

To Remember or to Forget?: Sensorial Encounters that Resuscitate the Past in Le Clézio's "Tempête"

KEITH MOSER

Abstract

This exploration of Le Clézio's recent text "Tempête" delves into the complex nuances of involuntary memory in the author's ever-evolving *œuvre*. Although this is a subject that the author has broached in previous works, it is perhaps in "Tempête" that the Nobel Laureate provides the most complete picture of involuntary memory. In "Tempête," Le Clézio also problematizes the reliability of the "privileged moments" or sensorial contacts that open the flood gates of memory. The protagonist of this complicated and multifaceted narrative is unsure whether he is truly reliving the past or simply inventing another version of it.

Keywords:J.M.G. Le Clézio; "Tempête;" involuntary memory; sensory studies; privileged moments

1. Introduction

In his latest work entitled *Tempête*, J.M.G. Le Clézio covers some familiar ground. Readers who are familiar with the Franco-Mauritian author's prolific and ever-evolving literary repertoire will immediately notice recurring themes that have been at the forefront of the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature's fiction since the publication of his first novel *Le Procès-verbal* in 1963. The purpose of this investigation is to explore sensorial encounters that resuscitate the past in the first novella "Tempête" from the collection bearing the same name. In this extremely realistic, complex, and multifaceted narrative, the author nuances his earlier ideas related to involuntary memory triggered by keen senses. In "Tempête," Le Clézio probes the inherent limitations of involuntary memory. The writer also problematizes questions related to the reliability of the memories being relived by the protagonist. In addition to the fact that our brain naturally tends to fill in the gaps, the searing pain induced by some of the protagonist's recollections compels us to ponder whether it is often preferable to leave certain things buried in the past.

Published in 2014 by Gallimard, *Tempête* is a collection of novellas comprised of two poignant narratives that sometimes destabilize the reader due to their stark realism.

First, it should be noted that the author intentionally borrowed the word "novella" from the English language to describe these stories. In fact, the official title of this collection is *Tempête: Deux novellas*. For those who are unfamiliar with this Anglophone literary form, Marianne Payot and Bernard Pivot offer operational definitions of this genre. Delving into the etymology of the term "novella," Marianne Payot explains, "Novella, un joli mot italien, adopté par les Anglo-Saxons, signifiant 'longue nouvelle qui ressemble à un roman'" (n.p.). Providing a similar definition as Payot, Pivot affirms that a novella is a "terme anglais qui désigne une longue nouvelle" (n.p.). Both Payot and Pivot note that both of these first-person stories are realistic representations of the trauma endured by several different protagonists in the modern world.

It is in this context in which the first text "Tempête" should be understood. Thirty years after the apparent suicide of his lover Mary Song, the narrator Philip Kyo returns to the place where this tragic event took place: Udo Island in South Korea. In an effort to make sense out of his troubled past and to forgive himself for his role (complicity/inaction) in the sexual assault of a young woman that transpired during the war before he met Mary, Philip Kyo takes up residence on the island for an extended period of time. Reminiscent of a Patrick Modiano novel such as *Dora Bruder*, the protagonist is searching for traces that might hold the key to unlocking the mysteries of his past and that of Mary Song. The failed writer and journalist is trying to find a way to live again by directly confronting the demons of his past, or to at least make peace with himself before succumbing to death.

When all hope appears to be lost, the narrator befriends a young teenage girl named June. June possesses certain qualities including a considerable amount of musical talent that remind him of Mary and which open the proverbial flood gates of memory. This platonic relationship appears to suggest that Philip Kyo might finally be able to close a difficult chapter of his life which has clearly eroded his appreciation of existence for the past thirty years. The time that the narrator spends with June before he is forced to leave the island because of an adulteress relationship with a married woman undoubtedly reinvigorates him. Instead of merely awaiting death and incessantly blaming himself for the crime that caused him to be incarcerated for six years, the protagonist rediscovers a thirst for life that beckons him to take advantage of the limited time that he still has on this earth.

2. Recollections and the shaping of time

Above all, "Tempête" is a bittersweet story about memory including how it operates and how these recollections shape the present and future. In this regard, Le Clézio's conception of memory mirrors that of Marcel Proust in *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Numerous critics including Claude Cavallero, Thierry Léger, Jean-Pierre Salgas, Isabelle Constant, Denis Bachand, and Adina Balint-Babos have underscored the Proustian elements of Le Clézio's fiction. Moreover, the author himself has even discussed this influence directly in interviews. In a conversation with Claude Cavallero, Le Clézio explains that he discovered Proust a little later in life in comparison to other authors. Additionally, although the Franco-Mauritian writer initially did not like certain

aspects of Proust's worldview, Le Clézio reveals that Proust would eventually be an invaluable source of inspiration (Cavallero 168-169).

Indeed, it is difficult to read several passages of "Tempête" without thinking of Proust. Specifically, Le Clézio seems to have adopted Proust's explanation of involuntary memory. Similar to how the Proustian narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu* is inundated by a deluge of memories because of a direct, sensorial contact involving a material substance from his childhood at Combray, Philip Kyo experiences this kind of enigmatic ecstasy as he is sitting in his hotel room. Upon his return to the island, the protagonist does not fully comprehend why something deep inside of him compelled him to come back to this space. Furthermore, he is at first unsure whether this return trip will produce any concrete results, given that this island is no longer as secluded as it once used to be because of the phenomenon of globalization. Yet, in spite of the swarms of tourists, the chic hotels, and the crowded beaches that concretize the contemporary landscape of this island, the primordial elemental forces that Philip Kyo discovered approximately three decades ago remain unchanged. The protagonist is still just as sensitive to the splendor and the fury of these elements as he was thirty years before.

When the wind touches his skin through an opening in the window of his hotel, Philip's sensorial faculties (re-)awaken dormant memories that he thought had been lost a long time ago. As the narrator reveals, "La nuit, dans ma chambre d'hôtel [...] le vent a sifflé à travers les jointures des fenêtres et de la porte [...] j'imagine le temps passé, j'imagine Mary, disparue, je pense à sa voix qui chantait le blues, à sa jeunesse, à ma jeunesse" (13-14). A few pages later in the narrative, the deep cosmic sensibilities of the narrator become even more evident. Explicitly linking involuntary memory to having acute senses that experience unfiltered material reality directly, the narrator further clarifies,

Quand la tempête commence, quand le vent souffle en continu de l'horizon de l'est, Mary revient [...] tous mes sens sont aiguisés, en alerte, ouverts à l'extrême pour recevoir ce qu'apportent la mer et le vent [...] cela réveille le souvenir de nos jeux amoureux, à Mary et à moi, les longues caresses de bas en haut, le goût des lèvres, les baisers profonds qui me faisaient tressaillir [...] Dans la tempête, j'entends sa voix, je sens son cœur, je sens son souffle [...] Dans la tempête elle revient, expulsée atome par atome des profondeurs (16-17).

In this passage, the narrator's intimate relationship with the remainder of the biosphere to which he is connected is what initiates these powerful instants where the past momentarily resurfaces. By (re-)connecting himself to the cosmic whole of which he is but a small part, the narrator opens the obscure corridors of memory that were previously buried deep in the recesses of his brain. The ephemeral moments of euphoria that the narrator relives thirty years later are a concrete example of what Keith Moser terms "privileged moments." In his monograph entitled "*Privileged Moments*" in the *Novels and Short Stories of J.M.G. Le Clézio: His Contemporary Development of a*

Traditional French Literary Device, Moser identifies three distinct types of privileged moments experienced by Le Clézio's protagonists related to nature, sexuality, and musicality. Moser also discusses how these fleeting instants of elation often trigger vivid memories that open up into philosophical and spiritual dimensions. According to Moser, even though this rending ecstasy is short-lived, epiphanies remain long after the sensual jubilation itself has long dissipated. In other words, the intense euphoria itself is not gratuitous from a philosophical perspective, given that these moments represent the possibility of a radical inner transformation. The (re-)crystallization of the narrator's past, rendered possible by his senses, explains the cautiously optimistic *dénouement*. Reliving all of these instants of anguish and joy from his past in the present allows Philip to heal and to envision a better future.

As the aforementioned passage illustrates, sensorial encounters that breathe life back into the past in Le Clézio's *œuvre* are often erotically charged. In numerous works including *L'Extase Matérielle*, Le Clézio lauds human corporality because it is our material essence which connects us to the rest of the universe and allows us to *make sense* out of the world in which we live and die. Similar to Proust, Le Clézio contends that the body itself is the key to unraveling the mysteries of the past and creating a stable identity. As Isabelle Constant asserts, "Comme chez Proust, les souvenirs réapparaissent lors d'un mouvement, d'une impression, d'une perception corporelle" (177). In this respect, the author's graphic depictions of the act of copulation itself in many different narratives including "Tempête" could be interpreted as a critique of pervasive puritanical ideology which warns believers to be "wary of the flesh." In contrast to puritanical convictions, Le Clézio valorizes the body itself because it enables the subject to catch a small glimpse of what and who we are in relation to the indifferent cosmic forces that arbitrarily tossed every sentient and non-sentient being into the chaos of existence approximately four and a half billion years ago with a big bang. The narrator rather explicitly confesses that he returned to Udo Island in an attempt to understand himself, his past, and the world to which he is inextricably linked more fully before dying.¹

In "Tempête," carnal pleasures are a pathway for reviving inert memories trapped beneath the surface. When the subject's material essence comes into contact with the same form of matter with which he or she originally experienced certain sensations, this phenomenon activates involuntary memory and the initial event is relived. In "Tempête," it is the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches associated with the ocean that rekindle the amorous passion that Philip once felt with Mary. As the narrator explains,

Une fois, dans la demi-lune, nous avons fait l'amour sur la plage, dans l'eau, en roulant à la manière des vaches marines. Cela s'est passé il y a très longtemps. Je croyais l'avoir oublié, mais quand je suis revenu ici, chaque seconde a recommencé [...] Et d'un seul coup la mémoire m'est revenue. J'étais là, sur cette route, seul et aveugle, et j'étais à nouveau trente ans en arrière, avec Mary [...] Nous avons écouté le bruit de la mer.

C'était la première fois que nous nous embrassions [...] Cette nuit est restée en moi, et maintenant elle renaît comme si rien ne nous en séparait [...] Je devais reprendre la suite logique de cette aventure, la disparition de Mary n'avait rien achevé. Je devais essayer de comprendre (44-46).

In these erotic descriptions, it is obvious that Le Clézio has embraced the Proustian perspective of memory. For a few brief moments, the contingencies of time and space no longer seem to exist. Specific modalities of matter in this maritime environment temporarily transport Philip back into time as he (re)-experiences the sexual gratification that he felt with Mary long ago. The relationship between this euphoria and involuntary memory helps to explain why eroticism is so ubiquitous throughout the Franco-Mauritian author's entire corpus, as noted by Sophie Jollin-Bertocchi in her aptly named work of criticism entitled *J.M.G. Le Clézio: L'Erotisme, les Mots*. This phenomenon is merely one reason why Le Clézio is one of the most sensual writers of his generation.

Although some of the author's male protagonists appear to have a difficult time appreciating what the feminine Other has to offer outside of the purely physical realm, as highlighted by Karen Levy in her analysis of "Lévinasian Eros and Ethics" in *La Quarantaine*, it seems that Philip did care for Mary on a much deeper level. Not only does the protagonist vividly remember the sexual ecstasy that they once shared, but he is also able to recall other essential qualities that attracted him to Mary in the first place. Like numerous Leclézian protagonists such as Laïla in *Poisson d'or*, Philip is hyper-sensitive to musicality in all of its divergent forms. In a scene that is reminiscent of *Étoile Errante*, powerful melodies performed by June in an evangelical church (re)-awaken the past. Similar to Esther in *Étoile Errante*, Philip is not religious in the traditional sense of the term. Yet, he experiences intense instants of elation when he listens to June singing in a church choir.

Summarizing the improbable and unexpected joy that he felt in addition to the memories that engulfed his entire being in this space, the narrator elucidates, "Je suis allé pour la première fois à l'église [...] Quand j'ai poussé la porte, j'ai entendu la voix de June [...] Elle chantait en anglais: *nobody knows but Jesus* [...] et j'ai ressenti un frisson" (72). Despite the comical elements of this stereotypical depiction of an evangelical church which makes a reader think of religious fanatics in the Southern region of the United States where believers handle snakes, "speak in tongues," and flop around the pews and aisles when the holy spirit moves them, this passage should be taken seriously.² The musical sonorities of June's voice remind Philip of the happy times that he spent with Mary.

Underscoring that the distinctive nature of June's voice, which reminds him of the bluesy, raspy manner in which Mary used to sing, is more important than the actual words of the hymn itself, the narrator muses, "Est-ce qu'elle n'avait jamais chanté aussi bien, avec une voix aussi claire et forte, en balançant un peu ses hanches et ses épaules, j'ai pensé à Mary autrefois dans sa robe rouge, quand elle était éclairée par le projecteur" (74). Albeit in a much different context from the previously mentioned

privileged moments, it is the narrator's senses which facilitate the resuscitation of these memories once again. The reader realizes that one of the reasons why Philip was so enamored with Mary to the point of even discussing marriage and children is because of her beautiful voice. Not only does the protagonist carry with him the guilt of the aforementioned war crime, but he also feels responsible for Mary's death. For this reason, these recollections are both painful and euphoric. Moreover, reliving his past finally provides Philip with a sense of closure. The narrator could not take away all of Mary's anguish, a woman who had endured far too much suffering even before meeting Philip, but he did love her. The protagonist is now cognizant that this relationship ultimately failed because they were both haunted by the past. Even if Philip is incapable of forgiving himself for his complicity in the gang rape that forever scarred a young woman's life, the feelings of serenity that remain after this ephemeral musical ecstasy has evaporated suggest that the protagonist might not longer blame himself for his lover's suicide. Philip realizes that perhaps there was nothing that he could have done differently to save the woman who had spent time in various psychiatric institutions and who had tried to drown her sorrows in an alcohol bottle.

The lingering question of whether the protagonist will ever be able to cope with the fact that he could have stopped a crime against humanity from transpiring during the war begs the reader to ponder if it is better to remember or to forget. In spite of the aforementioned cautious optimism at the end of the narrative, it still remains unclear if Philip should have returned to the island or not. Before moving back to the island, certain traumatic memories related to the violent sexual assault seem to be buried deep inside of his fractured psyche. According to many mainstream psychologists such as Bernard Weiner and H.M. Johnson, this form of repression is a natural defense mechanism that allows us to continue living after painful events. Weiner created the term "motivated forgetting," which can be conscious or unconscious, to explain this phenomenon in 1968. This commonly accepted psychological theory sheds light on a conversation between Philip and June. After the narrator recounts the story of his life to June including the details of Mary's suicide, he declares, "je crois qu'il vaut mieux oublier. Je crois que les souvenirs ne doivent pas nous empêcher de vivre" (107).

This passage is crucial because it adds another layer of complexity to Le Clézio's conception of involuntary memory. When these recollections are automatically triggered by a sensorial contact with other forms of matter, both the good and the bad resurface. Involuntary memory is an unconscious process that cannot be controlled. A subject cannot selectively filter out specific traumatic experiences and prevent them from rising to the surface. This unbearable anguish can reduce the quality of one's existence as opposed to healing the wounds of the past. For this reason, it is debatable whether Philip should have rendered himself vulnerable to this deluge of involuntary memory. Even if the narrator is now able to comprehend what happened more fully including his role in a sinister act perpetrated during the war, the reader wonders if the cost is too great. This is one of the enduring questions of the narrative: should Philip have reopened this partially closed wound or not?

Another section of the narrative further problematizes the phenomenon of involuntary memory. In an early passage of the text, the narrator readily admits that he is unsure how reliable his recollections of Mary truly are after thirty long years have passed. As the narrator confesses, “Elle s’appelait Farrell, Mary Song Farrell. Song parce qu’elle avait été déclarée à ses parents adoptifs sous ce nom, Sa mère s’appelait probablement Song. Ou bien elle chantait, je ne sais pas. C’est peut-être moi qui ai inventé après coup toute cette histoire” (21). Before Mary tragically took her own life, it is evident that Philip deeply cared for her. However, this enigmatic blues singer was always somewhat of a mystery to him. Given that he might not have known her that well in the first place, Philip is concerned that his brain is filling in the missing information incorrectly after a long lapse of time. Additionally, contemporary psychologists like Y. Dudai have observed that memories are relived through a process called “reconsolidation.” In particular, Dudai notes that the reconstruction that reconsolidation entails is replete with errors and downright fabrications.

This overt admission from the narrator is also reminiscent of the metafictional literary devices that Le Clézio employs in his early fiction. Philip does not appear to be an exceptional writer, but he is a writer nonetheless. Consequently, it is possible that the narrator is letting us know that Mary Song is purely a figment of his imagination. In *Terra Amata*, Le Clézio takes advantage of this technique often associated with the so-called French new novel movement to foster a sense of complicity between the reader and the author. At the end of this experimental novel published in 1967 by Gallimard, the narrator directly informs the reader that the protagonist Chancelade never existed in order to emphasize the universality of the story (i.e. existence) that he is attempting to tell. The suggestion that the narrator of “Tempête” might be engaging in metafiction as well adds yet another nuance to this discussion of involuntary memory. This possibility warrants further investigation by the academic community in future studies that transcend the inherent limitations of the present essay.

3. Conclusion,

“Tempête” is an extremely rich and complex narrative from a literary, philosophical, and psychological perspective. It could be argued that this recent text is one of the author’s best works in recent years. “Tempête” is an important addition to Le Clézio’s vast and extremely diverse body of work that continues to evolve with each passing day. When read alongside other canonical texts from different periods of the Nobel Laureate’s illustrious career that spans nearly half a century, “Tempête” nuances some of the writer’s earlier ideas related to involuntary memory triggered by our five senses. “Tempête” is a realistic and sometimes even disquieting narrative that encourages us to think more deeply about how involuntary memory operates and how it is triggered. “Tempête” also reexamines the validity of relived experiences like the ones described by the narrator from a slightly different angle in comparison to previous works. For all of these reasons, “Tempête” provides the most complete picture of involuntary memory in Le Clézio’s *œuvre*.

References

- Bachand, Denis. “La Nostalgie des origines dans *Le Procès-verbal* de J.M.G. Le Clézio.” @analyses 4(1): n.p.
- Balint-Babos, Adina. “Symboles de la mer chez Proust et Le Clézio.” *Equinoxes* 6: n.p.
- Cavallero, Claude. “Les Marges et l’origine.” *Europe* 765-766 (1993): 166-174.
- Constant, Isabelle. “La Mémoire du corps dans *Onitsha* de J.M.G. Le Clézio et *Chocolat* de Claire Denis.” *J.M.G. Le Clézio dans la forêt des paradoxes*. Eds. Bruno Thibault and Keith Moser. Paris : L’Harmattan, 2012. 177-188.
- Dudai, Y. “The Neurobiology of Consolidations, Or, How Stable is the Engram?” *Annual Review of Psychology* 55: 51–86.
- Johnson, H. M. “Processes of successful intentional forgetting.” *Psychological Bulletin* 116: 274–292.
- Jollin-Bertocchi, Sophie. *J.M.G. Le Clézio: L’Erotisme, les Mots*. Paris: Kimé, 2001.
- Le Clézio, J.M.G. *Tempête*. Paris: Gallimard, 2014.
- Léger, Thierry. “Les paradoxes du métissage culturel et littéraire dans *Ourania* de J.M.G. Le Clézio.” *J.M.G. Le Clézio dans la forêt des paradoxes*. Eds. Bruno Thibault and Keith Moser. Paris : L’Harmattan, 2012. 263-271.
- Levy, Karen D. “Elsewhere and Otherwise: Lévinasian Eros and Ethics in Le Clézio’s *La Quarantaine*.” *Orbis Litterarum* 56 (4): 255-275.
- Moser, Keith. “*Privileged Moments*” in *the Novels and Short Stories of J.M.G. Le Clézio: His Contemporary Development of a Traditional French Literary Device*. The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008.
- Payot, Marianne. “J. M. G. Le Clézio: le Nobel aux semelles de vent.” *L’Express* 27 March, 2014.
http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/j-m-g-le-clezio-le-nobel-aux-semelles-de-vent_1503486.html#D5EFGyDX1HRyVd4o.99
- Pivot, Bernard. “Les femmes et Le Clézio.” *Le JDD* 10 August, 2014.
<http://www.lejdd.fr/Chroniques/Bernard-Pivot/Les-femmes-et-Le-Clezio-la-chronique-litteraire-de-Bernard-Pivot-659022>
- Salgas, Jean-Pierre. “J.M.G. Le Clézio: Lire c’est s’aventurer dans l’autre.” Entretien. *La Quinzaine Littéraire* 435 (1-15 mars): 6-8.
- Weiner, Bernard. “Motivated forgetting and the study of repression.” *Journal of Personality* 36 (2): 213–234.

Keith Moser, Associate Professor of French at Mississippi State University. He is the author of five books including *The Encyclopedic Philosophy of Michel Serres: Writing the Modern World and Anticipating the Future*. Moser has contributed nearly fifty essays to peer-reviewed journals such as *The French Review* and *Romance Notes*.

E-mail: kam131@msstate.edu