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Loneliness in childhood in Le Clézio's works

The child is present in most of Le Clézio's works as the main character or secondary character (whom the main character encounters while wandering); the child is constantly there; everything is as if the author wants to warn the reader of his eternity, of his omnipresence.

Our purpose is to study the relationships that exist between loneliness and the universe of childhood, showing that the world of childhood is, in turn, a world in which children evolve (who remain children from the beginning to the end of the text) and a lost world of adults: a time when they themselves were children. The solitude that characterizes the child's world, in Le Clézio's novels, is not free; it is the necessary condition for an intense communion with nature, with the midst of trees, water, sea, mountains, in a single word, with everything that is not man's creation. It allows the child to discover what the adult does not know or understand.

Keywords: Nature, city, adults, childhood, loneliness

The child is present in most of Le Clézio's works as the main character or secondary character (whom the main character meets while wandering). It is there steadily; it is as if the author wants to warn the reader of its eternity, its pervasiveness.

From the first chapter, *Procès-verbal* Adam Pollo thinks of Michèle, but above all: “à tous les enfants qu'elle aurait, un jour ou l'autre, de toute façon”¹. At the end of *Désert*, Lalla, the little girl, gives birth to a new life, a child:

¹ Le Clézio, *Le Procès-Verbal*, 16.

Lalla tient l'enfant dans ses bras, elle coupe le cordon avec ses dents, et elle le noue comme une ceinture autour du centre minuscule secoué de pleurs. Avec les mêmes gestes instinctifs qu'elle ne comprend pas, elle creuse avec ses mains dans le sable, près des racines du figuier, et elle enterre le placenta.²

What touches us, when reading these two texts, is the inevitability of childhood with its extreme position in his works; perhaps the only element that the author does not question; the child is there; it is natural to think about being born, and from the moment you were born, all you need to do is, without thinking, "gestes instinctifs."

The child's presence in Le Clézio's novels allows the reader (and the characters) to connect to a safe eternal value that cannot disappear. It is almost a kind of God, outside the urban life, which has always existed and will always exist. What most characterizes this child is that he or she is almost always alone, discovers his/her character randomly during a walk; however, in one of his novels, *Martin*, Le Clézio has a little gifted boy faced with a group of children who manifest towards him their aggressiveness and their violence.

Martin is the first lonely one abroad, playing with "un sans doute charançon or quelque chose d'approchant"³. This scene announces what we read in *Terra Amata* when Chancelade plays with potato beetles. He is the God of this weevil since he holds the power of life and death over this insect. Knowing well that the weevil is his prisoner, he tantalizes the insect with freedom:

Plus tard, Martin reprit la petite bête entre ses doigts, creusa un trou dans le sable et la plaça au centre. Le charançon, sans hésiter, commença à escalader la pente. Mais le sable glissait sous ses pattes continuellement, et il retombait au fond du trou.⁴

Like Sisyphus (and his rock), the weevil always tries to climb the slope on to fall to the bottom. It is thanks to this game that Martin

² Le Clézio, *Désert*, 395.

³ Le Clézio, *La fièvre*, 156.

⁴ *Ibidem*, 158.

becomes aware of his own life in HLM⁵ city, like living in a cell, from where he is unable to escape. Does he, too, not live like the weevil?

Les choses étaient ainsi. Il fallait être vivant, se sentir vivant jusqu'au plus oublié de soi-même, pris dans le crépuscule, dans cette ville, sur cet espace de terre habitée, au centre d'une cour, espèce de troglodyte de H.L.M. Il fallait avoir tout son corps et toute son âme bien à soi, à la fois solitaire au centre d'un désert de béton, et coulant lentement avec tout le reste de l'univers.⁶

But it was Martin who led the game when playing with the weevil. He will become the toy group of children when they take, surround, and ridicule him like an animal.

To show aggression towards Martin, for these children, is first to make him lose his name; he no longer calls Trojmann but "La Cloche," "Le Beagle" (ibid.: 168); then "Grosse-tête" (ibid.: 169); is also to make fun of your accent, in fact to make fun of your particularities, of what distinguishes you from others "Laissez-moi passer, dit-il Laissez-moin pannsser 'nassillarda un des Servers." (ibid.: 168). Finally, the boys take his glasses and one of the guys makes him believe that they are hidden in the sand and he will have to dig to find them. But they put them in his pocket. Martin Trojmann becomes the weevil of the boys: "Les cris des enfants le traversaient of plus en plus vite le blessant à chaque fois en une nouvelle parcelle sa chair, comme des flèches, tout à fait comme des flèches Il était l'Animal traqué. ..." (ibid.: 171).

The unique characteristic of these children is that they are alone most of the time: they never appear in a group or a crowd. Unlike people walking in the city, they walk, for example on the coast, like Chancelade in *Terra Amata*. It is at the moment when she thinks she cannot find anyone and is thinking of bathing that the child Chancelade strikes up a conversation with a "petite fille vêtue d'un maillot rouge qui était assise les pieds dans l'eau."⁷

⁵ Abbreviation for *Habitation à Loyer Modéré*. Large modern building with low-cost flats.

⁶ Ibidem, 160.

⁷ Le Clézio, *Terra Amata*, 42.

The meeting between Chancenlade and this girl called Sonia is the meeting of two happy lonely persons; the meeting of two innocents that have not been marked by the stigmata of powers, the city, the anonymous crowd. The two children can talk as equals, without constraints, in total freedom⁸. Together, they discover the beauty, purity of nature, and the desire that brings them together comes smoothly without a preconceived idea.

The discovery (interrupted by the insect that moves in Sonia's womb) from your body follows on their mutual discovery by the word. During this dialogue, each wants to help others, give you pleasure search: Chancenlade teaches her to swim crawl; Sonia praises Chancelade's glasses.

The two children play together for a long time and, unlike adults on whom the powers impose desires, they play as they please; no one forces them to swim or walk; they are two recluses in a pure form that can communicate without restrictions because, above them, no master exists for the limit. When Chancelade begins to caress Sonia, she does not say anything; no code tells you that you need to refuse the caresses of a young man: "La petite fille ne dit rien, mais elle se serra contre le corps de Chancelade et passa ses bras autour de lui."⁹

The search for affection characterizes the child. Sonia, the young girl, alone at that time on the coast, truly understands friendship and happiness: they are not possible within the city (on a street, in a store); they are possible outside the civilization of men, its rules, its codes. Similarly, they are possible in the desert, the sun, away from any presence that Lalla and Hartani will love it (*Désert*). The fundamental relationship that allows the union of two children is a playful relationship; the child represents a happy solitude since he plays¹⁰. This relationship with the desert seems to come in the Nietzschean line of the individual's relationship with loneliness. Nietzsche, in *Aurora*, says Nietzsche: "Would you then go back to your desert [...] In the middle of the live crowd like a crowd and do not think as I think, after a while,

⁸ Unlike adults.

⁹ Le Clézio, *Terra Amata*, 46.

¹⁰ The only solitary character who is considered happy Indian Cobra in *Voyages de l'autre côté*, one that has the power to play with everything.

I always have the impression that wants to banish me from myself and steal my soul. [...] I then need to return to the desert to be good.”¹¹

This opening to the game, the adult loses it when he left the world of childhood; later when Chancelade becomes a man, he meets a boy, maybe his own son, and understands that all is becoming, in principle, inscribed in the child. Perhaps Chancelade-adult meets Chancelade-child, although the author is sure to make a difference:

Il y avait maintenant cet enfant qui n'était pas lui, qui vivait à quelques centimètres, absolument détaché. Cet enfant serait un homme un jour, il vivrait dans la société, il aurait un métier, une ferme, une maison à lui. Il serait un vieillard, un infirme aux mains tremblantes, et pourtant ce serait toujours le même.¹²

In *Les Géants*, a lonely boy, who leaves his home and spends most of his time in Hyperpolis park, cannot know happiness and a happy life, cannot connect with others through language, because he decided, one day, not to speak anymore: he is Bogo le Muet. He notes all the activities in the park that surrounds the Hyperpolis supermarket. He does not know happiness because he does not abandon the city and its shopping centre, in a reflected and definitive way, he does not act like Lalla who, in *Désert*, abandons every place she starts to get used to (the native desert, the old quarter of Marseille, the photographer's house); Bogo le Muet sometimes goes to the square, but he is as if fascinated by the city and constantly returns to the park of Hyperphis is a lonely child, who does not speak. He becomes happy when he finds pebbles on the beach: “Ensuite, il avançait avec précaution, et il était heureux parce qu'il savait qu'à cet endroit-là, il allait trouver des choses extraordinaires La plage ne serait plus anonyme, il. allait rencontrer de nouveaux galets.”¹³ He is happy because, at that precise moment, he observes the pebbles, he no longer needs others; he no longer thinks

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Aurora*, §471. Loneliness is, above all, restorative. A rest of social life, social duties, the masks we put so many times in public. We must learn to cultivate our loneliness, as a possibility of distinction, as a possibility of creating other, the different.

¹² Le Clézio, *Terra Amata*, 155.

¹³ Le Clézio, *Les Géants*, 105.

of the people who could look at him whehe is installed on the bumper of a car and turn him into an inert object and at the same time install him in its condition of a little beggar or a little thief; he is happy on the beach because it is not objectified by the look of the other. He dreams of becoming a pebble on the beach; to identify himself with this mineral matter that seems inert, but that is continuously renewed by the waves and the movement of the steps of those who walk, “Il aurait bien être un caillou voulu, rond et gris, un caillou parmi les autres cailloux C’était cell qu’il voulait être: un caillou.”¹⁴

If he is silent, it is not because of a disease or a malformation; Bogo decides “ne plus parler”¹⁵ We have here the playful character of this child’s attitude. Bogo le Muet surrenders to a kind of game: he goes through change, withdraws voluntarily to double loneliness, childhood; within the world of childhood, he closes himself off by refusing the word; he wants to escape the word; everyone talks around and he tries to understand the words that suit him:

Il aurait fallu que les gens parlent à voix basse. Bogo le Muet aimait bien quand on parlait à voix basse. On pouvait choisir les mots qu’on voulait, comme on lit un livre, on pouvait n’écouter que les mots qui étaient beaux, ou drôles, on pouvait n’entendre que ce qu’on voulait.¹⁶

Unlike Lullaby who, one day, decides not to go to school but walks on the coast instead, Bogo le Muet is constantly seduced by the city, by car, by Hyperpolis Park. It is the child who, in the space of a short time, is attracted by the objects that are dangerous and frightening to him; he is the desire that must be dominated, perhaps repressed to preserve the autonomy of the self. It is what explains why Bogo le Muet above all fears the policemen and the dogs that could run after him, sniff him out, kill him“Alors, dans Hyperpolis désert, ils pourraient lancer leurs grands chiens féroces qui parcouraient les allées les unes après les

¹⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵ Ibid., 149.

¹⁶ Ibid., 150.

autres, en flairant les pistes et en aboyant: Haw! Haw! Haw! et bogo le Muet serait bien perdu.”¹⁷

This lonely boy does not choose: he constantly hesitates between the desire for nature (the beach, pebbles, river) and the desire for civilization (the city, the cars, the supermarket). This resembles the attitude of Adam Pollo in *Le Procès-Verbal*, who delivers a constant shuttle between the detached villa and the city streets. It is perhaps why Adam Pollo pass a child? “Écoutez - vous vous m’avez l’air bien jeune.”¹⁸, says a woman on the beach to Adam. Looking for voluntary solitude, Adam Pollo is driven to rediscover the world of childhood. As a child, he begins to speak to the design of the wall in the house; each real element becomes a new element of an imaginary universe: “En effet, graduellement, il arriva à recomposer un univers de terreurs enfantines.”¹⁹ But perhaps the world becomes hostile to justify Pollo’s escape; he searches for the lost emotions of childhood, such as fear and desire; he somehow tries to find a picture of his inner self that urban society disfigured and disrupted. Seeking solitude, Adam Pollo tries to close the world of childhood; and conversely, the adult Adam Pollo sees his existential being marked by the child Adam Pollo. By memory, Adam tries to dive into his past; or else again the past appears in an uncontrolled way in Pollo’s adult present; the reciprocating movement between the loneliness of the house and the people of the city is accompanied by a reciprocating movement between the past and the present:

Et les canons, et les bazookas, les balles dum-dum, les mortiers, les grenades, etc. et la bombe qui tombe sur le port quand j’ai huit ans et que je tremble et que l’air tremble et que toute la terre tremble et se balance devant le ciel noir?²⁰

The character Adam Pollo is not a child, but he is presented to us as an individual marked by his childhood, which is marked by the war itself. Adam Pollo chooses not to find the world of childhood; indeed,

¹⁷ Ibid., 231.

¹⁸ Lé Clézio, *Le Procès-Verbal*, 35.

¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

²⁰ Ibid., 63.

he has never left it; this explains why he constantly plays with others, with their language, with the mouse, etc. The confinement to the house is metaphoric isolation of the world of childhood. In the course of the narrative, the reader suddenly sees Adam Pollo as a child:

On dirait que le monde a été dessiné par un enfant de douze ans. Le petit Adam bientôt douze ans²¹.

C'est un autre monde bizarre, tout de même, qu'il dessine, le petit enfant Adam. Un univers sec, quasi mathématique, où tout se comprend facilement, selon une cryptographie dont la clé is imminent.²²

This “imminent” key will never be discovered; the adult Adam Pollo spends a few days before his confinement to a cell at a psychiatric hospital to explain his situation to others. As a child, he prefers to tell people his secrets, but at the same time, he wants to keep them to himself. Adam Pollo plays with others to make them understand that they will give this explanation, but the reader does not know. Pollo revolves around this enigma and ends up going mad since he cannot penetrate to the heart of its meaning.

Adam Pollo is the opposite of Martin: the former, when he becomes an adult, seems to find this lost world and acts like a big kid. The latter follows a reverse path; as a child, he looks older than his age and the way he looks makes him a real adult. In both cases, childhood forms a kind of platform, a base, which emerges, in filigree, in all the actions of these two characters.

The child appears as such in numerous texts of Le Clézio. As such, because it is not presented laden with the sense that marks the adult; and as such in its solitude, because it is not allied with others to form a group.

After leaving home one morning in October to find nature, sea, and rocks, Lullaby wants to forget about the past and be on her own. All the elements that contribute to erase the past are valued, the most important being the sea: “Lullaby ne pensait même plus à l'école. La mer est

²¹ *Ibid.*, 201.

²² *Ibid.*, 202.

comme cela : elle efface ces choses de la terre parce qu'elle est ce qu'il y a de plus important au monde."²³

Vu cette filiation, notons que la jeune fille Lullaby, qui a rompu avec les conventions sociales, ce travail sur l'intériorité s'accomplit surtout au sein de la nature. Pour elle, quitter l'école signifie démarrer un processus d'introspection, et donc de reconstruction. Ainsi est-il que, temporairement, à l'extérieur de la ville, au bord de la mer, elle bâtit un chez elle accueillant, où le corps et l'esprit retrouvent un équilibre naturel dans une sorte de fusion apaisante avec les éléments.²⁴

Lullaby's lonely journey, however, quickly becomes a recreational journey: she discovers signs left by a stranger and begins to follow them, like a child playing treasure hunt. A feeling of uneasiness comes to ensure her first solitude from the moment she discovers the first sign "TROUVEZ-MOI"²⁵ by which she had passed before: leave home and take refuge in the wild solitude of the coast rocks. Later, she finds other signs written in chalk on the rocks: "NE VOUS DÉCOURAGEZ PAS! ÇA FINIT PEUT-ÊTRE EN QUEUE DE POISSON"²⁶

She then enters an abandoned house that looks cosy, with an inscription engraved above the door: "ΧΑΡΙΣΜΑ"²⁷, a Greek word meaning grace, favor, blessing.

C'était peut-être à cause de lui qu'il y avait tant de paix et de lumière:
"Karisma..."

Le mot rayonnait à l'intérieur de son corps, comme s'il était écrit aussi en elle, et qu'il l'attendait.²⁸

It is in this lonely but cosy universe where Lullaby finds the boy wearing glasses; this universe that brings together all the elements of

²³ Le Clézio, *Mondo et autres histoires*, 77.

²⁴ Balint-Babos, *Le processus de création dans l'oeuvre de Le Clézio*, 139.

²⁵ Le Clézio, *Mondo et autres histoires*, 71.

²⁶ Le Clézio, *Mondo et autres histoires*, 84.

²⁷ Ibid., 84.

²⁸ Ibid., 88-89.

nature.²⁹After the earth (rocks), water (the sea), this is the fire: Lullaby burns the written sheets, the letters: “C’était bien, de voir les pages bleues se tordre dans les flammes et comme les mots à reculons s’enfuir, on ne sait either.”³⁰ It is “parce que c’est amusant”³¹, says the boy, he burns her letters. The boy enters the game and searches for everything that he can burn; around this comforting warmth of the fire, they talk, they can express themselves and communicate. But unlike Lullaby, the boy is not completely alone; he knows he has to return home; he came to fish; he represents the law; he cannot afford to make mistakes continually on the coast; he did not leave the family unit: “Je ne peux pas rester, je dois rentrer.”³² The boy is somehow the adult while Lullaby is the little prince.

The child is not disturbed with the outside world; she continues to play, even if the apparent circumstances do not lend themselves to such: “Fais-moi un dessin, demain!, dit Lullaby au petit garçon.”³³ This drawing, a sign of the little boy’s existence when he is gone, Lullaby will take possession of it, she can burn it whenever she feels like it: “Je le brûlerai quand je l’aimerai beaucoup.”³⁴ Lullaby always acts like she is in a game; in this sense, she absolutely represents the spirit of childhood; she causes situations that lead to consequences that put her in a game; she decides to burn what he loves; she decides to burn what can escape his dear and essential loneliness; it is precisely because the child has the ability to give birth, to his will, his own emotions. It is the mystery of the coast rocks, the wild nature aspect, the solitude of the site, the man, the adult that scares Lullaby: “un homme vêtu d’un pantalon de toile bleue et d’un bouson, au visage noirci par le soleil, aux cheveux hirsutes.”³⁵

²⁹ And the poetic; they are those who Bachelard studied in his essays *L’eau et les rêves, La psychanalyse du feu ...*

³⁰ Le Clézio, *Mondo et autres histoires*, 92.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

³² *Ibid.*, 94.

³³ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

She fears this man because he makes her understand that it no longer has a secret, she can no longer play; perhaps he draws the chalk inscriptions to attract and rape, “Malgré la douleur dans sa cheville, Lullaby bondit et commença à dévaler la pente, au milieu d’une avalanche de cailloux.”³⁶ Lullaby is afraid because, at that precise moment, she no longer controls her emotions; it is someone outside the game that gives her the feeling of fear; she loses her solitude, and the relationship of friendship between her and the boy wearing glasses turns into a relationship of aggression between her and this man. Here’s what breaks her solitude and leads her ultimately to return to her family and to school.

The Director understood nothing of Lullaby leakage; for this representative of this order, law, Lullaby found certainly a boy, with whom she had sex; nothing else counts; it is the adult who meets the codes of society; if the girl left, it was only for sexual desire:

Vous avez un petit ami, n’est-ce pas?

Lullaby voulut protester, mais la Directrice l’empêcha de parler.

-Inutile de nier, certaines – certaines de vos camarades vous ont vu avec un garçon.³⁷

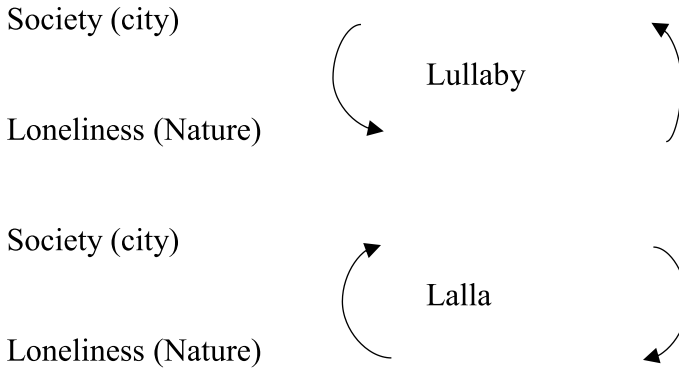
Only the math teacher, Mr. Filippi, who enables Lullaby to see or imagine the teaching on the rocks by the sea, understands the child; despite his function of teaching children, he might have remained a child who enjoys the solitude of the sea and the coast; he does not rebuke, but asks if the trip went well; both could truly communicate because their solitude is based on a common background: the love of the sea: “Et vous me demanderez ce que vous voudrez, tout à l’heure, après le cours. J’aime beaucoup la mer, moi aussi.”³⁸

We can then note that Lullaby and Lalla (the main character in *Désert*) run on two reverse paths:

³⁶ Ibid., 98.

³⁷ Ibid., 106.

³⁸ Ibid., 120.



Reverse but complementary paths allow us to find a circular structure.

The loneliness that characterizes the world of the child in Le Clézio's novels is not free; it is the necessary condition for an intense communion with nature, with trees, the water, the sea, the mountains, in short, with all that is not the creation of man. It allows the child to find out what the adult does not know or understand; the narrator of *Le Petit Prince* had, from an early age, the consciousness of this state, "Les grandes personnes ne comprennent jamais rien toutes seules, et c'est fatigant, pour les enfants, de toujours et toujours leur donner des explications."³⁹

Whether the boy, the main character in *L'Inconnu sur la terre* or the boy of *Voyage au pays des arbres*, the child, in its solitude, can see so much the drop of water, a tiny part of the rain that hits the cobblestones, as the vast expanse of the sea or the majesty of a large tree.

The boy, the main (and the only) character in *Voyage au pays des arbres*⁴⁰ must use his own means to travel since he does not have the means available to adults: "Mais pour voyager, il faut avoir les moyens. Le petit garçon n'avait pas de bateau, ni d'auto, ni de train, ni rien de ce genre."⁴¹ The sequence of the text clearly shows that the real journey is done in solitude, without material means, only by himself.

³⁹ Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince*, 10.

⁴⁰ The author does not give it any name.

⁴¹ Le Clézio, *Voyage au pays des arbres*, 2.

The little boy was already in the habit of walking in the forest, to the rhythm of tree and plant life, which he could not have done with a car or a train he feels as if the trees want to communicate with him, “Il y avait longtemps qu’il allait se promener dans la forêt, et il sentait tout un tas de choses bizarres, comme si les arbres voulaient lui parler, ou comme si les arbres bougeaient.”⁴² Trees only live when they are alone or in the child’s presence; when they see an adult approaching, they play dead: “Seulement, ils sont un peu farouches et timides, et quand ils voient un homme qui s’approche, ils resserrent l’étreinte de leurs racines, et ils font le mort.”⁴³ What the child has to learn is to tame the trees, trust them, listen to them, understand them... all the things that adults do not do because, in the eyes of the trees, they are predators. Moreover, unlike adults, the child acts as a joke and a joke is you get what you want: “Le petit garçon n’était pas pressé de partir, alors il s’est mis d’abord à apprivoiser les arbres.”⁴⁴ He finds, for example, the whistle that the trees understand; he does not try to call them by the language of men; he invents his own language: “Les gens qui ne savent pas apprivoiser les arbres disent que les forêts sont silencieuses. Mais dès que tu siffles, et que tu siffles bien, comme un oiseau, tu commences à entendre le bruit que font les arbres.”⁴⁵

Each tree has a particular sign; their whistle is recognizable by the boy; the child also learns to open his eyes to the trees: “Alors sur toutes ces petites feuilles agitées, il voyait des yeux s’ouvrir les uns après les autres, lentement, comme les yeux des escargots.”⁴⁶ (*ibidem*: 12)... Only the boy can penetrate the secret history of the trees, the stories they tell; from the moment someone approaches, they cease all activity; they close in on themselves, have much more amazing stories than they can tell humans, in their artificial and fictitious cities, some “ont de drôles de voix cavernueuses, et ils racontent des histoires vieilles de deux cents ans.”⁴⁷ They also live longer than men, their time scale does not

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

compare to the human timescale: “le roi de la forêt”, un chêne, a plus de “3.000 ans”.

Nature (here, the tree) is not given immediately to the child, as the shop window of the object to be bought by an artificial medium, the money; nature is left to be discovered by knowledge; the child is first alone, then he abstracts from his social surroundings; only then it can penetrate secrets of nature, communicating with trees, like the boy in *Voyage au pays des arbres*.

The attraction to the forest is stronger for the boy than his presence at the family home. Every night, he visits the forest, but he leaves home secretly when everyone is asleep. Others (adults, his parents) do not understand his attitudes and they would certainly think that he is crazy if they knew he was communicating with the trees. After talking with the trees, the little boy, always alone, falls asleep under the protection of an oak tree in the center of the clearing, “Le petit garçon dort longtemps, jusqu’au petit matin, jusqu’à l’heure de la rosée, et le vieux chêne veille sur lui toute la nuit.”⁴⁸ In his own loneliness in the forest, the boy finds happiness, true happiness by himself. This ‘true happiness’ has nothing to do with the fictitious happiness that the individual can acquire, by all means, within the consumer society.

But the boy in *Voyage au pays des arbres* (like the boy in *L’Inconnu sur la terre*, as Naja Naja of *Voyages de l’autre côté*) belongs to the unrealizable desire, utopia. It is not anywhere; it is the limit of happiness that Le Clézio tries to show us. Innocence, deep feelings, true friendship, and happiness only belong to these children, made almost mystical, and that resemble the prince of Saint-Exupéry:

...s’ils [les personnages le cléziens] sont solitaires, ils évoluent le plus souvent de la recherche de la joie individuelle à l’approfondissement d’une quête personnelle du bonheur qui ne peut être obtenue qu’en solitude: elle est indispensable pour qui désire les moyens de n’être plus dans la puérité et la superficialité du monde insensible.⁴⁹ (Amar, 2011: 15)

⁴⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁹ Amar, “Présentation”, 15.

The child in Le Clézio's work is fundamentally alone, but this solitude is positive and enriching; it allows him to access a superior knowledge of the surrounding nature; if it is associated with play, it also makes survival possible, and escape from the fictitious and artificial life.

In his solitude, the child finds freedom, not only the freedom to act, but also the freedom to think, dream, or imagine. There are no more codes or laws in the world of childhood. Le Clézio's children reach a mythical and timeless dimension; the child becomes a kind of limit that everyone should achieve, but the technological city that the author depicts clearly shows that is not the case.

Whether it is considered as a return to a kind of old, original, golden age as a refuge against all assaults of technocratic society or as the best guarantee of individual freedom, childhood is constantly present in Le Clézio's work.

The child can find true solitude, one that lets him experience an innocent and inquiring view of the world, particularly the artificial world of adults; she knows how to conserve the naturalness and simplicity that allow her to see others on the basis of relationships, not competition.

Les enfants ont ce manque de sérieux naturel, ce pouvoir de gaieté. Ils sont en dehors de l'univers adulte où l'on parle trop, où l'on cherche trop de raisons, Ils sont hors d'atteinte de l'ennui, parce que le monde bouge et vibre sans cesse pour eux. C'est leur vertu aussi qu'il faut trouver, maintenant, pour être libre. La vérité terrestre n'est pas raisonnable, ce n'est pas un calcul, ni une logique. C'est être là, être aux aguets, aux écoutes, sans cesse prêt pour toutes ces merveilles.⁵⁰
(Le Clézio, *L'Inconnu sur la terre*, 1978: 287)

All these childhood qualities boil down to this excerpt, but Le Clézio understood that this is a kind of utopia as children, completely free, those that adults can "trouver la vertu", appear, in his work, as species of myths. The world of childhood is, in a second stage, a stage of recovery of the myth of origins, past both the individual and society. It is a refuge, confinement in the margin of human society.

⁵⁰ Le Clézio, *L'Inconnu sur la terre*, 287.

Le Clézio shows the relationships of the character with the vegetable world, animals and rocks animated by the marginalization that often moves the leclezian character; in the dialogues, which are often no more than a long monologue, in which the being is in search of itself, in which the desert becomes light and the void is populated by creatures who break with any commitment. Children still have this inner light that comes from there. Their gaze purifies the atmosphere in their ability to communicate with nature as opposed to adults whose thoughts distort the actions. Thus, children are the true leclezian ‘invulnerables.’ Indeed, they are not tainted by this Western philosophy towards which Le Clézio feels antipathy. Their life is still pure, without abstraction, and they can see the world as it truly is without their gaze having to bear the vision of a world imposed by the culture that flows by the gaze and, above all, by the word of the other.

The free and lonely child cannot, therefore, be fixed; he comes as Mondo in *Mondo et autres histoires*, from the unknown (both spatial and temporal) and goes in the direction of a new unknown. He leads the way for others with his experience, but no one follows him; he always leaves without saying a word.

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