

The Eternal Return Interrupted: the evolution of the myth of Cythera until today

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Abstract

What this article explores is how the myth of Cythera is developed and returns in French literature, and to what effect, through texts selected over several centuries until today. The literary myth of Cythera illustrates the notion of eternal return through its adherence to the ancient myth of Aphrodite, but it also subverts it in a way that pessimistically defies all possibility of cyclical recurrences of sacred times and heroic deeds.

Keywords

Literary myth, Cythera, Antiquity, 19th-century French poetry, 20th-century fiction.

1. Introduction

The eternal return implies the notion (developed by Mircea Eliade) that one can go back to the time of occurrence of events described in a specific myth, thus moving from profane time back to sacred time (Eliade 1967, 23). This is generally understood to refer to the imitation of the exemplary acts of a mythic figure or to the repetition of their circumstances. This process can be repeated over (historical) time and modern authors demonstrate that it can take on new significances while the fundamental meaning of a myth remains unchanged.

The myth of Cythera is present in many European cultures, but this article will focus in particular on how it is developed and returns in French literature, through texts selected over several centuries until today. This myth illustrates the notion of eternal return through a dual quality: its adherence to the ancient myth, mixed with an ever-renewed sense of subversion that brings beliefs of cyclical recurrence to the test.

Yves Chevrel (2009) defines myth as an allegorical narrative configuration, which represents the basis of a collective reference, and emphasises what differentiates literary myth from other myths: it is a relatable narrative iteratively recounted.¹ It is important to keep in mind that, with each iteration of this narrative, free modifications appear and these changes bring new meanings – a process that determines the very nature of literary myth (Albouy 1969).

Contrary to ancient myth which tells, explains and reveals, while remaining anonymous, timeless, and being conveyed by oral traditions, literary myth is identifiable

insofar as its various authors are known (Brunel 1988). Both, however, have in common that they are susceptible to return in endless variants, offering a multitude of interpretations. Although, like ancient myths, it carries universal themes, exploring and fine-tuning them with each rewriting, the literary myth finds its inspiration in contemporary situations which the story-teller uses as stepping-stones in the elaboration of radically new readings.

This adaptability of literary myths necessarily distances them from ancient myths and is one of the features of the process of defiance inherent to them. The rewriting aspect, which is in dissociable from the literary myth, can indeed only function if subversion of an original text is present.

Defiance is also directed at readers and may constitute an author's refusal to submit to their narrative desires, to their horizons of expectation – expectations that are both personal and conventional. In this way, literary myths resist the facile and regulatory discourses that are sometimes carried by consensus around myths – thus encouraging readers to think for themselves.

A literary myth naturally displays the qualities of a free agent, moving effortlessly between the artistic genres, ideas and images that it transgresses, demonstrating its creative power, through an undisciplined style that borrows from ancient texts to better disturb their meaning, in the successive stages of its evolution, via its reception and adaptations, and the cultures it traverses.

As we shall now see, Cythera perfectly illustrates all these traits, voicing both the irresistible desire of the eternal return and the impossibility to achieve it in modern times.

2. Cythera, a literary myth

Cythera is one of the Ionian islands, situated at the foot of the Peloponnese.² In Ancient Greece, it was the home of a temple dedicated to Aphrodite, honouring her arrival on the island. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Gaia, the Earth, tired of the insatiable sexual appetite of Uranus, the Sky, and after too many pregnancies, asked one of their numerous sons, Cronus, to cut off Uranus' sexual organs. Having castrated his father, Cronus threw away his sex which fell in the middle of the sea. Mixed with the waves, his seed produced Aphrodite, and thus was the Goddess of Love born. Carried away by Zephyr, she landed on Cythera, which is why she is herself occasionally referred to as Cytherea. She is also called Venus in Roman mythology, a name found in many poems and fables dedicated to the theme of Love and to Cythera. As for Cupid, her son, also called Eros, he is sometimes considered the God of Cythera.

Perceived as a paradise island, associated to women and love, Cythera also remained in the collective imagination as an eternal and enigmatic destination. Indeed, the island was for a long time a commercial and maritime (including pirates or conquerors) meeting place, as well as the locus of strangely mysterious historical events. Its culture was influenced by diverse civilisations, which can still be seen in its architecture (a mixture of Aegean et Venetian elements, for the most part). Over time, a succession of political powers, from the Greeks to the Romans, Byzantines, Venetians, Ottomans,

French, and finally the British, occupied Cythera until 1864, when it was reunited with Greece. Cythera's complex history is consequently part of the evolution of the myth that surrounds it and, depending on the circumstances, a journey to Cythera may represent an inaccessible goal, a perilous excursion or a voyage to a different world, or even death.

However, Cythera's long-lasting signification is that of an erotic escape. Its name, associated with an island and a love goddess, combines aspects of both. This is how Aphrodite became, in the poetic imagination, the protector of lovers who have travelled from an orthodox world to find a free-spirited and enchanting location for their love-making. Jacques Peletier du Mans, in the 16th century, saw in Cythera a metonymy associated with the pleasure of love, a synonym of voluptuousness (Goyet 1990, 278).³ To "embark for Cythera" soon became a sexual metaphor.⁴

The island's connotations allow artists to create imaginary realms running according to particular laws, whose topography functions according to feelings, as can be seen in the 1650 *Carte du Royaume d'amour en l'isle de Cythère (Map of the Kingdom of Love on the Island of Cythera)* by Tristan l'Hermite.¹ Similar maps are published in the 17th century, but in 1654, Madeleine de Scudéry, develops the idea when she illustrates her novel *Clélie, histoire romaine (Clélie, a Roman History)*² with the famous "Carte de Tendre" ("Map of the country of Love"),³ a topographical and allegorical representation of sentimental conduct and practice. On this map, villages, paths, rivers, etc., illustrate the different stages found in love relationships.⁴ One of Tendre's rivers, for instance, is called Inclination, and it joins two other rivers, one called Esteem, the other Recognition. In order to go from a place called New-Friendship to a town called Tendre-upon-Esteem, one needs to pass by an area called Great-Spirit, followed by the agreeable villages of Pretty-Verse and Love-Letter. The river Inclination, in this amorous geography, runs smoothly in contrast with the passionate Sea which is dangerous.⁵

According to Giuliana Bruno (2002), the "Carte de Tendre" maps out routes that explore gender differences, yet, at certain points, join symbolic terrains at intellectual and emotional levels, thus representing the close ties that exist between men and women, which complement amorous relationships. What Scudéry promotes is an emancipatory alternative to the social standards of her time. This map aims to offer women an uncharted and productive, rather than reproductive, path to follow. At a time of absolutist patriarchy (King Louis XIV's rule), Scudéry attaches an egalitarian utopia to the myth of Cythera.¹⁰

3. The Watteauesque Ambiguity in 19th-Century Poetry

This innovation announces Jean-Antoine Watteau's most celebrated work with Cythera at its core. For Julie Anne Plax (2000), Watteau's *fêtes galantes* express a desire felt by the aristocracy at the time to escape royal authoritarianism by engaging in forms of pastoral and hedonistic recreation, in which costumes betrayed egalitarian fantasies. This is particularly evident in Watteau's *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera* (1717),¹¹ which encapsulates what Cythera meant, at the time: a euphemism for free

love associated with a typical Parisian spot for romantic rendezvous, the Parc de Saint-Cloud on the river Seine (Börsch-Supan 2007, 64).

The exegesis of the *Pilgrimage* raises a polemic, however: some viewers see in it a joyous departure for the island of Aphrodite; others, on the contrary, describe it as the preparation for a return from the island tinged with melancholic undertones.¹² This ambiguity marks the beginning of a new interpretation of Cythera: the invitation to a celebration of love in the middle of an enchanting, natural environment is now progressively perceived as a journey to an ephemeral paradise.¹³

The revolutionary period temporarily puts an end to Watteau's success – the artist being considered purely frivolous –, but in the 19th century, a renewed interest for his work appears which echoes the duality that had begun to be perceived in the *Pilgrimage*. On the one hand, frivolity is pursued in writings that use Cythera as the place for erotic adventure. Among the many possible examples, there are stories such as *Le Sacrifice de l'amour, ou La messe de Cythère* (1809) by J.B. de Saincrier who describes young priestesses' (sexual) initiation at the Temple of Aphrodite. The theme will continue to recur until the early 20th century, in collections such as *Les Sociétés d'amour au XVIIIe siècle* (*Love associations in the 18th century*), *Le code de Cythère* (*Cythera's Code*), or *Le Culte d'Aphrodite et de Lesbos*, (*The Cult of Aphrodite and Lesbos*) – collections written according to memoirs, chronicles, songs, pamphlets, unpublished plays and manuscripts by Jean Hervez (1906).¹⁴ On the other hand, the interest for Cythera as found in the work of a new generation of 19th century poets, confirms the more gloomy of the interpretations attached to Watteau's masterpiece.

Gérard de Nerval, for instance, is inspired by Watteau's art as he writes his novel *Sylvie* (1853). The narrator, now a Parisian returning to his homeplace in the country after many years, meets again with Sylvie, his first love, and on the occasion of a ball, starts to believe he can relive the passion of their youth. But Sylvie is soon to be married to another. The dream of love followed by sorrow recalls the ambiguity of the *Pilgrimage*, apparently festive and full of hope, yet tinted with nostalgic overtones – an ambiguity that evokes an idyllic world, now lost.¹⁵

Nerval contributes all the more to the establishment of this new tonality, that he had earlier described, in his *Voyage en Orient* (1851), the disappointment he felt when he visited the island of Cythera (Cérigo to him). Indeed, as his boat approaches the coast of the island, Nerval's head is full of images from the poetry and art he has enjoyed in the past, and he feels at first elated, admiring the purple hills resembling clouds. But his dream soon turns into a nightmare: although the sky and the sea are still in beautiful unison, the ground seems dead, destroyed by human exploitative presence, and it seems to him the Gods have fled from it (Nerval 1984, 392). A vision, in particular, deeply strikes him: that of a hanged man. It strikes him all the more that, before he realised what he was gazing at, he had thought he could perceive a small monument on top of a rock which seemed to him the preserved statue of some protective

divinity (no doubt he had Venus-Aphrodite in mind). However, as the boat draws nearer, he sees it is in fact the horrific structure of gallows on which a man has recently been executed (Nerval 1984, 393).¹⁶

This rude awakening provoked by a nauseating vision are found again in Charles Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère" ("Voyage to Cythera"), in which the sense of revulsion is enhanced and relentlessly plagues the poet:

<p>Mon cœur, comme un oiseau, voltigeait tout joyeux Et planait librement à l'entour des cordages ; Le navire roulait sous un ciel sans nuages ; Comme un ange enivré d' un soleil radieux. Quelle est cette île triste et noire ? — C'est Cythère, Nous dit-on, un pays fameux dans les chansons, [...] — Île des doux secrets et des fêtes du cœur ! [...] Belle île aux myrtes verts, pleine de fleurs écloses, [...] — Cythère n'était plus qu'un terrain des plus maigres [...]. J'entrevois pourtant un objet singulier ! Ce n'était pas un temple aux ombres bocagères, Où la jeune prêtresse, amoureuse des fleurs, Allait, le corps brûlé de secrètes chaleurs, [...] Nous vîmes que c'était un gibet à trois branches, Du ciel se détachant en noir, comme un cypress. De féroces oiseaux perchés sur leur pâture Détruisaient avec rage un pendu déjà mûr, [...] Ridicule pendu, tes douleurs sont les miennes ! Je sentis, à l'aspect de tes membres flottants, Comme un vomissement, remonter vers mes dents Le long fleuve de fiel des douleurs anciennes ; [...] — Le ciel était charmant, la mer étonnante ; [...] Hélas ! et j'avais, comme en un suaire épais, Le cœur sevelidans cette allégorie. Dans ton île, ô Vénus ! j'en ai trouvé debout Qu'un gibet symbolique où pendait mon image... — Ah ! Seigneur ! donnez-moi la force et le courage De contempler mon cœur et mon corps sans dégoût !</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Baudelaire 1999, 173-175)</p>	<p>[My heart, like a bird, joyfully fluttered And freely glided around the rigging; The ship rolled on under a cloudless sky; Like an angel tipsy on glorious sunshine. What could that dark, grim island be? — It's Cythera, We're told, the legendary land hailed in songs, [...] — The island of the secrets and feasts of love! [...] Sweet isle of green myrtles and blooming flowers, [...] — Cythera now was but the sparsest rock [...]. Yet I glimpsed a singular object ! This was not the temple deep in wooded shade, Where the flower-loving young priestess Went about, her body devoured by a secret fire, [...] We saw that it was a triple gibbet, Standing out darkly against the sky, like a cypress. Ferocious birds perched on their feed, Tore furiously at a decaying dangling body, [...] Grotesque hanged man, your misery is also mine! While I looked at your floating limbs, I felt rising to my throat, like vomit, The long and bitter river of my past suffering; [...] — The sky was lovely, the sea was smooth; [...] Alas! my heart, as in a thick shroud, Felt terminally wrapped in this allegory. On your island, O Venus! all I saw standing Were symbolic gallows from which my own image hung... — Ah! Lord! Give me the strength and the courage To contemplate my heart and my body without loathing!]¹</p>
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Here, all the elements of past and new perceptions of Cythera are gathered: the myth of Aphrodite vs the reality of the contemporary island, Watteau's pictorial feasts still feeding sexual fantasies vs the bareness (the sweet berries of the myrtles are gone) and bleakness of the land (the only fruit now visible is a hanged man). These contrasts lament, like Nerval's, an innocence and a paradise lost. The existential tone of Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère", although it came out four years after Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, seems to have triggered the largest following and made the poem the biggest source of influence of the two among modern writers, as we shall see later.

However, echoes of and similarities between both can sometimes be found together in a new text. For instance, Victor Hugo worked on a poem entitled, as Cythera was called in Nerval's text, "Cérigo",¹⁸ published in the famous collection *Les Contemplations*, in 1855. Hugo here offers his own take on the subversion of the positive side of the myth of Cythera. Where Nerval had imagined the sorrow that follows the dream and definitive loss of love, recalling the ambiguity of Watteau's *Pilgrimage*, the idyllic world now vanished, in Hugo's poem, the reality behind the Cytherean dream represents the end of bodily pleasures and the beginning of the decrepitude of the human body, the start of old age and the foreboding of death. While the main theme differs quite significantly from Baudelaire's – Hugo does not identify with a corpse but with the island itself as a sad and solitary rock –, interestingly, he does agree with Baudelaire, describing Cythera as once a luscious garden, the island of green myrtles (the same fruit found in "Un Voyage à Cythère"), which is now no more than a lugubrious, exhausted, meaningless place.¹⁹ Moreover, echoing both Nerval and Baudelaire, he addresses himself to Cythera, saying: "tumeurs, sombre captive!" (sombre prisoner, you are dying). With the simple choice of the name "Cérigo", the notion of captivity and death, in a poet as politically involved as Hugo, reminds us of the denunciation of the repeated colonisation of the island over time. The poet's feeling here is therefore not so much one of bitterness and self-disgust, as found in Baudelaire, or simply one of sorrow in the face of the inevitable loss of beauty, love and life, but rather one of regret at the thought of the assaults of human selfish exploitation and destruction, added to a sense of waste. The poet searches for Watteau's beautiful characters supervised by the Gods; yet, like Nerval, he can only remark on a growing emptiness.²⁰

Théodore de Banville belongs to this generation of poets that perpetuates a fresh perspective on Cythera. Just like Nerval, Hugo and Baudelaire did each in his own way, Banville indeed also considers Watteau's paradise destroyed by the materialist, colonialist and heavily industrial societies of his time. Let us remember that, while France was changing quickly at the time, Cythera as a colony, belonged to Britain until 1864, and that Britain was the leading European country then, as far as modern progress was concerned. In 1861, in his "Ballade aux Enfants perdus" ("Ballad for Lost Children"), Banville sees Cythera in "mourning", "agonising", but he insists: "Never mind ! let's go to fictitious lands ! [...] Let's embark for beautiful Cythera." Later,

he adds: “Away from this world with a deadly breath. [...] Let’s embark for beautiful Cythera”, desperately appealing to those “Heroes hidden in sickly bodies, Let us flee, let us leave on our frail boats [...]. Let’s embark for beautiful Cythera.”²¹

Thirty years later, in 1891, with a poem entitled “Cythère”,²² once again Banville contrasts horror and beauty, death and love. He imagines how a local boatman describes Cythera: covered in graves and ruins; it has become an impure marsh populated by vultures, monsters, snakes and toads.²³ However, in light of this desolation the poet pretends he can still see Cythera as it once was. Suddenly turning the poem around, he declares that nature is still as abundant as ever, describing the island as a harmoniously coloured field of flowers, and Aphrodite’s dark eyes filling the air with wonder and joy.²⁴ The poet thus confirms that mythic Cythera continues to exist in dreams and, consequently, can be revived whenever desirable.²⁵

Confirming Eliade’s assertion that: “If one goes to the trouble of penetrating the authentic meaning of an archaic myth or symbol, one cannot but observe that [...] it implies a metaphysical position”, we can observe that, through their many poems on the theme of Cythera, Nerval, Baudelaire, Hugo and Banville together have revealed not only the reality behind the myth, but also the metaphysical aspect of the dream of paradise, while adding to it a humanist and existential reflection.

4. Modern Cythera: Jeanne Hyvrard

The revaluation of the myth of Cythera by 19th century poets is pursued and further subverted in contemporary fiction. The most striking example among new interpretations is Jeanne Hyvrard’s first novel, *Les Prunes de Cythère* (The Plums of Cythera) published in 1975. This text dramatically develops the transgressive approach of the myth Cythera by transposing it to another island: Martinique. The plums of Cythera, who form the title of the book, are actually typical of Martinique, the Antillean island that was compared to Cythera when it was first discovered, being perceived as a paradise island,²⁶ hence the name of these plums. Like her predecessors, who had turned the idyllic myth on its head through images of decay and pain, Hyvrard expresses bitter nostalgia when she evokes the real beauty that is no more, revealing what hides behind the perception of the heavenly isle: “L’île entière sent la mort [The whole island reeks of death]”²⁷ (Hyvrard 1975, 34), declares the main narrator, called like the author, Jeanne.

There are indeed several, difficult to identify, narrators in this text, all women, who may or may not be relatives, possibly ancestors, of Jeanne. Where her predecessors had all proposed masculine perspectives on an island associated with the goddess of love and sexual passion, Hyvrard chooses a narrative style which allows several broken female voices to mix and complement each other to ruthlessly denounce the condition of the most destitute, among them women, on this territory in the Caribbean that still belongs to France. Through the character of Jeanne-la-Folle (Mad Jeanne), Hyvrard revisits the ancient myth and condemns the foundations of a patriarchal, brutal and arbitrary world. The bitter cries that Baudelaire’s narrator heard on his voyage to Cythera can be heard here too, when Jeanne, who is being kept in a

mental institution, screams with pain and frustration. Is she really mad? Or is she being punished, in which case, what was her fault? It seems that her sin was to give birth to an unholy child. Progressively, the reader deciphers Jeanne's tragedy, that proves to also be Martinique's tragedy as Jeanne's heartbreak, in Hugolian fashion, reflects the destiny of the island itself.

Like Cythera, Martinique has indeed had a troubled past. Its inhabitants, the Caribs, had to deal with different invasions until 1493, when Columbus landed there and gave it its current name. French settlers claimed the island in 1635 and, at first, met with local resistance. Soon, however, brutal retaliation resulted in many being killed, while survivors were taken captive and expelled from the island. Later, Britain attempted several times to occupy the island and did control it from 1794 to 1815, before it became again, once the Napoleonic Wars ended, a French region, which it has remained ever since.

In Hyvrard's novel, the perception of the island's beauty still belongs to the male coloniser's discourse in which, as Joëlle Cauville writes, "La désagrégation du féminin [...] mise en parallèle avec l'aliénation du colonisé [The disintegration of the feminine is [...] paralleled with the alienation of the colonised]" (Cauville 2010).²⁸ Hyvrard uses historical facts: girls are taken forcefully away from their mothers to be sold as slaves, to be raped by their masters and give birth to children who will know the same fate – a vicious circle that continues until madness and death are all that is left.

Adopting the Banvillian refusal of an atrocious reality, and perpetuating the dream, would not help in this case:

Remontons le temps à la recherche de l'innocence. Rends-moi les terres que tu as pillées. Je ne parlerai pas français. Je ne servirai pas chez les maîtres. [...] Les Blancs ont pris nos terres. Mais nous partirons dans la jungle, le corps exultant et les cheveux en broussaille. (Hyvrard 1975, 171).

[Let's go back in time to regain our innocence. Give me back the land that you have plundered. I will not speak French. I will not be a servant at the master's house. [...] The White people took our land. But we will take to the jungle, our bodies jubilant and our hair dishevelled.]

Hope would be to no avail to those who were born on the type of *isle Baudelaire* qualified as a "banal Eldorado". Reality is indeed harsh for the natives. In the following passage, the contrast between their population, mostly descended from enslaved Africans, that constitutes the largest workforce toiling the island's fields, and the white land owners mostly descended from French settlers, who constitute a minority, is blatant: the natives are depressed and deprived, while the settlers live comfortably and follow their whims:

Au beau milieu du jardin, le prunier de Cythère. Et, dans mes mains, la corde pour me pendre. [...] Ah, mon cher, les jus de Cythère... Et la langue des îles. Et les doudous... Et dans mes mains, la corde. (Hyvrard 1975, 120).

[“In the middle of the garden, the Cythera plum tree. And, in my hands, the rope to hang myself with. [...] Ah, my dear friend, the juices of Cythera... And the languor of these islands. And the local girls... And in my hands, the rope.]

For Jeanne, the indigenous woman, the Cythera plum tree is synonymous with the Baudelairian gibbet and indicative of self-loathing. For the white masters, it is attached to promises of sexual favours.

Martinique is nothing like the gentle and prolific mythical Cythera and prayers can only remain unanswered: “Mais! amour même est mort. [...] Je tends les mains vers le prunier de Cythère. [Even love is dead. [...] I reach out to the Cythera plum tree.]” (Hyvrard 1975,170) The reader cannot be sure whether those hands are beseeching or whether they are getting ready to tie the noose.

Yet, the picture was not always so dark: “Les prunes de Cythère. Vert jade, vert printemps, vert laitue. Mon luxe. [The Cythera plums. Jade green. Springtime green. Lettuce green. My luxury.]” (Hyvrard 1975,49) This colour reminds us of what grew on Baudelaire’s beautiful island of green myrtles, that is Cythera before the invasions and the abuse of the land. Now, however:

Le prunier de Cythère juste assez haut pour qu’on s’y pendre. Le prunier de Cythère donton fait les jus. Le prunier qui ne fait pas d’ombre et qui tend les doigts cartelés vers les fenêtres de la maison. Le prunier qui m’appelle la nuit quand tu dors et que rienne me protège. (Hyvrard 1975, 38).

[The Cythera plum tree just high enough to hang yourself from. The Cythera plum tree which produces juices. The plum tree that casts no shadow and that holds its widespread fingers toward the windows of the house. The plum tree that calls me at night when you are asleep and nothing protects me.]

The Cythera plum tree, leitmotiv of the novel, presents the same duality as the Cythera island after Watteau: life (through its juices) and death (through its rope-inviting branches). In the above quote, a supplication seems to come from the tree. In a mirror effect, Jeanne reaches out for the tree and the tree seems to yearn for her.

Nerval’s chilling vision seems to haunt Jeanne, and it is herself, as in Baudelaire’s vision, she sees on the gallows. The devouring vultures in her case are her wardens: “Ils ont cimenté ma gorge pour que je ne crie pas. Ils ont lié mon corps pour que je ne danse pas. Et ils ont fait de moi la mort. [The Cythera plum tree just high enough to hang yourself from. The Cythera plum tree which produces juices. The plum tree that casts no shadow and that holds its widespread fingers toward the windows of the house. The plum tree that calls me at night when you are asleep and nothing protects me.]” (Hyvrard 1975,189) The voice that speaks for several female narrators says she has been called sometimes adulterous, sometimes incestuous, but there is no evidence in the novel that she ever chose her lover(s) and the child of her forbidden love is either aborted, still-born, or she keeps being told she will always remain infertile. *Mère*

(mother) thus becomes synonymous with *mort* (death). Could we find ourselves further from the myth of Aphrodite? Jeanne's infecundity does not give her the space to develop personally that Scudéry recommended for women in her day. Indeed, Scudéry's "carte de Tendre" had aimed to offer women an uncharted path that would take them away from the reproductive role their patriarchal society imposed on them. She thus promoted an egalitarian hope through the myth of Cythera. Yet, women in Hyvrard's novel seem to receive even less consideration and respect than their metropolitan French ancestors.

The only possible way out of this situation is to flee the Cytherean, forsaken island of Martinique: "Mère, laisse-moi partir. [...] vers l'autre port, vers l'autre part, vers l'impossible autrefois. [Mother, please let me go [...] to the other port, to the other place, to the chimerical elsewhere.]" (Hyvrard 1975, 100) However, earlier in the text, one of the feminine voices said: "L'autre part, c'est ici. [Elsewhere is here.]" (Hyvrard 1975, 61) Indeed, but for whom? For the navigators who once landed on the beaches of Martinique? For those settlers who came later from their European shores to help themselves to the productive land and its beautiful daughters? Certainly not for Jeanne, for whom to leave is to live; otherwise, madness and suicide will be her lot:

Le prunier de Cythère. Les bonheurs morts. Les branches écartelées lui tendent les mains. Au beaumilieu du jardin. Fais pas ça. Essaie encore un peu. Pour quoi faire ? (Hyvrard 1975, 77).

[The Cythera plum tree. Defunct felicity. The painfully spread out branches are stretching their hands out to her. In the middle of the garden. Try a little, once more. What for?]

The Cythera plum tree, the novel's leitmotif, is therefore the fatalistic sign of the island's annihilation; the sign also of an obsolete symbolism, obsolete because the reality behind the phantasy has been revealed.

There is no reason to hesitate before setting out on a sea voyage, because the mythical Hero has already made [such a voyage] in the fabulous Time. All that is needed is to follow his example. Similarly, there is no reason to fear settling an unknown, wild territory, because one knows what to do. One has merely to repeat the cosmogonic ritual, whereupon the unknown territory (= 'Chaos') is transformed into 'Cosmos'. (Eliade 1967, 141).

With Hyvrard's most recent interpretation in mind, in which chaos only lead to more chaos, it seems hard to adhere to Eliade's encouragement and attempt to embark for Cythera today. However, the multifarious rewritings of the myth of Cythera over time allow us to evaluate its deep dichotomy: on the one hand, it can be buoyantly positive when relating to the hedonistic pleasures of the privileged; on the other, it can be bitterly cynical to the outcast victims of the powers that be. The constantly renewed exploration of the myth of Cythera demonstrates that, each time it is put in question, the literary myth's sever-modern quality shines forth, thus creating yet another collective reference for a theme in constant evolution.

As we have seen, literary myths being in essence subjective and disobedient – and Cythera is the perfect example of those traits –, they systematically defy the iterative and therefore exemplary aspects of the recounted stories. While the myth of Cythera illustrates the notion of eternal return through its adherence to the ancient myth of Aphrodite, it rebels against it too, which rather complicates matters for any possibilities of an eternal return. Progressively, indeed, this hope is interrupted by considerations that would tend to indicate that it is only possible to eternally return to a myth through the imagination, and that, even then, this can lead, not to an enlightening resolution, but to cruel disappointment. This is the message carried by the myth of Cythera which, having followed a certain optimistic trend from Jacques Peletier du Mans's work, in the 16th century, and Madeleine de Scudéry in the 17th, developed to progressively, through Watteau's art in the 18th century and the poetry of the 19th (Nerval, Hugo, Baudelaire and Banville), and increasingly so in more recent times (as we saw in Hyvrard), tend to pessimistically defy all potentiality of cyclical recurrences of sacred times and heroic deeds.

Notes

1. Chevrel also emphasizes the crucial work of Gilbert Durand and Pierre Brunel in the development of myth criticism, as both scholars focus not only on the emergence and flexibility of aspects of myths, but also on the powerful ability of myths to irradiate other texts.
2. Cythera is its Latin name (used in English). It is also known as Kitira, Kythera (in Greek), Kythira (also a Greek name but used in German), Citera (in Spanish), Cythère (in French), or Cerigo (in Italian), etc.
3. Original: Peletier du Mans, Jacques. *L'Art poétique d'Horace, traduit en vers françois*. Paris: M. Vascosan, 1545.
4. There are many such allusions to be found, among others, in *La Pléiade*, the name given to a group of 16th-century French Renaissance poets whose principal members were Pierre de Ronsard, Joachim du Bellay and Jean-Antoine de Baïf.
5. This map by Tristan l'Hermite can be consulted here: https://spacefiction.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/carte_tristan_lhermitte.jpg. See also Buffard-Moret, Brigitte.
6. *Clélie, histoire romaine*'s 10 volumes were published between 1654 and 1660.
7. To view the map: <https://spacefiction.wordpress.com/2014/02/03/la-carte-de-tendre-un-exemple-des-cartes-allegoriques-du-pays-de-lamour-la-carte-de-tendre-an-exemple-of-allegorical-maps-of-country-of-love/>
8. The literary style used by Madeleine de Scudéry arose in her generation from the conversations and word games of *les précieuses*, the witty and educated intellectual ladies who frequented salons and stayed away from the male political disputes of the royal court. The map was aimed at their group's entertainment. It was a sort of board game they enjoyed playing.
9. My translations. For more details, see Thureau-Dangin, Philippe.

10. See also Mallinson, Jonathan.
11. *Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera* is also sometimes called *Embarkation for Cythera*. Another version of the *Pilgrimage* (Musée du Louvre, Paris) was made in 1719 (Charlottenburg Palace, Berlin). To view both paintings: http://www.artble.com/artists/antoine_watteau/paintings/embarkation_for_cythera. Watteau had painted his first representation of Cythera as early as 1709, with *Ile de Cythère* (Island of Cythera) which was only rediscovered in 1981. To view it: <http://www.jean-antoine-watteau.org/The-Island-of-Cythera-1709.html>.
12. For more details, see Levey, Michael.
13. See also Cusset, Catherine.
14. For more detail, see Brulotte, Gaétan & John Phillips. In particular, vol.2, p.1198, on Edward Sellon's *Cythera's Hymnal*, 1870.
15. For more detail, see Posner, Donald. *Antoine Watteau*, and Ostrowski, J.K. N.B.: in the poem entitled "Cythère" in the collection, *Fêtes galantes* (1869), Paul Verlaine is also inspired by Watteau.
16. See also Rouger, Gilbert.
17. My translation. N.B.: "Un Voyage à Cythère" was first published in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1855.
18. According to Georges Brunet, Hugo composed this poem between 1853 and 1854.
19. "Tout homme qui vieillit est ce roc solitaire/ Et triste, Cérigo, qui fut jadis Cythère, / Cythère aux nids charmants, Cythère aux myrtes verts, / La vie auguste, goutte à goutte, heure par heure, / S'épand sur ce qui passe et sur ce qui demeure [...] ; / Cythère est là, lugubre, épuisée, idiote [...]." (Victor Hugo 1972, 344).
20. My translation. "Tête de mort du rêve amour, et crâne nu / Du plaisir, ce chanteur masqué, spectre inconnu. / [...] Mais toujours le ciel bleu. C'est-à-dire, ô destin! / Sur l'homme, jeune ou vieux, harmonie ou souffrance, / Toujours la même mort et la même espérance. / Cérigo, qu'as-tu fait de Cythère? Nuit! deuil! / L'éden s'est éclipsé, laissant à nu l'écueil. / [...] Qu'as-tu fait des chansons [...] / Des danses, des gazons, des bois mélodieux, / De l'ombre que faisait le passage des dieux? / [...] Tu t'appelles oublié! tu meurs, sombre captive! [...] / Ce monde inférieur, où tout rampe et s'altère, / A ce qui disparaît et s'efface, Cythère, / Le jardin qui se change en rocher aux flancs nus [...]." (Victor Hugo 1972, 344).
21. My translation. "Je le sais bien que Cythère est en deuil! / [...] Agonisant sous le soleil sauvage. / La solitude habite son rivage. / Qu'importe! allons vers les pays fictifs! / Embarquons-nous pour la belle Cythère. / [...] Loin de ce monde au souffle délétère. / Embarquons-nous pour la belle Cythère. / [...] Héros cachés dans ces corps maladifs, / Fuyons, partons sur nos légers esquifs, / [...] Embarquons-nous pour la belle Cythère." (Banville 1861).
22. Published posthumously in the collection *Dans la fournaise (In the Fire)* in 1892.
23. "Son fier palais, ses blanches tours / Sont des ruines et des tombes, / Et les aigles et les vautours / Ont déchiqteté ses colombes. / [...] Cythère est un impur marais / Où des monstres s'entre-dévorent, / [...] De longs serpents et des crapauds / Y rampent, tout couverts de boue." (Banville, 1892). My translation.

24. “L’île n’était qu’un champ de fleurs/ Aux mille corolles écloses,/ Où s’harmonisaient les couleurs [...]/ Cypris, vierge, ravie encor/ [...]/ Parut. Ses yeux noirs pleins d’éclairs,/ [...] Emplissaient follement les airs/ D’éblouissement et de joie.” (Banville, 1892).
25. “Certes, je sais bien que Vénus/ Est dans la nuit et dans le rêve./ Mais c’est toi, perfide enchanteur/ [...] Qui la ramène dans le jour/ Et qui l’empêche d’être morte!” (Banville 1892).
26. Tahiti, interestingly but the same reason, was too. See Conrad, Peter. *Islands. A Trip through Time and Space*, London, Thames & Hudson (2009, 29).
27. All translations of Hyvrard henceforth are mine.
28. My translation.

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