

Le Clézio's "Martin" and His Religion of Ecstasy

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Research is scant related to Le Clézio's novella "Martin" from the collection of short stories entitled *La Fièvre* with a few important exceptions including Maurice Cagnon and Stephen Smith's essay "'Martin': A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Hydrocephalic." Moreover, most analyses of this narrative are quite superficial given that they are part of more comprehensive projects which investigate the Franco-Mauritian author's literary corpus as a whole. However, a more systematic exploration of this oft neglected text could potentially hold the key that unlocks the mystery of the inexplicable, enigmatic ecstasy that often pervades Le Clézio's later fiction. Critics such as Jean Onimus, Ruth Holzberg, Keith Moser, Masao Suzuki, Jacqueline Michel, and Teresa Di Scanno have attempted to appropriate these ephemeral moments of euphoria that do not seem to fit into the rational mold.¹ Unlike many other Le Clézian protagonists, Martin not only experiences intense instants of jubilation, but he also theorizes about the existential, ontological, and spiritual significance of these fleeting moments of ecstasy. Underscoring Martin's ability to articulate the powerful feelings of intoxication that appear to defy simplistic rational appropriation for the other characters that comprise the collection *La Fièvre*, Jennifer Waelti-Walters affirms, "Martin's experience is the reverse of that of the other characters in this collection of stories. While all the others learn to experience the pulsating life of matter around them, Martin is not only aware of the experience but can define it totally" (37).

Similar to numerous other Le Clézian protagonists, Martin is an adolescent. Moreover, as Bruno Thibault clearly outlines in his analysis of the short story "Lullaby," adolescence is often a turbulent time period for many individuals who struggle with a plethora of issues including their own identity in Le Clézio's fiction. In reference to the aforementioned narrative, Thibault asserts, "La métamorphose physique et psychologique de l'adolescence est le thème central de 'Lullaby.' Lullaby est une jeune fille qui, un jour, décide de faire l'école buissonnière : elle fuit le lycée pour faire le point et tacher de voir clair dans sa vie" (30). Yet, in stark contrast to many other characters, such as Lullaby and Daniel,² Martin is not a child who is free

¹ See Jean Onimus (1983), Ruth Holzberg (1976-1977), Keith Moser (2008), Masao Suzuki (2007), Jacqueline Michel (1986), and Teresa Di Scanno (1983).

² Daniel is the protagonist of the short story "Celui qui n'avait jamais vu la mer" from *Mondo et Autres Histoires*.

from parental authority.

Although they appear to have pure intentions, the Torjmann's exact academic perfection from their son. In reference to this parental obsession, the narrator affirms, "Au cours des années qui suivirent sa naissance, les Torjmann avaient consacré tous leurs efforts et beaucoup d'argent à faire de leur fils une sorte de génie. Aujourd'hui, en dépit de tout, Martin Torjmann était à douze ans un assez beau spécimen d'hydrocéphale" (132). As the term hydrocephalus implies, Martin's impeccable intellect is perhaps too vast. Although his academic knowledge is extraordinary, his social skills are almost non-existent. The young adolescent has literally become famous for his extensive knowledge of traditional scholastic disciplines, but the tragic end of the narrative underscores his lack of any concrete knowledge of the outside world and social relations. The litany of artificial information that Martin possesses hardly serves as a deterrent for the bully and his companions who sadistically mistreat him in the sandbox. The profoundly distraught adolescent implores God to take his life and to remove him from this cruel earth. The ambivalent nature of this final gesture will be further analyzed in a later section of this essay.

Before the heartrending unraveling of this tale, Martin is the subject of an interview which is the veritable focus of the narrative. During this conversation, Martin confides that he is deeply spiritual. He emphatically insists, "Je suis né en croyant" (145). However, he quickly clarifies:

J'ai vraiment pris conscience de la religion, et de la possibilité d'être irrégieux, vers l'âge de huit-neuf ans. Quelque chose m'avait marqué; à cette époque, je fréquentais une église très belle où la messe était merveilleusement chantée. Et curieusement, ce n'est pas un sentiment d'injustice qui m'avait fait comprendre la réalité de l'esprit irrégieux, mais un sentiment de perfection, de beauté, de sublime. J'étais plongé vivant dans l'univers divin, je nageais dans la joie, et j'étais encore là, sur terre, un homme, rien qu'un homme, petit, mesquin, sans infini (145).

Although Martin attends a cathedral and is sensitive to the musical properties of the mass as a child prodigy, he is most drawn to the terrestrial sublime. Instead of discovering hope in the form of a Christian afterlife, Martin embraces the grandeur of the cosmos and the strange feelings of intoxication that such a communion trigger.

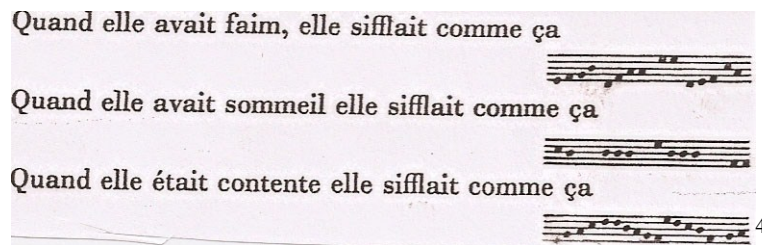
Esther, the Jewish protagonist of the novel *Etoile Errante*, is also deeply affected by the melodic sonorities of the Hebrew incantations and prayers that she hears when she attends the synagogue for the first time as an adolescent. Although both of her parents are of Jewish origin, they do not practice the traditional religion of their culture. In reference to this mystical, linguistic force, the narrator elucidates, "Elle cherchait à lire sur leurs lèvres les mots étranges, dans cette langue si belle, qui parlait au fond d'elle-même [...] Le vertige montait en elle, dans cette grotte pleine de mystère [...] Jamais elle n'avait vu une telle lumière, jamais elle n'avait entendu pareil chant" (81). Similar to Martin, it is the music itself in this religious space that

touches Esther and edifies her spiritually. It should be noted that the young Jewish adolescent does not even understand the symbolism of the rites that she is witnessing.³

Yet, perhaps the best parallel in the Franco-Mauritian author's diverse literary repertoire for the cosmic euphoria experienced by Martin is found in the experimental text *Voyages de l'autre côté*. The enigmatic protagonist Naja Naja recounts a story about a sailor who is shipwrecked on a bizarre island with no beaches or reefs. The experienced seaman is further distressed when he discovers that his vessel has disappeared. The crew is stranded on this peculiar island that does not resemble anything that they have ever discovered. For this reason, the sailors lament their plight as prisoners on a cursed land.

Much to their surprise, however, the crew soon discovers that the enchanted island is not as sinister as they at first believed. One day the men realize that the coast of this odd place is literally being eaten by whale sharks. In an effort to save themselves from certain death, the sailors scare the animals to save the bleeding island. After all of the sharks have disappeared, they treat the island's wounds. The crew develops an intimate relationship with the animate land, and the most experienced sailor even learns how to speak its language. Not only can he understand this linguistic code comprised of distinct whistling sonorities, but he can also imitate these sounds.

Moreover, these melodic tonalities are simple refrains that allow these human beings and this island to communicate through song. The narrator translates three of these harmonious linguistic expressions, along with their musical notation, as follows:



As is often the case with Le Clézian protagonists, the crew is sensitive to the innate musicality of the cosmos itself.⁵ As many Amerindian societies affirm, the cosmos

³ For a more detailed analysis of the musical ecstasy that momentarily allows Esther to escape the dire, genocidal realities of the Shoah, see Keith Moser (2008).

⁴ These images are reproduced with the expressed written consent of (c) Editions Gallimard. They are taken from page 143 of the *L'Imaginaire* version of the text.

⁵ Several comprehensive studies have explored the importance of music in all its varied forms in Le Clézio's narratives. See Jacqueline Dutton (2004), Marina Salles (2006), Keith Moser (2008), Isabelle Gillet (1998), Catherine Kern-Oudot (2006), and Fredrik Westerlund (2006).

does indeed speak if one knows how to listen. Moreover, this fictitious island is a metaphor that expresses the need for human beings to have a close, primordial relationship with the rest of the material universe. Furthermore, this narrative serves as a reminder that nature is sacred and is not merely a fertile space to be ruthlessly exploited by the forces of modernity.

This type of direct communication with a divine, cosmic entity is a leitmotif that pervades Le Clézio's entire literary repertoire. As Jean Onimus asserts, "S'il y a une mystique chez Le Clézio, elle est toute terrestre, ou plutôt cosmique : un déploiement, à perte de soi, dans l'espace et la lumière" (520). Moreover, this primordial spirituality paradoxically reminds human beings of their smallness in the greater scheme of life while edifying them with feelings of plenitude. The "petitesse" to which the author is referring is also the same bittersweet epiphany discovered by the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle*.

In addition to revealing his sensitivity to the sensory disruption actuated by an ecstatic fusion with the natural world, Martin also directly discusses mysticism and pantheism. In this same interview, Martin fervently declares that mysticism is the "seule forme possible de religion" (146). Affirming his appreciation of the mystic theologian Ruysbroek and more clearly elucidating his religious views, Martin states, "Mais c'était un théologien, et à son époque, au XIV^e siècle, personne n'aurait accepté l'expérience mystique à l'état pur comme base d'élévation spirituelle. C'était même dangereux d'être un mystique, à son époque. Les trances étaient plutôt mal vues" (146).

After clearly indicating his penchant for mysticism and noting the historical persecution experienced by untraditional thinkers, Martin muses, "Au fond, notre époque me semble parfaite pour l'extase. Nous pouvons même essayer de l'écrire" (146). Whereas mystics often practiced their beliefs in secrecy in the past to avoid punishment or execution, Martin expresses his hope that modern society would be willing to embrace such a possibility. Moreover, the reader is left to ponder if this is Martin's dream or the author's. It is no secret that Le Clézio is considered to be one of the most mystical contemporary French writers. In this new social climate described by Martin as being ripe for mysticism, has Le Clézio not already been composing ecstasy with his traditional ball-point pen for decades?

It should also be noted that critics have been attempting to appropriate the enigmatic *joie de vivre* that often characterizes the author's later fiction and of which the reader finds traces in his earlier texts for many years. In reference to these ephemeral and poignant instants of euphoria and to Le Clézio's literary project as a whole, Ruth Holzberg declares, "L'écrivain finit donc par admettre non seulement que les mots sont nécessaires, mais que le langage permet d'écrire l'extase, de dire le monde [...] Le langage parviendrait alors à reconstruire un nouvel univers qui refléterait encore mieux notre monde et la réalité dans laquelle nous existons." (103).

As Holzberg correctly elucidates, the fleeting elation experienced by many Le Clézian protagonists is short-lived, but these transforming instants open into other dimensions that allow the subject to transcend commonplace reality. Moreover, these intense moments that sometimes represent existential epiphanies which profoundly alter the lives of the author's characters can and should be written. As Holzberg suggests, perhaps finding a manner in which to compose pure ecstasy is even a crucial aspect of Le Clézio's literary project itself.

Returning to the short narrative, after revealing that the present generation is perhaps ready to consider mystical thought, Martin professes that all states of euphoria are equal, regardless of how they are initiated. As Martin asserts,

la foi est une transe, et tout ce qui est proche de cette transe participe de la foi [...] L'état de transe est un état quasi normal chez l'être humain; il suffit de très peu de chose pour le provoquer. Un rien, un peu d'alcool dans le sang, un peu de drogue, l'excès d'oxygène, la colère, la fatigue [...] Il s'agit d'un basculement, mais ce basculement met en œuvre des régions inconnues de notre esprit. En fait, il n'y a fondamentalement aucune différence entre un homme intoxiqué par l'alcool et un saint livré à son extase [...] Au moment X de l'extase le saint et l'intoxiqué sont semblables, sont au même endroit (147).

For Martin, spirituality can be reduced to feelings of euphoria evoked in many divergent ways. It is not the path that matters, but rather the end product or the ecstasy itself. It should also be noted that the imbalance to which Martin is referring is reminiscent of the surrealist project. The significance of the intoxication is that it allows the subject to explore other regions of consciousness. By equally valorizing all spiritual exercises that lead to ecstasy, Martin eliminates religious dogmatism as the subject is free to choose his or her own "guise" in Baudelairian terms. Moreover, the subject is also able to interpret the meaning of these intense instants of jubilation himself or herself. In essence, Martin's "religion" possesses no ideological rules of social conduct.

In fact, Le Clézio has always expressed a predilection for types of spirituality that do not exclude those who refuse to accept an imposed, rigid system of morality throughout his entire literary career. As the author himself asserts in an interview with Pierre Lhoste, "Dieu c'est l'Infini aussi bien l'Infini psychanalytique que l'Infini de la drogue c'est cette espèce d'ouverture que tout être a en lui ce qui fait qu'il cherche qu'il se déplace qu'il écrit qu'il ouvre les portes même s'il les referme ensuite" (47). This spiritual openness and the infinite possibilities for establishing a meaningful relationship with the divine to which Le Clézio refers is also present in the writer's most critically acclaimed works such as *Désert*. In her analysis of the mystical beliefs of the indigenous, nomadic peoples of the Sahara, as manifested in the novel *Désert*, Bettina Knapp affirms, "The freedom of worship and the joy of earthiness these desert nomads experience are also opposed by Le Clézio to organized religion, with its tightly knit rituals, regulations, and emphasis on lure" (704). Perhaps

the spiritual ecstasy experienced by the protagonist Lalla and her Tuareg forefathers in this narrative best concretizes Martin's ideal religion. Although Lalla is edified because of her primordial relationship with the cosmos and the enigmatic religious figure Es Ser, who is emblematic of the sun itself, her beliefs do not impose social constraints upon others. Whereas modern monotheistic cults have fostered much intolerance and bigotry by forcing its believers to accept definitive answers for life's most important questions, Lalla discovers the grandeur of a pure state of euphoria with no strings attached. Since she is able to associate her own personal meaning with these mystical encounters, such as the experience in the night club with Es Ser in Marseilles at the end of the novel,⁶ Lalla does not need anyone else to commune with the natural forces that surround her.

Likewise, when asked directly about his spiritual beliefs, Martin states, "Je n'ai pas véritablement de religion. Je ne suis pas contre le principe de la religion [...] Je veux dire que l'esprit de l'ascension pure et véridique vers Dieu est essentiel, alors que la fédération, je veux dire l'ensemble des règles qui constitue une religion comme le catholicisme est une simple contingence" (147-148). Like many other Le Clézian protagonists such as Lalla, Martin is not religious in the traditional sense of the term, but he is deeply spiritual. The sacred exists on this physical plane not in the hope of a celestial paradise. In reference to this cosmic spirituality, Germaine Brée explains, "La 'divinité' de Torjmann semble ici avoir pris un aspect concret cosmique" (39). As Brée notes in the context of both *La Fièvre* and Le Clézio's entire literary project, the author's diverse protagonists actively seek a communion with the unintelligible, divine universe. Martin's vision of the sublime is similar to that of the Camusian narrator of "La mer au plus près" who enthusiastically professes that the Mediterranean Sea is his only "religion avec la nuit" (182).⁷

Martin also dissociates the notion of God from moral considerations. According to Martin, "Dieu n'est pas bon : il est. Bon, mauvais, sont des pauvres mots s'appliquant à un ensemble de règles concernant quelques détails de notre vie matérielle. Pourquoi serait-il concerné par nos pauvres mots et nos pauvres valeurs" (148). Martin stipulates that God is neither benevolent nor malevolent. Earthly conceptions of good and evil are social constructs created by humanity. Martin also reiterates that God would not debase himself by seeking human praise or recognition. Martin's "God" is much too grandiose to be interested in human concerns.

Clarifying his thoughts, Martin specifies, "Dieu est la création. Il est donc un principe inextinguible, inorienté, la vie même [...] Intemporelle, non pas même intemporelle et infinie. Le principe. Le fait qu'il a quelque chose au lieu qu'il n'y ait rien" (148). As Martin lucidly expresses, God is inseparable from the material world

⁶ See Marlies Kronegger (1995).

⁷ It should be noted that Keith Moser (2009) briefly discusses the necessity of examining the relationship between Camus and Le Clézio.

in which we live. If God is nothing but creation or the universe itself, this could explain Le Clézio's obsession with cosmogony. Unraveling the enigmas of creation simultaneously provides an answer to the existential questions "Who am I?" and "What am I?" By returning to the beginning of time, if such a period indeed exists, before various cycles were set in motion, the subject would witness the perfect storm that created life and perhaps better understand his or her place in the cosmic whole.

However, when asked if he possesses pantheistic tendencies, Martin asserts, "Non, parce qu'il ne s'agit pas d'honorer Dieu en toute chose. Dieu est extérieur, et si je vous disais que vous êtes Dieu, que je suis Dieu, ce n'était pas pour vous donner l'idée que selon moi, Dieu est une espèce de corps à l'intérieur duquel nous vivons" (148). Although Martin vehemently insists that he is not a pantheist, his objection to this philosophical and spiritual term appears to be purely semantic. If God is creation itself, then how could the divine possibility exist outside of this physical realm? The ambivalence of this passage perplexes the reader and implores the question: "Why would Martin so adamantly resist this classification?" Perhaps Martin is uncomfortable with the label "pantheist" given all of the connotations that this belief system implies.

Yet, his spiritual convictions appear to be similar to those of the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle* who describes the cosmos as a "gigantesque utérus" (288). Both the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle* and Martin affirm that everything is composed of a single, sacred substance. This notion of a divine shell in which all of material life resides is reminiscent of Spinoza's contention that the world is comprised of one pure substance. Furthermore, Martin maintains that the sublime to which he is referring does not need to be worshiped. Moreover, the divine is ultimately inaccessible as it surpasses the limitations of human knowledge.

The only manner in which a material being could fully experience God is to transcend the contingencies of time and space and return to the very moment in which life began. Since this return voyage to what Le Clézio calls "l'origine explosive des temps maudits" is impossible, human knowledge of the sublime is destined to be theoretical and fragmented (*Extase Matérielle*, 82).⁸ As Martin elucidates, "Voilà pourquoi Dieu est à ce point inimaginable pour les pauvres esprits des hommes" (149). Given their inherent limitations, human beings will never be capable of ascertaining a complete knowledge of the sacred. Definitive answers to some of the most compelling mysteries of life, such as mortality and the existence of God, will always elude mankind. In the absence of infallible responses to philosophical questions, humanity will continue to create theories.

Although definitive answers are intangible, Martin, like many other Le Clézian protagonists, embraces the ecstasy of the present and valorizes human existence in

⁸ The author's fascination with cosmogony and this "reverse voyage" is also evident in other early texts in addition to *L'Extase Matérielle*, such as *Le Déluge* and *Voyages de l'autre côté*.

general. Yet, Martin is also cognizant that life is filled with physical and cerebral anguish. Consequently, the intoxicated subject, regardless of their path to euphoria, resides in the "même paradis vide et terrifiant" (147). Although this entire expression appears to be full of contradictions, Martin is revealing the existential paradox of what Le Clézio poetically terms the "gouffre serein" in *L'Extase Matérielle* (98.). Even if human existence is gratuitous, momentary instants of pure elation briefly efface the existential suffering and perhaps allow the subject to bathe in the sublime.

However, the disconcerting end of the narrative creates a considerable amount of ambiguity concerning the young prodigy's spiritual belief system. As he is sulking in the sandbox after being victimized by a group of bullies, Martin directly addresses God imploring this supernatural entity to euthanize him thereby terminating his immense suffering on this earth. Affirming Martin's distress and his pleas for someone to end his life prematurely, the narrator states, "'Dieu, ô Dieu!' dit Martin. 'Je t'ai trop blasphémé. Si tu es là, si c'est cela que tu veux, viens, prends ma vie! Emporte-moi! Emporte-moi!'" (173). Waelti-Walters offers the following interpretation of these destabilizing final lines: "hailed as a religious leader by the outside world he returns to the sand pit where he is set upon by a gang of children who torment him. He takes this as divine punishment for blasphemy" (37). Although Waelti-Walter's explanation is certainly supported by textual evidence, perhaps the comment "if you are there" is the most revealing. Martin's cries for help are not truly emblematic of a sincere effort to reach out to an omnipotent and benevolent being, but they are rather a reflection of the protagonist's anguish and desperation. In this poignant moment of misery that melancholically culminates this tale, Martin confesses to a God in which he does not really believe given that he has no other recourse. The protagonist has nothing to lose by evoking the name of a higher power that if he or she exists could alleviate his pain once and for all. Even though the declarations at the end of the work appear to undermine the ideas that Martin expresses in his public discourses, the protagonist simply thinks that it is worth a try just in case his hypotheses until this point have been incorrect.

The ambivalent *dénouement* also concretizes the debilitating aspects of Martin's hydrocephaly. Although the protagonist has many admirers and even followers, he is unable to function in society. The Torjmann's have succeeded in creating an intellectual machine, but by the same token they have socially and perhaps emotionally stifled their son's development. Martin represents the type of knowledge that Western society valorizes in its academic institutions across the globe, but his inadequate interpersonal skills render close relationships with children of his age virtually impossible. For this reason, even if Martin is capable of both experiencing pantheistic euphoria triggered by a close communion with the rest of the material universe and articulating this deep form of cosmic spirituality, it will be difficult for him to attain true happiness given that most human beings are unable to escape

civilization altogether. Although Martin's vast erudition is indeed impressive, it is perhaps also indicative of the author's concerns related to the role of education in modern society. Of what use is an unbalanced, encyclopedic education that does not adequately prepare an individual for both the challenges and possibilities of being a member of a given society?⁹

In addition to the aforementioned philosophical and theological ambiguity exemplified by Martin's final gesture, Cagnon and Smith note Le Clézio's intentional self-deprecating ironic humor in this complex short story. According to Cagnon and Smith, this tale should be interpreted as a reflection of Le Clézio's uneasiness related to his newfound celebrity status as an important French intellectual after the publication of *Le Procès-Verbal* at a rather young age. As Cagnon and Smith assert, "The most [...] evident parallel between Le Clézio and Martin is their youthful celebrity. The 23-year old Le Clézio had been catapulted to fame by the success of his first novel [...] Martin, at the age of twelve, is the object of similar, though greatly exaggerated adulation" (65). Le Clézio's humble view of the artist, highlighted in several interviews and public discourses, gives credence to Cagnon and Smith's theory.

The Franco-Mauritian author is clearly uncomfortable being placed upon a pedestal as a sort of prophet whose role is to purvey definitive knowledge to the intellectually inferior masses. For this reason, in an interview with Jean-Louis Ezine, Le Clézio elucidates, "L'art est une forme d'artisanat [...] Je crois que l'écrivain est une sorte de bricoleur" (30). Moreover, as noted by critics such as Claude Cavallero¹⁰ and as evidenced in the author's Nobel acceptance speech "Dans la forêt des paradoxes," Le Clézio demystifies the entire literary profession. For Le Clézio, writers need to be modest and to realize that they can only bear witness to the crimes against humanity that their works decry. In other words, it is evident that the author does not consider himself to be a member of an elite whose social function is to enlighten the general populace by revealing universal truths. Summarizing their ideas, Cagnon and Smith conclude, "'Martin' with ridicule as its weapon, destruction as its aim, attacks the author, his critics and admirers, and his achievements" (67). Not only does the writer refuse to take himself seriously in this early work, but he also targets anyone in the French literary institution that has an inflated view of himself or a pretentious vision of art. Although Cagnon and Smith underscore the ironic tone of the entire narrative, they also admit that Le Clézio probes serious subjects in this short story that merit further examination. As Cagnon and Smith declare, "'Martin' derides, and thereby

⁹ Le Clézio's concerns related to the rigid pedagogical model that is emblematic of Western culture and its values are evident in many other works as well. For example, in an effort to discover other truths that are not valorized in the classroom and to re-establish a connection with her absent father, Lullaby "décida qu'elle n'irait plus à l'école" (*Mondo* 81).

¹⁰ Claude Cavallero (2009). See bibliography.

negates, but also renews and develops ideas which infuse Le Clézio's entire literary canon" (64). Therefore, this work must not be automatically dismissed as nothing but an ironic caricature of an artist that has little other additional value. Despite the author's insistence that he should not be excessively venerated by literary critics, fans, or the French intelligentsia in "Martin," a systematic investigation of this text contributes to one's understanding of ideas expressed by the writer in other narratives.

Ook Chung's analysis of Martin's anguish in the final lines of this work also underscores the importance of intellectual humility. As Chung explains,

Le comportement blasphématoire dont s'accuse Martin peut être lié à un manque d'humilité [...] Ce n'est qu'à la suite d'une avanie, qui le déloge de son statut de prophète intronisé et le reconduit au silence, que Martin reprend conscience de la petitesse de son existence dans l'univers [...] Martin réalise que le monde des adultes manque d'humilité et qu'il n'est pas tellement différent de celui des enfants réels qui bâtissent des châteaux de sable en se croyant les maîtres de l'univers (136).

Although Martin's religion of ecstasy is perhaps more productive for society than inflexible universal belief systems given that the subject is free to interpret the meaning of his or her terrestrial inebriation, the protagonist realizes that he has fallen into the trap of allowing his followers to worship him as a spiritual leader and moral authority whose every utterance is golden. For this reason, Chung and other scholars have astutely noted that "Martin" is a cautionary tale that warns artists about the pitfalls of becoming too prideful concerning their social contributions. Moreover, as Chung also highlights, the debasement from which Martin suffers in the sandbox is a fall from grace that reminds him of his smallness in the greater scheme of life. Despite his immense wealth of knowledge, Martin has the same intrinsic right to exist as the insects with which he played sadistic games. This doctrine of biotic egalitarianism, which is quite compatible with a pantheistic worldview, is also evident in numerous other works such as *L'Extase Matérielle* and *Terra Amata*.¹¹

In conclusion, Martin's ecstasy is emblematic of an essential thread in Le Clézio's diverse literary repertoire in spite of the disquieting ambivalence and profound anguish that characterize the end of the narrative. Moreover, even if the author deliberately pokes fun at himself as Cagnon and Smith suggest, it is perhaps in this short story in which Le Clézio most clearly articulates the eco-spirituality that pervades much of his fiction. For this reason, future studies are needed in order to shed even more light on this complex tale from the early period of the author's career. Whereas many Le Clézian protagonists experience the same poignant instants of pure

¹¹ (e.g.) "Alors, il faut s'humilier. Il faut renoncer à comprendre, il faut se faire tout petit devant ce qui existe" (*Extase Matérielle* 69).

joy as Martin, this child prodigy is perhaps the only one to attempt to describe these moments in rational terms. However, it should be noted that Martin also realizes that these enigmatic instants of jubilation cannot be fully understood. Although it is imperative to have a direct, sensorial contact with the divine shell in which all of humanity resides, this sacred entity is ultimately indecipherable. It is in this ambivalent, ontological realm that human beings greatly suffer and in which they experience profound sensations of intoxication that allow them to communicate at some basic level with the incomprehensible divine.

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