper is that, although stand-up comedy lacks the full complement of conventional theatre, its characteristic performance mode embodies such crucial theatrical elements as drama, music, costume, make up, characterization and audience response. The methodology of the research is highly sociological and artistic while the approach is quantitative. The major finding of the study is that stand-up comedy in Nigeria commands huge socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic potentials even as it satisfies the hunger for live theatre entertainment amongst Nigerians. It is for the foregoing that



the paper canvasses the need for the integration of stand-up comedy courses into the secondary and tertiary educational curricula in Nigeria.

**Ouassila Korichi**, *A Writer's Avatar: Self-Fictionalization in James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003)*

Throughout history, people have been practicing life-writing, some in a private way in their diaries and others publically through autobiographical writing. This article analyzes James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (AMLP), which is classified by genre as a memoir. Therefore, it provides a promise of truthfulness and reality to its readers. However, the content of the memoir was accused of being untruthful. Actually, there is a mixture of fact and fiction within the body of the text that raises questions about the legitimacy of their existence together since generally speaking, fiction is prohibited from existing in a non-fictional work. In this paper, it is argued that fact and fiction can actually exist together under the umbrella of autofiction, in which the author creates a mythical figure i.e., an avatar that he exposes to the public. Thence, this paper problematizes the fact and fiction dichotomy, and brings questions about the dividing lines between them in autobiographical writing to the front. It also responds to questions about the self and the process of its fictionalization. To this end, Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality and theories about self-fictionalization by Doubrovsky and others are invoked for the analysis of the text.

**Loïse Lelevé**, *Conspiracy Theories, Storytelling and Forgers: Towards a Paradoxical Ethics of Truth in Contemporary European Fiction?*

In postmodern Europe, two phenomena seem to have converged to challenge fiction's ability to deliver truthful accounts. The renewed popularity of conspiracy theories and the vogue of storytelling as a management tool appear to blur the boundaries between facts and fiction. In response, contemporary interest for factual literature might be the symptom of a "reality hunger" that resorts to nonfiction rather than to fiction to analyze and discuss social

evolutions. However, there also emerges in contemporary literature a new fictional trend of falsification novels, narratives dealing with forgers and their forgeries. Such novels are proof that nonfiction is not the only ethical horizon for contemporary literature to deal with the difficult question of the divulgence of truth. Contemporary European falsification novels may well be a prime example of the drive of contemporary fiction to put its relationship to truth back into play. In fact, representing the fabrication of a forgery resorting to storytelling techniques to elaborate a conspiracy theory allows writers to challenge their readers to a playful fictive investigation using an ironic form of veridicity to confer to literature a new ethical dimension, relying on the unveiling of the deeply polysemous nature of reality.

**Abbes Maazaoui**, *Leurre littéraire et mensonge romanesque*

The article examines the foundations of what it terms the *leurre*, a rhetorical strategy that combines playful seduction, irony and practical joke, and blurs the borders between playing and lying, reality and fiction. To illustrate this rhetorical process, the article analyzes in details a cornucopia of deceptive strategies used by Robbe-Grillet in his groundbreaking novel, *Les Gommages*, to disguise his intentions, lull the reader and entice him into misinterpreting the events. Grounding his approach on well- thought- out stylistic, grammatical, semantic and narrative logic, the narrator skillfully manages to create the factual belief that expressed intentions are not what they seem.

**Marco J. Prost**, *De la traîtresse à la sorcière: imaginaire et représentations de l'héroïne rusée condamnée au bûcher dans la littérature courtoise médiévale.*

This article studies the structures of domination put in place by the courtly society of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, as they appear throughout its literature, by questioning the motif of female characters condemned to be burnt at the stake. That punishment, at a time predating condemnations for witchcraft, is depicted as a mean of oppression against women who are outside of patriarchal social control, and

who show their independent way of acting, often through the use of deception and the display of a free sexual life, or—to put it in terms of literary archetype—by behaving as *female heroes* rather than *heroines*. But these texts do not only denounce burnings at the stake as unjust punishments inflicted upon women, who are often shown to be the collateral victims of a male fight for domination. Literature from around 1200 also sheds light on how the punishment by fire, while having little to do yet with heresy and witchcraft testifies to the strong anxiety towards uncontrolled female otherness, which, by seeking to escape from masculine domination, ends being assimilated with a monstrosity, a manifestation of evil to be destroyed. Thus, while medieval courtly literature showed patriarchal domination at work against an oppressed female figure, it also anticipated by nearly two centuries how the early modern imaginary represented women and their sexuality as oppressive, and the consequences thereof. Moreover, it appears that the condemnation of witchcraft or female deception as inspired by the devil was not so much the reason for condemning them to death, as the consequence of the need for a valid reason to invalidate their behaviour outside of sanctioned norms.

**Biliana Vassileva**, *Alternative Realities in the Arts or the Impossible Proof of Aesthetic Perception*

The current research paradigms of aesthetics are actively renewing themselves: each new art work requires the invention of a method derived from its own “within” subtle mechanism. The unique creative process and its outcomes can be captured only by full immersion in its singular aura. Thus new questions arise, especially when researchers are confronted with multicultural art sources, in order to stir in depth the tradition of Western aesthetics. I begin with the researcher’s “posture,” avoiding judgement: the researcher’s academic posture has been modified in the PhD research creation project, developed by performer researcher Pauline Le Boulba; *Watching Dance, Dancing its perception* (title translated from French by the author - *Regarder la danse, danser sa réception*), at the University of Paris 8. Le Boulba has decided to renew art critique method, and even to

transform it into a performance practice. She offers new option of how to give a different, or even to avoid to give any, account of dance performances seen; instead of watching a performance, followed by a process of writing about it, she has decided to dwell on the kinesthetic traces and echoes she's experiencing after the phase of active perception of the art work, and responding to it with a selection of other art works. I continue with the researcher's perspective, avoiding certainty: in a similar way, in an essay about the invention of a new kinetic model of watching visual arts and choreography. I have explored the concept of creating a visual and kinesthetic arts atlas, along the lines of that proposed by German art historian Aby Warburg in 1929. This atlas affords dance scholars the ability to enhance their perception by applying a mapping strategy that links artworks, including visual art objects, choreography, image and video. Special attention is paid to detecting the subtexts across a range of kinetic metaphors, symbols and motifs in works by Ohad Naharin, Sharon Eyal and Gai Behar, Roy Assaf, Noa Zuk and Ohad Fishof. The essay demonstrates a new application of an earlier mode of research methods derived from the field of art history, mostly based on work with visual data, though often combined also with the analysis of literary sources, far from any strategy of conveying in an objective way a subjective artistic point of view. The study highlights also the artists' point of view on multiplicity of aesthetic perception at work without any need of evidence, proof or scientific measure.

**Olivier Wicky**, *Femmes médiévales et femmes fatales dans la littérature moderne*

What sort of influences did the medieval stereotypes about the deceiving women (or sometimes faeries or demons disguised as women) have on French literature during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period where many writers, especially those linked to catholic or right-wing environments, had a deep fascination for the Middle Ages? To answer this question, this article analyses two novels and a short story—written by Charles Maurras, Maurice Barrès and Pierre Benoit—, each portraying a “femme fatale” using lies, illusions and betrayal to lure her male victims toward

sin, craziness or even death. All of these texts are linked to the medieval period by their context or their themes (Crusades, Cathar heresy, etc.) and represent several sides of the *topoi* about devilish women like heretics or witches, using deception and hiding their true nature, figures that were already present in Arthurian myths and Inquisition's treaties.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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**David Amadio** teaches creative writing and composition at Lincoln University, where he also edits the campus literary magazine, *SIMBAA*. He received his MFA in Fiction from Bowling Green State University in 2001. His work has appeared in *Talking River*, *Masque & Spectacle*, *Packingtown Review*, and *The San Francisco Examiner*. He lives in suburban Philadelphia with his wife and two children.

**Laurent Balagué** wrote his PHD thesis on « langage et histoire chez Maurice Merleau-Ponty ». (2008) His most recent papers focuses on the question of imaginary. His favorite authors are Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze or Elias Canetti. He tries to think the ties between author belonging to hermeneutic tradition like Paul Ricoeur or Hans-Georg Gadamer and philosophers or thinkers who do not believe in hermeneutics, but belongs to the so called « french theory » like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida or Gilles Deleuze.

**Julius Bongkorog** holds a PhD in Social History from the University of Yaounde I, Cameroon. He is a high teacher and has taught History for more than a decade in some schools around Buea. His research area of interest is on inter- ethnic relations.

**Eïmma Chebinou** holds a Master in Didactique des langues et cultures from Paris III La Sorbonne, and a Master in Francophone Literature from USF (Tampa, FL) with a thesis entitled “Identité féminine et amour interculturel dans *Shéhérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* de Leïla Sebbar, *Mon examen de blanc* de Jacqueline Manicom et *Le*

*Baobab* Fou de Ken Bugul.” She is currently a third year PhD student at Florida State University. Her research explores the complex interconnections between ethnography, diaspora and aesthetics in literature, cinema and hip hop music.

**和萌 Raymond Delambre**, born in Paris (Marais), former student of Michel Serres, graduated from Sciences Po. Curator-in-Chief, longstanding specialist in Asian cinema, civilization, contemporary art, Zhou Xuan, Paul Claudel, and Jules Verne. Raymond Delambre teaches at France Direct School. He is also playwright (Satoshi Miyagi, Daniel Mesguich for stage), worked with Golden Lion Su-Mei Tse, Golden Bear Tsai Ming Liang, Golden Leopard Xiaolu Guo, Mami Kiyoshi, Li Yang. Raymond Delambre won many prizes, including Fondation franco-japonaise Sasakawa, aide à la création (ministère de la culture), prix Cinéma (Bal de Paris). Raymond Delambre is the author of numerous books and articles, which address major social concerns. He has written on topics ranging from the legal system to the media, in order to unpack the complex rise of China as a global power. His books include: *Le cinéma sur les cimaises*, Paris: 7° art, 2013; *Ombres électriques: les cinémas chinois*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf; Corlet: Condé, 2008. His most recent publications include: “Pour la similitude chez Li An *alias* Ang Lee”, “Le cinéma taïwanais: une autre cinématographie chinoise”, “Entretien avec Han Ming”, *L’Avant-Scène Cinéma* 632 (2016): 14-21, 34-43, 44-49; *Festival du Cinéma chinois de Paris*, Scope Éditions: Paris, 2009-16; “Entretien avec Justine Malle autour de (la) *Jeunesse*”, *CinémAction* 161 (2016): 168-78; “*A Touch of Sin*, tableau de la Chine d’aujourd’hui”, “Cinéastes chinois d’aujourd’hui”, “Le cinéma chinois: un paysage ondoyant”, “La Chine, puissance cinématographique de demain (voire d’hier)”, *L’Avant-Scène Cinéma* 625 (2015): 4-17, 36-53, 54-61, 62-69; “Hollywood aux caractéristiques chinoises?”, *Monde Chinois, nouvelle Asie* 36 (2013): 81-86; and “Comment Wang Bing déplaça Joris Ivens de son piédestal”, “Au Fossé de la Grande Famine maoïste: pauvreté absolue sous obédience”, *CinémAction* 149 (2013): 7, 98-107, 148-56.

**Camille Duplaa** is a PhD student at Paris-Nanterre University. Her thesis focuses on the cult of the mother goddess in the Christian era. Her research interests include also the reception of mythological discourses and their creation in the contemporary world.

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**Ikram Hili** is a former graduate of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities of Sfax (2007) and of the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Tunis (2010). She pursued her PhD at the Faculty of Arts, Letters and Humanities of Manouba, Tunis, where she was awarded her PhD degree with very honorable distinction (2017). Hili currently works as an Assistant Professor at the Higher Institute of Applied Languages of Moknine, Monastir, where she teaches literature and translation. Her main fields of interest are 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Poetry, Modern Manuscript Studies, Archival Works and Culture Studies. She is a former Fulbright Visiting Scholar to Indiana University Bloomington and Smith College Massachusetts, where she worked closely with Sylvia Plath's Collections. She was recently awarded a postdoctoral fellowship at IU, being named a 2018 Summer Repository Research Fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study.

**Edward Egbo Imo** is a lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He holds a Ph.D. in Dramatic Theory and Criticism from the same university. He is an actor, master of ceremonies, playwright, critic, adapter, singer, screen writer, editor and proofreader. He has published several journal articles in local and international journals. He has also starred in several Nigerian video films. They include *Seven Graves for the King*, *Lost Focus* and *Twist of Fate*. He has also written a radio drama on unemployment titled *Fantastic Bazooka* which graced the airwaves of Ray Power 106.5 FM, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The courses he teaches include: Comic Spirit, Nigerian Theatre and Drama, Theatre of the Absurd, Elements of Drama and Dramatic Theory and Criticism. He is married to Madonna and this union is blessed with two daughters-Chinujinime and Chigwushime.



His major research interests include Theatre for Development, African Indigenous Performance Aesthetics, Stand-up Comedy and Music Theatre.

**Ouassila Korichi** is an Assistant Professor in the English department at ENS of Laghouat, Algeria. She teaches Grammar, Writing, British Literature and Didactics of Literature. She got her M.A. degree from Yarmouk University in Jordan. Her interest is in the field of literature and its teaching. She is working on her Ph.D. thesis in the field of Didactics of Literature. She taught in Alqusoor Academy in Jordan in 2012, and she has volunteered to teach English in Thailand in 2016. She is responsible for the Masters' Program in her department, starting from March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018.

**Loïse Lelevé** is a former student of the École Nationale Supérieure, and a French literature agrégée. She is preparing her Ph.D. thesis at Rennes 2 University (France) with Emmanuel Bouju as her advisor. Her research focuses on the figure of the forger in contemporary Italian, French and British novels and artworks. She is the author of several published articles, amongst which “Fictions de l’énigme: vers une poétique du faux tableau” (*RLC* XC, n° 1, janvier-mars 2016), and “Images meurtrières et discours historique à la fin du XX<sup>e</sup> et au début du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle” (*Fin de siècle : fin de l’art ? Destins de l’art dans les discours de la fin des XIX<sup>e</sup> et XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Cyril Barde, Hermeline Pernoud, Sylvia Chassaing (eds.), Paris, Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2018).

**Abbes Maazaoui** is Professor of French and Linguistics at Lincoln University of Pennsylvania. His books include *Making Strangers: Outsiders, Aliens and Foreigners* (April 2018), *The Arts of Memory and the Poetics of Remembering* (2016), *Proust et la claustration*, and *La Rhétorique du leurre dans Les Gommages d’Alain Robbe-Grillet*. He has also edited special issues of the *Lincoln Humanities Journal* on *Us and Them* (2017), *Panopticon: Surveillance, Suspicion, Fear* (2016), *Borders* (2014), and *Follow Your Passion: Representations of Passion in the Humanities* (2013). His essays on literary criticism and twentieth-century French

and Francophone literature have appeared in *Romance Notes*, *The French Review*, *Romance Quarterly*, *Études francophones*, *L'Esprit créateur*, and in various other critical collections. He is the founder and editor of *The Lincoln Humanities Journal*, and a member of the editorial board of the *Revue du Centre d'Études des Littératures et des Arts d'Afrique du Nord* (CELAAN).

**Marco J. Prost** graduated in medieval literature at the University of Geneva (M.A.) and then studied at the University of Oxford (M. St. in medieval studies). He is currently writing a Ph.D. thesis in medieval French at the University of Lausanne (jointly supervised at the University of Reading, UK) with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation. He researches the notions of fiction and deception in French epic and romance literatures from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, with a specific interest for Anglo-Norman texts, First Crusade epic, and the mechanisms of literary adaptations throughout various medieval languages. His publications include studies on medieval manuscripts, on *chansons de geste* (“Quand *Le Siège d'Antioche* remplace Troie: pour une lecture spirituelle du manuscrit de Spalding (BL, Add. 34114) et de son *Songe vert*.” *Par deviers Rome m'en renvenrai errant*. Ed. M. Careri et al. Rome: Viella, 2017. 251-262), as well as on courtly literature (“Female cunning on the edges of chivalry in Gerbert de Montreuil's *Continuation to the Conte du Graal*.” *On the Edge*. Ed. H. Mahood. *The Reading Medievalist*, 3 (2016): 40-60). He is currently investigating the mechanics of plot tension within medieval narratives.

**Biliana Vassileva** is a researcher and professor in dance and somatic studies, contemporary art and performance studies at the University of Lille - Nord de France since 2009. She obtained a Master (thesis on Pina Bausch's creative process) in 2001 and a Ph.d. in Dance Studies « William Forsythe's Improvisation Technologies : A Singular Approach » at La Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris III in 2007. Currently, she conducts qualitative research on dance and somatics through a transcultural fieldwork and practice based projects about improvisation embodiment.

**Olivier Wicky** is a PhD student at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland). His thesis explores the reception and rewriting of the medieval myths and literature during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (1905-1945). He wrote several articles about the political or religious use of the Middle Ages and his fields of research include French catholic authors, nationalism, Arthurian myths and heresies.

## Call for Articles for Volume 7 - Fall 2019

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*The Lincoln Humanities Journal* (ISSN 2474-7726) is seeking contributions for 7<sup>th</sup> **special issue**, to be published in December 2019, on the topic of ***Ab/uses of Power and Violence: Villains, Bullies and Tyrants***. Contributors are invited to examine critically (a) the making of the villain, the bully and the tyrant: myths and realities; (b) the various incarnations of the villain in art, literature, history, film, folktale, television, political life, international relations, and the media; (c) the mis/use of power, from bullying, harassment, sexual assault, to random violence and unprovoked wars; (d) the diversity of interpretations and perspectives: from heroes to villains, and vice versa; (e) the collective fascination with the figure of the 'bad guy'; (f) the evil political power against the rule of law and justice.

Topics may include but are not limited to:

- Villains, supervillains, tragic villains, sympathetic villains
- Monstrous monarchs and imperial tyrants
- Tyrannical bosses and mobsters
- Bandits and gangsters
- The bully: abuse of power
- Racial, ethnic, religious and sexual bullying
- Bullying in international relations, terrorism and the rogue nation
- Cruelty and violence in film, theater, literature, and television
- Forces of evil (in wars, famine, environmental disasters, etc.)
- Evil political power against the rule of law and justice
- Mad scientists and pirates as celebrated and despised figures
- Evil women, women and power: the femme fatale, the w/bitch, etc.
- The rebel as a sympathetic figure of neo-colonial resistance
- Ethical perspectives: ambivalence towards the bad guy

- Concept of heroism, myths and urban legends
- Heroes and anti-heroes

Full Article Submission Deadline: **June 15, 2019**. The submissions include an abstract of 200-400 words (in MS Word), a biographical note of 50-250 words (in MS Word), as well as the following statement, "*I solemnly confirm that the attached manuscript has never been published elsewhere, under this, or another title.*"

For all important submissions guidelines, see the next page of this journal.

**Please send your complete proposal to** Abbes Maazaoui, at [maazaoui@lincoln.edu](mailto:maazaoui@lincoln.edu) on or before June 15, 2019. All submissions are subject to double-blind review.

## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

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### Submission Guidelines

Articles that do not follow the following guidelines are automatically returned. They will be rejected from any further consideration if they are returned twice for incompleteness of information or formatting issues.

### Submission Guidelines

1. Include an abstract of 200-400 words (in MS Word)
2. Include a biographical note of 50-250 words (in MS Word)
3. The article should be 4000-6000 words, including the abstract, the footnotes and the works cited
4. Include the following statement in the cover e-mail: *"I solemnly confirm that the attached manuscript has never been published elsewhere, under this, or another title."*
5. Include name, professional affiliation, phone number, and email address in the cover e-mail.
6. If needed, written permission(s) from the copyright holder(s) to reproduce any copyright images, visuals or materials quoted beyond the fair use as defined by the Copyright Law of the United States should be obtained by the author upon article acceptance.

### Formatting Guidelines

7. Manuscripts should conform to MLA-style guidelines as detailed in recent editions of *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*.
8. Use font Georgia # 12. The entire article, including the abstract and the indented quotations, should be double-spaced, and in MS Word.

### Submission & Review Process

Articles should be submitted electronically to Abbes Maazaoui, Editor ([maazaoui@lincoln.edu](mailto:maazaoui@lincoln.edu)). Articles undergo a (double) blind review process.

### **Deadlines**

- The deadline for submitting manuscripts is June 15, 2019.
- The online and paper versions are published in November-December, 2019.

### **Acceptance and Publication:**

Once a submission is accepted for publication, the author will be asked to provide the following to the Editor by e-mail to [maazaoui@lincoln.edu](mailto:maazaoui@lincoln.edu).

- A final, fully revised version of the article
- A final, fully revised abstract. The abstract must be in English.
- A biographical note of 50-250 words

### **Copyright**

It reverts to the author after one year provided that acknowledgement is made to the article's publication in *The Lincoln Humanities Journal*.

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- *Borders* (Volume 2, 2014)
- *Memory and the Poetics of Remembering* (Volume 3, 2015)
- *Panopticon: Surveillance, Suspicion, Fear* (Volume 4, 2016)
- *Us and Them* (Volume 5, 2017)
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To contact the editor, send an email to: [maazaoui@lincoln.edu](mailto:maazaoui@lincoln.edu).



Fall 2018 | Volume 6

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