

The Predilection for White and Black in Le Clézio's Early Works

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Building upon the existential framework developed by J.M.G. Le Clézio, this essay attempts to shed light on the essence of the enigmatic colorless world-view to which the early works of the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature frequently refer. To be more precise, his fictional universe of the 1960s and 70s is characterized and defined by the patterns of white and black. During this period, the Franco-Mauritian author, in a connotative manner, uses this dichotomous motif and suggests that only this colorless contrast exists in the world. In other words, in his novelistic representation, rather than the symbolism of living color which is incidental, the pair of inanimate and inorganic opposites is always primary. This black-white dualism thus becomes an obsessive *leitmotif* for the young author. In regards to this stylistic technique, *Voyages de l'autre côté* (1975) turns out to be the “last novel” of the future Nobel Laureate, while Masao Suzuki calls it the “first Le Clézio” (11),¹ similar to the interpretation of Thierry Marin about the periodization of the author's works (2-4). This counter-hegemonic novel constitutes a philosophical reflection of the young writer against “a stranglehold over the dissemination of information to the masses” (Moser 2023a, 1), because his fascination for black and white present in his early works and which has persisted since Le Clézio's first novel *Le Procès-verbal* (1963), disappears. Nevertheless, this theme in the early literary works of the author remains scantily studied in the field of French and Francophone Studies. Specifically, no existing studies exclusively focus on this white-black duality related to the philosophy from which Le Clézio derives much inspiration.²

A few researchers are nevertheless interested in the colorless concept of the young Le Clézio. For instance, Ook Chung underscores these two elements of *Le Livre des fuites* (1969) in his analysis of prophetic discourse and investigates black and white as symbols of collective or personal consciousness (158-161). Moreover, Ruth Amar, who focuses on the thematic study of loneliness, indicates that “dull, gray colors” represent “colorless colors and that of parity (non-difference)” (71; 71). This semantic analysis demonstrates the state of the dystopian overflow at the heart of the contemporary city in *Les Géants*. But these studies are the only ones that delve into the essence of the colorless world-view in Le Clézio's early works. Although his texts as a young author bear witness to an obsession with this black-white dualism, this aspect of his early writing needs to be explored more systematically. The purpose of this essay is to fill this research gap and to shed light on certain details of Le Clézian writing allowing us to better grasp its essence.

In his novelistic imagination, the author often exposes the reader to all the paradoxes that emanate from a colorless representation. His text then produces a feeling of ambiguity that he conceals behind fallacious words. In order to question the antinomies of the young author, we will focus on the sybaritic experience of his daydreams, as Sophia Haddad-Khalil posits (6-12). Studying the internal experience he has of his novelistic world will therefore be an effective approach for understanding his true feelings compared to a much more literal analysis. Thus, whenever the black-white interplay is present, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny that the writer instinctively tends to

dwell within the confines of his self-centered world. This reflection will demonstrate that Le Clézio's predilection for white and black is a universal symbol epitomizing our common nature shared with all humanity. It would be utterly naïve to think that the author is by nature a special person rather than being an ordinary human being. With no exception to the fact that a real artist endeavours to possess a keen understanding of seemingly invisible forces defining the human condition in a given era, the disappearance of the black-white *leitmotif* with egocentric overtones coincides with an artistic maturity that allows Le Clézio to reach a wider readership. Despite the purity of the writer's intentions, it is therefore debatable whether the notions of the "desire to commune with the greater material, biosemio[tr]ic matrix" (Moser 2023b, 7) found in *L'Extase matérielle* (1967) and *L'Inconnu sur la terre* (1978) are connected to each other. The evolutionary process leading from his early style of writing to the "second" (Suzuki 11), more mature, is not easy to define, because the borders between the two versions of him, as an author, are blurred. Thus, to clarify this ambiguity, we should discuss the similarities that bind them together rather than highlighting their differences. Outlining this development is therefore an essential step in developing critical studies on the Nobel Laureate.

Considering the first literary phase and contextualizing it with his tendency for white and black will deepen our understanding of why the author has, over time, modified his literary and philosophical approach, away from a "French Beat spirit" (Thibault 2009, 11). The use of the colorless dyad perfectly symbolizes an internal mechanism well known to the young author: paradoxical discourses. This essay will thus enhance our understanding of an inner evolution that will reconnect to the position of a "writer-traveler" (Thibault 2009, 10), or "passer" between different cultures (Roussel-Gillet and Salles 7-13). The study of his predilection for white and black will help to reveal the hidden charm, emotion, sincerity and joy of the young Le Clézio, still not very popular with readers compared to the second version of himself.

Contextualization of the Young Le Clézio's Fictional Reality

From a philosophical perspective, it is by design that the archetype of the white-black dualism generates *Extase matérielle* (Material Ecstasy) which offers an invitation to a dreamlike journey that penetrates inside a myth of the author. For the young Le Clézio, who appears to be a philosopher rather than a novelist not only to critics but also to the writer himself, his imagination expresses and translates its own complete reality, similar to the postmodern spirit which derives much more inspiration from the fictional construction of reality than its representation. The aforementioned literary device immerses the reader in an unusual space of the fictional world. Through this reverie, as evidenced with many of Le Clézio's characters, we can read the author's state of mind at the time. With the publication of *Le Procès-verbal*, this motif appears in his interview with Jean Chalon in 1963, where the author at the age of 23, talks about publishing a book one day explaining the internal mechanisms of his extremely strange first protagonist. In this conversation, this writer identifies "Material Ecstasy" as the thought of Adam Pollo. This way of thinking allows this character to transform into a beach, dog or animal that can be found at the zoo (Chalon 3). While starting with a gaze, Pollo's mentality, interconnected with Le Clézio himself as the latter muses (Chapsal 1963, 31-32), reaches the ineffable cosmos. After the publication of the collection of short stories *La Fièvre* in 1965 and then the novel *Le Déluge* in 1966, Le Clézio moved to Bangkok as a French teacher in order to complete his national obligations as a technical assistant. The Franco-Mauritian author then published the essay *L'Extase matérielle* in 1967. I posit that these previously mentioned four works lead to a mythical reality born of his appetite for personal happiness illustrating how one never interrupts the endless flow of absolute ego.

Against the background of a quest whose goal is to visualize a detachment from oneself, the black and white dyad abounds, to the extreme, much more than in his other works written up until the end of the 1970s. In order to understand what characterizes the colorless vision of Le Clézio, it is necessary to analyze the novelistic images from the writings of this period. Let's take a representative

piece that we find at the beginning of *Le Procès-verbal*. The example in question shows us the spirituality of Pollo which consists of a type of mysticism in which every object becomes unique and eternal. These representative images underscore his solipsism based on the black–white dualism, our subject of study. Through the lens of Pollo’s implied insanity against the backdrop of social norms as Keith Moser underscores (2014, 96–100),

The sun also deformed certain things: the road, under its rays, liquefied in whitish patches; sometimes cars drove by in single file, and suddenly, for no apparent reason, the black metal burst like a bomb, a spiral-shaped lightning flashed from the hood and caused the whole hill to flare and bend, with one blow of its halo displacing the atmosphere by a few millimeters. (Le Clézio, *Le Procès-verbal* 15)

Specifically, from 1963 to 1967, white and black are in contrast, contradict each other, oppose each other, as opposed to Junichiro Tanizaki’s theory in *In Praise of Shadows* asserting “no matter where it becomes clean or where it becomes unclean, it is better to blur the lines” (10). At the same time, the two overlap to provide a complete picture of Le Clézio’s fictional reality. The principle of “Material Ecstasy” is best expressed through the idea of an impossible unification of the colorless antinomies of white and black. Later we will analyze in more depth this aspiration of the writer to find his own exclusive truth. As for the period of Le Clézian solipsism, Masao Suzuki remarks that the novel *Terra amata* (1967), after the publication of the essay *L’Extase matérielle*, is positioned in the same periodization as the latter (16–62). Admittedly, there are several motifs common to these two books, such as the effort to negate the distinction between life and death. However, a comparative analysis of the imaginary universes of these two works reveals a great discrepancy between them.

The Act of Being a Creator

In *Terra amata*, which may connect to the practice of “cosmic historiography” that is not limited to *Homo sapiens* (Moser 2018, 133), more precisely in its prologue and epilogue, the creativity of Le Clézio is a step towards knowledge of the “closed world” (240) meaning the limits of his imaginary space. This idea refers to a distrust of the author with regard to his novelistic creation itself. This distrust would later inspire the novel *Le Livre des fuites* (1969). In *L’Extase matérielle*, on the other hand, this dimension of mistrust is substantially absent, for instance, as opposed to *La Guerre* (1970) and *Les Géants* (1973) written against “the rise of multinational capitalism [coinciding] with the birth of hyperreality and the post–truth era” that Keith Moser highlights (2023b, 12). Consequently, everything the author conceives is truth in this regard. Le Clézio explains that he writes “by doing writing [...] with no other aim than to be oneself” (*L’Extase matérielle* 74).

Away from the European continent, the writer with dual Franco–Mauritian (Franco–English at that time) nationality, completed his French military service in Bangkok, as a French teacher at the University of Thammasat as a technical assistant.³ With the publication of *L’Extase matérielle*, in his interview with Daniel Albo, Le Clézio denounces sexual tourism and confesses to considering this country and its inhabitants as inferior because of the low regard they place on the culture of writing, which conversely makes the literary text possible (Albo 26–27). At the same time, it should be noted that the author shows less interest in the cultural differences between Southeast Asia and Europe. Rather, he ponders common Thai culture, developing a strongly ethnocentric point of view.⁴ This confession, not worthy of that of a future Nobel Laureate described as a “writer–traveler” or “passer” between different cultures, may refer to Pollo’s position. The latter considers himself to be the center of the world by looking at others through the prism of his own rules. To be more precise, neither Le Clézio nor Pollo want to deepen their understanding of a society to which they cannot conform. In this regard, a Western egocentrism is apparent in the author at the time, especially in the works written around the same time as *L’Extase matérielle*.

Through his own creative instinct, the writer seeks to impose on others his particular psyche in which the primitive prototype of the world is molded by himself, to be more precise, as Plato muses

on demiurge being responsible for creating the world (445–446). The ethnocentrism of the author, like that of his characters, is obvious. However, Le Clézio and Pollo strive to abandon their original civilization. There is a paradox here as the author is a common person like us. This dilemma or inconsistency arouses in the protagonists a self-destructive impulse, as if the author himself is the victim of an unbearable and violent suffering. This contradiction is embodied in the character of Pollo, who civilized society rejects because of his existential discord. Nevertheless, at the same time, this protagonist rejoices in the madness that results in his internment in an insane asylum.

Pollo's behavior symbolizes a struggle against the shackles of Western civilization, a theme that fascinates Le Clézio. The author strives to penetrate inside the Self, while avoiding the real. This is about making the most of words in order to achieve spiritual unity. Through the alchemy of words, the writer manages to bring the reader into the super-reality of Pollo, a state of "Material Ecstasy." Le Clézio invites the reader to enter the delirium of an alienated, anxious individual facing loneliness, a hallucination where words lose their usual meaning and are no longer sufficient, but which at the same time renders paradoxes possible.

This illusory journey is reflected in the power of the fictional reality in which the writer anchors himself at the time in order to rediscover a realm detached from society. In what elements does Le Clézio anchor this desire to move away from reality? He complains first of all about the frustrating life of "civilized" human beings in Europe: "[...] I would have preferred never to have been born. Life, I find it very tiring" (*La Fièvre* 7). In his interview with Madeleine Chapsal, Le Clézio insists on the impotence of human emotions, as well as the uselessness of life. In this case, the author praises the fictional universe. His imagination allows him through writing to realize his own reality, where it is possible to unite two opposite sides of the same idea like, for instance, death and life (Chapsal 1965, 36–37). Belonging to a literary civilization makes this state of mind possible through the construction of a fictional reality. This means that this rhetorical technique helps Le Clézio to unite the antinomies. Parallel to this tendency of the author to refuse the real, his early character Pollo focuses on mental efforts with the intention of concretizing his identity. In reality, however, it does nothing. In other words, this protagonist, similar to the "lonely pervert" from Kenzaburo Oe's *Sexual Humans* (107), opts for a spiritual life in an imaginary reality where he can wield any object at will.

Thus, the fabulous imagination helps Le Clézio to establish his own spiritual fortress. From this follows the prerequisite of the conviction that writing constitutes the perceptual basis of the concrete things that surround us. Following this logic, his visual acuity at the time alludes to solipsism and selfish exclusivity. In this way, the writer strives to develop a spiritual vision of reality mixed with white and black. In order to reduce the feelings of insecurity that are triggered in society, Le Clézio strives to know how to identify the link that unites life and death. In his interview with Roger Borderie, the author reveals his vision of this link in *L'Extase matérielle* where "death is not another world, and [...] to die is simply to pass from a form of life to another" (Borderie 12; 12). He endeavors to target "death [...] which can feel most opposed to wholeness" with the intention of "accepting" the painful duality between life and death (12; 12). In this manner, the writer wants to drive out of his psyche the binary conceptualization of appearance and disappearance in existence. Le Clézio, eager to achieve the transcendence of this dyadic thought, continues to "describe this evidence (of the elimination of vital duality) bit by bit" (12, my insertion). This is how the writer attaches himself to hopeful death, the end of the human dyad. This state of mind returns to nothingness in harmony with a state before birth in *L'Extase matérielle*.

The Possibility of Hope Through Death

In the spirit of what the young author perceives to be signs of happiness, his creative practice contrasts, for example, with the notion of death developed by Montaigne: "[...] death is indeed the end, not for all that the goal of life" (1269). Le Clézio always ponders the essence of death (Jeancard 7) and tends to gravitate towards a fictional universe instead of real life. Many Le Clézian characters

are capable of approaching the fruitful end of a useless life, as opposed to an old man hugging a young naked woman, afraid of death, asking for forgiveness and consolation in Yasunari Kawabata's *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* (83–84). Pollo, for instance, embodies this eccentric attitude about death. In this regard, as Ruth Amar underscores, Pollo is extremely strange, particularly because of his ambiguous and paradoxical identity, where his speech and activity seem enigmatic to the point of being impossible to understand (142–143). On the other hand, this figure only exists through the gaze of the homodiegetic narrator, as summarized by Germaine Brée (22). In the last paragraph of *Le Procès-verbal*, the narrator suggests his upcoming suicide: “While waiting for the worst, the story is over” (248), implying a kind of perfect beauty admired by Isao Inuma in Yukio Mishima's *Runaway Horses* (148).

At first glance, this commentary by the narrator concludes the life of the character confined in an insane asylum in a pessimistic way. Similarly and paradoxically, Pollo's madness is identified as a return “to his mother's womb” (*Le Procès-verbal* 248). This state of mind “recalls with nostalgia a reassuring uterine universe,” as Miriam Stendal-Boulos argues (76). We see optimism in this idea of returning to the uterine fortress. Pollo strives to find an intermediate way to fight against the life-death barrier insofar as this link is experienced as a chain imposed by society. In this framework conceived by the author, happiness or paradise are the finality explaining the irresistible temptation of death which also entices other Le Clézian protagonists from this time period, although none of them can really understand the precise reason. The writer elucidates that their unconsciousness leads to an existential aversion of a conception of the separation of the two entities in a modality of clear opposition, like life and death.

In the context of this “unity” of a binary conception related to Western moral systems that criticize Pollo's behavior as Keith Moser muses (2014, 100–103), the protagonist Mallaussène in the short story “En bas, vers la mort” (1963), for instance, reaches out with his left hand and pulls on the steering wheel of the black Opel that his girlfriend is driving. This destructive temptation encourages this protagonist to steer the car and deliberately cause an accident. The narrator praises his suicidal impulses with optimism as in *Le Procès-verbal*. Similarly, the characters in *La Fièvre* are tempted to let themselves be drawn into an illogical consciousness, where death and life mingle with each other to create a total unity.

Alongside the paradoxical tendencies of the characters, as Masao Suzuki underscores, Le Clézio at the time confused *non-être* (non-being) with *n'être plus* (no longer being) (Suzuki 44–48) in reference to the notions of Vladimir Jankélévitch. In other words, in this context, the conception of death as the negation of life by the disappearance of the body is shattered, and with it the radical opposition between life and death disappears. In an unusual way, the destruction of the body that we observe engenders the rebirth of the spirit. The author, by transposing this idea into his own myth and by creating the fictional universe, reconnects his witness, the reader, to an optimistic conception of suicide.

The young Franco-Mauritian author seeks here to get rid of the obsessions of Western life connected to a consumer society. Le Clézio expresses a preference for poverty rather than the accumulation of goods as Jean Onimus notes (84–86). In other words, his attachment to death comes from contesting the capitalist ideology inherent in postmodern European civilization. The writer expresses the alienation of the freedom of the so-called civilized individual through the figure of the Westerner who is incarcerated inside a drawing representing a prison (Le Clézio, *Le Déluge* 66). The dementia of the characters leads to the life-death barrier in that it keeps the individual under the yoke of the civilization to which they belong and therefore maintains the dyadic conception of being. For Le Clézio, this idea of a frozen image is harmful. From this point of view, a painter in the short story “La Fièvre,” for instance, criticizes European art which aims to detach from reality a piece such as eternity on canvas, because according to him the real painter is a mad man who scribbles endlessly on the ground with chalk (35–47), like Heraclitus' statement: “everything flows.”

Far from the real, the author connected to his novelistic universe seeks to lock himself in his own ecstasy in the manner of death. In this way, it is possible to unite two opposites of the same dichotomous conceptualization in search of a new image of the universe, without ever freezing it.

The Shift in Consumer Society to a Personal Cosmos

In the novel *Les Choses* (1965) by Georges Perec, it is interesting to see the portrait of a couple constrained and subject to objects in consumer society. This portrait refers directly to the success of the French economy during the 1950s and 1960s. Similarly, the novel *L'homme qui dort* (1967) by Perec recounts the story of a man who tries to escape the omnipresence of objects. During this period, John Kenneth Galbraith expounds on the psychological effects of contemporary advertising, about which he speaks of the "dependence effect" (152-160), while Jean Baudrillard discusses the relationship between objects and man in *Le Système des objets* (1968) and *La Société de consommation* (1970), as Marina Salles cites in her analysis of Le Clézio's early works (2006, 128-130). Against the backdrop of his social situation, an existential discrepancy between the young Le Clézio and consumerist society is becoming clearer. The author reinforces the direction towards his own mythological fiction instead of directly facing the reality of industrialized and consumerist cities.

At the same time, it is possible to link Le Clézio's works of the time to the *Nouveau Roman* (new novel). It was during the publication of *Le Procès-verbal* that *Les Fruits d'or* by Nathalie Sarraute, *Pour un nouveau roman* by Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Degrés* by Michel Butor and *Le Palace* by Claude Simon appeared. Ruth Holzberg, for instance, notices in Le Clézio's works a motif of the degradation of the individual that is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett, as well as the minute detail of the descriptions and the hostility of the invading objects that recalls Robbe-Grillet (163). Admittedly, Le Clézio often criticizes the novelistic approach of Robbe-Grillet in that it tends to grant too much importance to the literary form. In an interview with Madeleine Chapsal, Le Clézio claims to have never read the works of Robbe-Grillet (Chapsal 1963, 31). Nevertheless, we find in *Le Procès-verbal* passages parodying *La Jalousie* as noted by Stendal-Boulos (84). This shows that Le Clézio is fully aware of this literary movement. In reality, he also examines the novelistic form as a framework for artistic representation, in the same way as Robbe-Grillet. Their shared problem is that of the search for a new novelistic approach which would make it possible to reveal an image of reality without ever freezing it, unlike that of the 19th century, where the novelist writes a story dependent on the vicissitudes of fate where the principle of causality remains based on the precise life of the individual.

Le Clézio strives to penetrate the city perceived as a maze where the individual is locked up. A city, a geometric and homogeneous prison without exits through the author's gaze, makes us unable to distinguish the slightest difference between the diversity of an entity and this generalization. This landscape refers to the idea of a "labyrinthine universe" (Hadji 37-38) and to the *Nouveau Roman* movement, and it may bring Le Clézio closer to Marguerite Duras in their attempt to dissect the essence of modern civilization.⁵ On the other hand, the most fundamental disconnect between Le Clézio's works and the *Nouveau Roman* is found in the creation of cosmology. This conviction stems from the author's mistrust of social norms. Holding himself at a distance not only from Sarrautian consciousness like an amoeba that has not yet formed, but also from the Robbe-Grilletian reality of objects independent of the subject, Le Clézio moves towards the elaboration of his own reality in a self-centered movement.

This defining characteristic of the writer comes from the *nouveau réalisme* (new realism) movement as Bruno Thibault theorizes (2004). This is a group guided mainly by Pierre Restany and Yves Klein, accompanied by the demonstration of "new perceptual approaches to reality," which attempt to grasp the reality of industrialized and consumerist cities (Salles 2006, 165-176). In this regard, the perceptual discernment of the world is in question. Like the principles undergirding *nouveau réalisme*, a consideration of this reality leads Le Clézio to reestablish his own way of apprehending society and acting against its artificial environment. In the case of the author, the indictment of his own civili-

zation results in the destruction of his spiritual prison through recourse to a fictional universe. For the writer immersed in postmodern Western civilization, objects that are inseparable from conventional notions serve as a dualistic symbol that even includes life and death. The relationship between man and object is a recurring theme.

In *Le Procès-verbal*, for instance, Pollo constantly wanders in the “labyrinth of the city” and takes advantage of the point of view of dogs in order to “reconstitute a notion of space and time which would have nothing human” (79; 79). This desire for emancipation stems from disgust for the commercial relationship between the individual and the object whose prices one “couldn’t help reading” (*Le Procès-verbal* 83), a relationship born from the framework of contemporary European civilization. Le Clézio frequently uses the motif of the stripe, which Westerners associate with madness or incarceration, in order to symbolize the idea of prison as Michel Pastoureau argues (95–100). Thus, city dwellers are perceived as ants living “in striped pajamas with striped sheets, and striped pillows, with perhaps striped paper on the bedroom walls, and striped moths bumping into striped lampshades, in striped nights, streaked with neon, striped days of rails and cars” (*Le Clézio, Le Procès-verbal* 80), surrounded by a large number of advertising objects which symbolize consumer society. Life inside the logical, symmetrical city without exits alludes to modern incarceration as Jacqueline Dutton underlines (117). This is to infer that the townspeople are prisoners.

When they are forced to confront reality, many Le Clézian characters feel an existential malaise related to the inability of escaping urban life. Its commercial nature forces the protagonists to rank the objects before their eyes according to their price. In particular, the stripe of the bar code then becomes the sign of the prisoner. They seek to reject the values of consumerist society, while considering that “loving poverty” (*Le Clézio, L’Extase matérielle* 50) is a virtue. They abhor the spectacle of the city spreading out before their eyes. Under these conditions, perceptual discernment subjugates city dwellers to a mental prison placed under high surveillance by a certain convention which defines their scale of values.

In this vein, a paradox arises with characters who feel that “Noises, movements, the dummy are necessary for [them]” (*L’Extase matérielle* 44). This contradiction is central to understanding the behavior of Le Clézio’s characters and their ontological dilemma. Although marginal, they never deviate from the city yet without ever approaching the center. It should be noted that the psychoanalytic physician Rollo May insists on the importance of creating a myth of oneself in order to cure mental illness, a term which refers to an existential crisis in a given society. Given that May’s perspective is in keeping with the sensibilities of the young Franco-Mauritian author, it is therefore a question of reconciling the disagreement with the maternal civilization of the writer where the dualistic conceptualization of life and death inevitably arises. Consequently, Le Clézio, eager to accommodate himself to his original civilization, established his own myth. In this context, it would be possible for him to feel at ease, far from the reality of consumerist society, similar to the narrator of Haruki Murakami’s *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* who decides to stay in a dream world in order to reach the “never spoiled” Self (586).

The Subject Immersed in a Realm of Black-White Dualism

In order to realize his objective, the writer endeavors to introduce the cosmology of Parmenides into his novelistic cosmos as Suzuki notes with less detail (56). In an interview with Jean Chalon in 1963, Le Clézio’s interest in pre-Socratic philosophers including Parmenides appears obsessively: “Parmenides is at the hotel with me. [...] Parmenides follows me everywhere because I don’t understand him” (Chalon 3). According to this ancient Greek philosopher, in a real universe, there is only one entity that understands everything. This “could be opposed to the cohesion” (Parmenides 262). Moreover, this substance is “completely full of being,” “limited,” “completed” and “inflated like a round ball” (Parmenides 262–263). We still have a few fragments of his treatise in verse *On Nature* that have survived. This treatise is not limited to monistic truth but also mentions dyadic falsehood.

At the beginning of this epic, which follows the example of Hesiod's *Theogony* (Gadamer 121), the goddess appears opposite the poet who puts the sheep to pasture in Mount Helicon. This deity reveals to him the character of the authentic entity, the truth, then that of the illusion which proceeds from this truth (Hesiod 5). In this passage from *On Nature*, it is not by chance that Parmenides is also interested in the opinion of mortals (261-266). According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, the monistic vision of the ancient Greek philosopher distinguishes truth, represented in a ball comprising everything beyond the distinction of objects, from the multiplicity of opinions of mortals perceived as harmful human sensations arising from daily customs (136-137). These opinions of mortals are based on the vital duality of appearance and disappearance. This device enables Parmenides to deepen his understanding of the limitations of human life (Gadamer 132). Owing to his point of view, the human being finds himself trapped within a binary framework from birth to death. This is the ideal cosmogony that Le Clézio gives the reader a glimpse of and to which he aspires from afar, as Michelle Labbé insists (54).

For the young Franco-Mauritian writer who conceives the monist universe as his own myth, the reality of the consumer society before his eyes is comparable to the opinion of mortals like Parmenides, it never reflects the truth. In this context, we penetrate the author's space in the opinion of mortals and truth which refers to Parmenides. The integration of the representation of Parmenides into reality according to Le Clézio allows him to develop his own novelistic vision between the Self and his maternal civilization. In his early works, theses and antitheses in black and white frantically collide inside the opinion of mortals; they kill and annihilate each other in a movement towards the truth. In fragment 1 of *On Nature* by Parmenides, the goddess asserts to the poet that she not only teaches the truth but also the opinion of mortals. The transition between these teachings is found in fragment 8. In lines 50 to 53 of this fragment, the goddess announces: "[...] here I end confident speech And thought aiming at truth. Henceforth learn the opinion of mortals" (253). According to Parmenides, the opinion of mortals, illusion, arises from the human desire to give names to objects which may conform to two opposite characteristics of the same substance. In fragment 9, there is thus the primordial duality of mortals, that of "light" and "dark night" (266; 266). Due to this structure, the deceptive space circulates within a binary structure. Returning to the young Franco-Mauritian author's novelistic universe, the opinion of mortals refers directly to the consumer society of contemporary Europe. This misleading idea of reality, according to the author, reconnects to social norms. In the prologue to *Le Déluge*, which recounts the negation of the genesis where "the world had ceased to be and to have been" (11), a misleading image of reality is first formed from an obscure coloration directly related to the black and white dyad. Then, as everything is divided into two essences,

The hitherto undecided colorations were structured in black and white. Then, according to the essential differences, a part of lights, a part of shadows piled up. (*Le Déluge* 12)

This is how the importance of the black and white binary structure is revealed in Le Clézio's early fiction. This colorless duality reconnects to the genesis of the opinions of mortals, far from the truth in the sense of Parmenides. Starting from the black and white elements that are found in the two poles, a distinction of colored objects appears in opposition to a total entity.

The main idea of *Le Déluge*, after the appearance of the primordial duality of the world, concerns the tragic life of the protagonist François Besson. The latter finally goes blind for having looked directly at the sun in the heart of the so-called city of "counterfeit reality" (*Le Déluge* 46). In this framework, a deceptive reality born of society, the Self is composed of "flesh, color, space, time" (*Le Déluge* 22), like human life and therefore mortal. Besson is aware of his mortal nature, hence he rejects perceived conventional opinions and social norms as a deviation from the monistic truth. Consequently, in the epilogue of *Le Déluge*, the deceptive space of consumerist society is stripped of all colors down to the primordial black and white dyad.

Parallel to Besson's psychic conflict, the character of *Le Procès-verbal* Pollo is also keenly aware of his mortal nature. Therefore, he seeks the development of his own monistic thought in response to the example of Parmenides. The latter helps Le Clézio fight against the terror of death in an effort to reconnect common sense to the extent of the writer's black-white cosmology. Thus Pollo, endeavoring to seek the truth in the sense of Parmenides, lauds fragment 8 of *On Nature* of the aforementioned ancient Greek philosopher in order to renounce the opinion of mortals: "How could things that exist eventually become things that ought to be? How could he be born? Because if he was born, he is not, and he is not either if he must one day come to be. Thus the genesis is extinguished and out of investigation the perishing" (Le Clézio, *Le Procès-verbal* 54-55). The author's works at the time seek not only the truth but also the opinion of mortals, or rather a dialectical movement between the two in order to delve into an impossible unification of the colorless antinomies.

Le Clézio, through his desire to distance himself from the social norms of consumerist society, takes full advantage of the structure of the works *Le Déluge* and *L'Extase matérielle*. In these works, the story begins from the prologue with the image of truth and ends in the same image in the epilogue, alluding to fragment 5 of Parmenides: "[...] Of having to start from one point to another: To this point again I will return again" (259). This eccentric framework of Le Clézian cosmology thus contributes to getting rid of the vision of consumer society as fixed and ossified. The future Nobel Laureate, eager to express his ideal reality, conceives a structure for the work whose first original part is then split in two with the intention of forming the prologue and the epilogue of the work (Borderie 11). The writer then inserts, in the middle of the framework formed by the prologue and epilogue the meaning of the truth in the sense of Parmenides, with the central part of the work aimed at dissecting consumer society as the opinion of mortals.

However, Le Clézio's main interest lies above all in the presentation of characters whose characteristic feature is that they tend to die because of social norms. These mortal protagonists are eager to return to the truth in the sense of Parmenides, at a time when the black and white duality is not yet clear. In these circumstances, two representative approaches to reality reveal states of mind replete with anguish. On the one hand, when we penetrate inside consumerist society, we find the theme of the struggle against objects as in *Le Procès-verbal* and *La Fièvre*. These works are marked by an erosion of the perception of the characters, born of the collective vision of society. Le Clézio, conceiving his narration as an inner experience of his characters where the horrors encountered are magnified to the point of making them descend into madness, composes a fictional universe sometimes by adopting an interior point of view in relation to the characters, sometimes by looking at them from afar, which is not without irony. This narrative approach aims to represent the disagreements of the author but also of the characters with the dominant opinions or social norms. This is why the protagonists always move towards the monistic truth whether it is voluntary or not. On the other hand, the narration is the fulcrum of truth in the sense of Parmenides in *Le Déluge* and *L'Extase matérielle*. The characters are drawn into a circular movement between truth and opinion. In order to present all aspects of Le Clézian thought in the most eloquent way possible, the author attributes to the narrator a broader perspective. This narrative technique allows the reader to get closer to a fictional universe as a space permitting the author to treat all of the objects as he pleases.

Le Clézio, striving to express his ideal imagination, concentrates on visual description. In his interview with Denise Bourdet during the publication of *Le Déluge*, Bourdet remarks that the novelistic style of Le Clézio is characterized by "the acuity of the gaze and the vigilant analysis of sensations" (115), qualifying this writer as a novelist of the gaze. Alain Jouffroy describes the functioning of the author's gaze with the term *stylo-caméra* (pencil-camera): "Le Clézio films his life with his pencil-camera which not only restores to us the visible, but the enormous mass of invisible things which make the visible universe groan, ooze, tremble ceaselessly" (71). This expression also appeals to Le Clézio in reference to the conversation with Pierre Lhoste (15-16). Drawing on the abnormal sensations that lead to monistic truth, the author seeks to describe not only what he sees, but also what he does not see in a literary universe influenced by the thought of Parmenides.

This ancient Greek philosopher, trying to understand the principles of the universe as much as possible, favors intellectual perception over sensuality, yet Parmenides does not deny sensation itself. As the philosopher declares in fragment 7 of *On Nature*: “Resist habit, abundant pretexts, which could lead you to follow this path, where blind eye, deaf ear and tongue still rule everything” (260). Kaname Miura underscores that Parmenides tends to challenge all confidence in sensual experience without excluding it. Thus, the errors of perception refer to the usual way in which sensation is interpreted (Miura 160). Owing to this conviction, Le Clézio’s gaze allows the reader to penetrate inside the Self, where everything is in motion between truth and opinion to unite the colorless antinomies which are white and black, dualistic opinions of mortals. Le Clézio agrees with the idea of Parmenides with regard to sensation, so the writer seeks to redress his poor visual discernment in a literary way. The author expresses above all here a distrust of the sensual image resulting from social norms. This is why he concentrates on a literary description that disintegrates before his eyes in search of the monistic truth.

At first glance, there is a paradox between Le Clézio as a novelist of the gaze and his own distrust of sight. Nonetheless, the influence of Parmenides on the author provides the reader with a key to understanding. In fragment 4 of *On Nature*, the philosopher muses, “But see how things absent due to the intellect impose their presence” (258–259). Hans-Georg Gadamer interprets this paradox as the need to perceive what cannot be perceived with the senses, but which nevertheless exists (155). This is how Le Clézio takes advantage of a similar process to encourage us to accept his own truth, in a realm of the black-white dualism which takes aim at an impossible unification of the colorless antinomies. In this context, the author, who leans toward visual description, first endeavors to contradict the opinions of mortals concerning the life-death duality in addition to criticizing consumer society.

Furthermore, the actions and behavior of the characters can be understood by Fragment 6 which reads “Keep your thought away from this false path that opens in search of you” (259–260) as in the short story “L’homme qui marche,” where “infinity is not, it only exists for what is finite” therefore “we must not think” (Le Clézio, *La Fièvre* 126). This strategy seeks to avoid the conception resulting from two opposites of the same substance that prevents monistic thought. This attempt by the characters is the struggle against the dominant mores of society, and it constitutes a central theme of Le Clézio’s work. Parallel to this theme of resistance to social norms, the author also mentions that the epigraph of *Le Procès-verbal* can be assimilated into fragment 14: “Shining in the night with a borrowed brilliance, She (= the moon) goes around the Earth” (Parmenides 269, my insertion), as well as fragment 15: “Certainly it (=the moon) looks towards the rays of the Sun” (269, my insertion). This motif of the sun and moon as two sides of mortal opinion shines through Pollo’s actions (Chalon 3).⁶ In one scene from the novel, for instance, Pollo leaves the abandoned house on the hill to go to the city to look for his girlfriend Michèle. All night he travels through the city without being able to find his lover until the end. Compared to the motif of the sun and moon following the example of Parmenides, Pollo represents himself in the city as a “big sun burning everything in passing, transforming everything into heaps of ashes” (Le Clézio, *Le Procès-verbal* 141). Plutarch in *Against Colotes* interprets the content of fragment 14 of *On Nature* as “the Moon is not the Sun” (Parmenides 269). In other words, the moon may well shine, nevertheless, its brightness will always remain artificial and will never equal the sun. This conception is also linked to Pollo’s actions, insofar as he “looks for sunspots everywhere” (Le Clézio, *Le Procès-verbal* 11), concretizing fragment 15. Pollo strives to become the center of the universe like a moon that imitates the sun as the master of sight. Ironically, there is thus the duplication of opinion of mortals, for Pollo is actually moving towards his own opinion in opposition to the conventions of consumer society.

In conclusion, the presence of Parmenides’s thought in Le Clézio’s early texts is mainly connected to the struggle between two opposites of the same substance, which are clearly found in two opinions of mortals arising from social norms and the opinion of many Le Clézian protagonists connected to a monistic version of the truth. The aporia of the writer’s thought lies in figures of speech, especially

in the black and white pair that consists of refusing social norms as reality. In other words, the mental act of uniting two completely opposite poles of the same substance, the antinomies, appears impossible in practice, thus his protagonists are only given access to madness in black-white dualism. Le Clézio's understanding of truth in the sense of Parmenides is always contradictory and risky. We sometimes have access to the characters' point of view which translates into their own opinion close to the truth in the sense of Parmenides. Therefore, these characters find themselves trapped in a vise between their opinion approaching the truth and the point of view of society, thereby transforming their lives into a hell from which they cannot escape resulting in a real hemorrhage of the mind.

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Notes

- ¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.
- ² Although Marina Salles possesses a keen understanding of how many Le Clézian characters perceive through colors including black and white (2020), her analysis aims to illustrate the pictorial aspect that is not limited to Le Clézio's early works as opposed to his entire philosophical framework on which I have attempted to shed light. Similar to Salles, Isabelle Roussel-Gillet highlights the prevalence of the white-black image related to photography.
- ³ Born in Nice in April 1940, Le Clézio spent a year of his childhood in Ogoja, Nigeria, where his father Raoul, an English military doctor, was transferred. Southeast Asia is therefore not his first experience of living in a non-European country.
- ⁴ Le Clézio later wrote an article "Lettre à une amie thaïe" in which he expressed his admiration for the "animated silence" that was happening in Thailand (12-14). According to the author, this harmonious order reflects a relationship of equality between nature and men. Alongside this motif, furthermore, we also find the scene taking place in Cambodia in *Le Livre des fuites* (144-149). However, he is less interested in Southeast Asia compared to Africa, America or even East Asia.
- ⁵ As Jalila Hadji highlights in the works of Duras, this labyrinthian image is connected to a hotel where love and death prowl along multiple circular corridors, some of which only lead to false exits (37). Similarly, Le Clézio is also interested in the circularity of modern civilization without exits in order to deepen his understanding of what it means to be human.
- ⁶ Originally in the interview, Le Clézio translates into French fragment 14: "Claire autour de la terre errante, lumière d'ailleurs" [Clear around the wandering earth, light from elsewhere] as well as fragment 15: "Toujours portant ses regards inquiétants vers le soleil" [Always bearing her disturbing gazes towards the sun].

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