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**The Complex Ambivalence of “Privileged
Moments” in the Works of J.M.G. Le Clézio: Their
Force, Their Limitations, and Their Relationship to
Alterity**

A Dissertation Presented for
the Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
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Keith Aaron Moser
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation delves into the complexities and nuances of the contemporary French author J.M.G. Le Clézio, one of the most respected and prolific writers of his era. Specifically, it investigates the phenomenon of a “privileged moment” or a “moment privilégié” in his works. This literary concept is most often associated with Marcel Proust. In this study, the intricacies as well as the limitations and paradoxes of three distinct types of privileged moments in Le Clézio’s writings are methodically explored. Privileged moments related to nature, musicality, and sexuality are systematically probed during the course of this investigation.

The introduction provides an operational definition for the expression “privileged moment,” and briefly outlines some of the main ideas discussed in the various chapters which follow. Although several literary scholars use this term, a precise definition of this word or even a clear explanation of what it encompasses does not seem to exist. Chapter one explores manifestations of privileged moments in the writings of earlier French writers. Specifically, it analyses intense instants of euphoria in Proust’s *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Sartre’s *La Nausée*, and Camus’s *Noces*. Chapter two investigates the undeniable literary transformation that occurs in Le Clézio’s works beginning with the publication of *Mondo* in 1978. Specifically, this section examines the existentialist nature of some of Le Clézio’s early writings and explores how his powerful experiences with the Embreras and Waunanas in Panama, with the indigenous cultures in

Mexico, etc. drastically altered him and his writings. Chapter three investigates the inexplicable instants of euphoria which abound when Le Clézio's characters commune with nature in *Mondo*, *Désert*, *Le Chercheur d'Or*, and *Pawana*. Chapter four explores privileged moments related to music in the short story "La Roue d'Eau," as well as in the novels *Etoile Errante*, *Désert*, *Le Chercheur d'Or*, and *Le Poisson d'Or*. Chapter five systematically investigates moments of sexual ecstasy shared with an Other in *Désert*, *Le Chercheur d'Or*, and *La Quarantaine*. Whereas the other mysterious moments of euphoria are solitary instants, these erotic encounters constitute a different type of experience, which will also obligate us to reflect upon various ethical issues.

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Introduction and General Information

Although a number of literary theorists, such as Gilles Deleuze, Bettina Knapp, and Daniel Melnick have written about the importance of euphoric instants in the works of Proust as well as other French authors and have even used the term “privileged moments,” there exists no precise definition of this term or even a clear explanation of what this expression could encompass. Moreover, no one has ever sought to explore this phenomenon in relation to the vast fictional repertoire of J.M.G. Le Clézio. Given his status as one of the most read and respected contemporary French authors in the academic community as well as in the general public, his writings need to be further investigated. Since 1963, Le Clézio has dazzled both critics and lay readers alike with his immense talent and the diversity of his writings. Before we begin a systematic exploration of privileged moments in Le Clézio’s works, it is essential to offer an operational definition of this elusive term. I propose that they be defined as follows: Moments of enigmatic ecstasy resulting from direct contact by means of one or more of the senses. The “strange joy” that characterizes these experiences defies or escapes logical explanation, demonstrating the limitations of rational thought. I would also suggest that the following characteristics are often applicable:

1. These moments are often linked to involuntary memory, although certainly not always.

2. These moments are often experienced as a direct result of a close communion with nature (e.g. The force of the sun, the sea, etc.).
3. These moments are extremely intense, but of a short duration.
4. These moments appear to efface the contingencies of time and space.
5. These moments often transform the subject. They constitute epiphanies through which the subject discovers something radically transforming about the reasons for his or her own existence. In other words, privileged moments may also represent a possible transcendence of the ephemeral human condition.
6. These moments are also often linked to a precisely literary apprenticeship or an “initiation.”
7. These moments are often experienced by solitary protagonists. However, privileged moments involving sexuality are shared with an Other, and are therefore open to more complex ethical considerations.

In this particular study, we will explore the complexities as well as the limitations and paradoxes of three distinct types of privileged moments in Le Clézio's works-those related to nature, musicality, and sexuality. Before we begin this in-depth exploration, however, we will discuss earlier manifestations of such moments in the French literary tradition. In chapter one, we will briefly investigate works written by other French authors, such as Proust, Camus, and Sartre. These seminal writers from the earlier years of the twentieth century are already firmly entrenched in the French literary canon. Their protagonists, who

experience instants of euphoria in differing contexts and in different fashions, will serve as a point of departure for our particular investigation.

In chapter two, we will discuss the literary transformation that occurs in Le Clézio's early fiction from the 1960s through the late 1970s. As many critics have appropriately noted, the publication of *Mondo* in 1978 represents a drastically different type of writing, which will be further developed in all his later texts. Specifically, this section will examine the so-called "existentialist" writings and explore how Le Clézio's experiences with various indigenous cultures profoundly changed his attitude toward life and his writing. We will begin by analyzing Le Clézio's first novel *Le Procès-Verbal*, written at the age of twenty-three. After probing the nuances of this complex and initial literary effort, we will analyze three tales that comprise the collection of short stories entitled *La Fièvre*. We will investigate the narratives "La Fièvre," "Le Jour ou Beaumont Fit Connaissance avec sa Douleur," and "Un Jour de Vieillesse" from this significant early work. Then, we will consider what Le Clézio himself says about this transformation by means of published interviews such as *Ailleurs* and the so-called Indian text *Haï*. After discussing Le Clézio's own explanation for this phenomenon, we will direct our attention to the intriguing but mysterious texts *Mydriase* and "Le Génie Datura." These works concretize the nexus of his inner change because they detail specific experiences with mind-altering substances, a significant aspect of his initiation with the Embreras in Panama.

In chapter three, we will focus on selected texts from approximately 1980 to the present, which attest to this perceived transformation. Specifically, we will

delve into the complexities of enigmatic moments of euphoria in the short texts from the *Mondo* anthology and in the novels *Désert*, *Le Chercheur d'Or*, *Etoile Errante*, *Poisson d'or*, and *La Quarantaine*. These narratives provide the most striking examples of privileged moments and their effects. We will begin our systematic exploration of the three specific privileged moments with instants of euphoria related to nature, followed by those induced by music and sexuality- chapters three, four, and five respectively.

Why is a study of privileged moments necessary given the vast repertoire of existing critical studies? I argue that this particular investigation is extremely important because it will seek to offer an exhaustive analysis of these moments and how they function in a variety of fictional works. It will also relate these instants to other dimensions of human experience, emphasizing their specifically interdisciplinary nature. Our analysis of privileged moments in the works of Le Clézio does not just pertain to French literature, but also to philosophy, religion, ethics, anthropology, etc. For example, our discussion of ethical matters related to the Other in the last chapter entitled “Shared Moments of Sexual Ecstasy With an ‘Other’” will remind us of fundamental ethical considerations such as “What does it mean to live a good or moral life?” and “What is my level of responsibility to those around me?” These are basic questions that every society and individual has grappled with and will continue to struggle with throughout time.

Furthermore, Le Clézio is one of the most prolific and respected living French authors. Although many literary scholars have explored the role of nature in the works of J.M.G. Le Clézio and a few researchers have briefly made reference to

the enigmatic joy that we will analyze, no literary study has probed their depths or revealed their inherent ambivalences. Exploring these depths and bringing these nuances to the surface will enable us to recognize more clearly the originality of Le Clézio's literary endeavor and to appreciate the challenge that he offers us as readers at the beginning of a new millennium.

CHAPTER I

Literary Precursors

Before we begin to delve into the complexities, ambiguities, and paradoxes of privileged moments in the works of J.M.G. Le Clézio, we must briefly explore examples of privileged moments in the writings of earlier twentieth century French writers. We will begin our analysis with Marcel Proust because his work possibly offers the most striking example of what constitutes a privileged moment. In addition, the literary term “privileged moment” is more often associated with Proust than any other French author. For example, when referring to the famous episode with “les madeleines,” Bettina Knapp states that “Sometime after this wonderful experience the Narrator realized that such ‘privileged moments’ were triggered by his senses: taste, sight, smell, feeling, hearing” (252). Not only does Knapp recognize that privileged moments exist in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, she also links these ephemeral but powerful moments of ecstasy to direct contact with the senses as we have indicated in the introduction. Speaking of the work’s narrator, Thomas M. Donnan also discusses in great detail the enigmatic “bonheur that invades him in his ‘moments privilégiés’” (428). Donnan also probes the relationship between these brief but intense moments and the concept of aesthetic salvation which we will discuss in a later section of this chapter.

The “strange joy” that we wish to investigate during the course of our study is clearly evident in the scene with the “madeleines” but also in the scenes

that describe the effect of “la petite phrase de Vinteuil” upon Swann. We will begin our discussion with the madeleines scene, because it is one of the most celebrated in all of French literature, and it offers the reader a concrete example of a privileged moment. Whereas recalling past memories of Combray using logic and voluntary memory proves to be totally futile for the narrator, these memories are involuntarily triggered when he simply tastes the cakes. As the narrator affirms, “Il y avait déjà bien des années que [...] Combray [...] n’existait plus pour moi [...] mais à l’instant même ou la gorgée mêlée des miettes du gâteau touchait mon palais, je tressaillis, attentif à ce qui se passait d’extraordinaire en moi ”(44). This particular citation clearly reveals the instantaneous nature of privileged moments and exposes the force that accompanies these instants, which causes the narrator to shiver at the transformation taking place within him.

It is also important to note that the tea and the madeleines do not just invoke an isolated memory or two, the narrator is inundated by a flood of memories as the entire village of his childhood comes back to life. For example, he starts to remember “toutes les fleurs de notre jardin et celles du parc de M. Swann, et les nymphéas de la Vivonne, et les bonnes gens du village et leurs petits logis et l’église et tout Combray et ses environs, tout cela qui prend forme et solidité, est sorti, ville et jardins, de ma tasse de thé” (47). The precious memories that the narrator thought had long been dead or dormant inside of him are suddenly, inexplicably, and instantaneously resuscitated. This privileged moment has been singled out by many scholars to argue the superiority of

involuntary memory to voluntary memory or the “mémoire de l’intelligence” as Proust prefers to call it (45). Proust, like Camus whose work we will explore in a later section of this chapter is very distrustful of what Western society calls “intelligence.” Proust, like many other writers, also does not understand the limited role given to other forms of thought which do not fit into the rational mold. Privileged moments such as the one described with the madeleines indicate that logic has definite limitations even if society refuses to admit them. The narrator describes his experience with the pastries when he states:

Il en est ainsi notre passé. C’est peine perdue que nous cherchions à l’évoquer, tous les efforts de notre intelligence sont inutiles. Il est caché hors de son domaine et de sa portée, en quelque objet matériel (en la sensation et de sa portée, en quelque objet matériel (en la sensation que nous donnerait cet objet matériel), que nous ne soupçonnons pas. Cet objet, il dépend du hasard que nous le rencontrions avant de mourir, ou que nous ne le rencontrions pas (44).

This particular passage demonstrates how privileged moments can occur in everyday life through chance sensory encounters. For example, touching an old vase that belonged to a loved one or smelling an aroma that used to come from your mother’s kitchen for the first time in years could both open the proverbial flood gates of memory.

The famous episode with the madeleines, however, is not the only experience in *A la recherche du temps perdu* that can be labeled as a privileged

moment. The enigmatic ecstasy or “strange joy” that appears to have no rational explanation and which best exemplifies a privileged moment is clearly present in the scenes referring to “la petite phrase de Vinteuil” as well. André Benhaim describes the effect of Vinteuil’s musical composition upon Swann as follows: “Vinteuil’s sonata forces Swann into a ‘strange frenzy of intoxication’ by dismissing his intelligence trying to deconstruct it” (27). Thomas M. Donnan provides a similar explanation in the section of his article where he discusses the “apocalyptic joy” of Vinteuil’s phrase and its importance to the notion of aesthetic salvation, which we will discuss momentarily. Although the same feelings of ecstasy appear to be present when Swann listens to Vinteuil’s “little phrase” and when the narrator Marcel indulges in the pastries, it must be noted that Vinteuil’s “petite phrase” does not always produce the same effect upon Swann. In other words, the little tune, as we will momentarily explore, is capable of triggering intense moments of happiness but also powerful instants of sorrow as well.

In his article “Vinteuil ou Le Paradoxe de l’Individu en Art,” Patrick Labarthe claims that this inexplicable joy can be used to explain “l’ensemble de l’expérience amoureuse” or the whole complex relationship that exists between Swann and Odette (111). The first appearance of Vinteuil’s musical phrase coincides with the process of the evolution of love or to use Labarthe’s term “la pleine cristallisation” (111). In other words, amorous feelings are never as strong as in the beginning when the crystals are forming. In the beginning, Vinteuil’s “little phrase” becomes a touching melody which links Swann and Odette, a sort of “national anthem” (Donnan 422). The “sensation délicieuse” or the “voluptés

particulières” triggered by the musical air do not have any “rapports logiques” or logical explanations (Proust 206). In other words, Swann cannot explain the effects of this melody, or how the harmonious chords that penetrate his being are projected into his relationship with Odette.

The second appearance of the same phrase in the text, however, illustrates the fragility of passionate feelings. To the reader, it is clear that the process of “decrystallization” has taken place. The crystals that shined so beautifully in the beginning of Swann and Odette’s relationship have now disintegrated. This same melody that initially gave him so much happiness now hurts him deeply. Swann begins to notice the contradiction that exists between Odette’s actions and his amorous feelings. Since he perceives Odette’s actions to be questionable, he becomes “un monstre de jalousie.” In desperation, Swann tries to look into Odette’s bedroom in an attempt to catch her in the act of cheating on him. During one of these middle of the night attempts, a visibly disturbed Swann incurs the wrath of Odette’s neighbors who just want to sleep in peace. Speaking of Swann, the narrator states, “Anxieux, irrité, il alla dans la petite rue ou donnait l’autre face de l’hôtel, se mit devant la fenêtre de la chambre d’Odette ; les rideaux l’empêchaient de rien voir, il frappa avec force aux carreaux, appela ; personne n’ouvrit. Il vit que des voisins le regardaient ”(273). From scenes such as this, it becomes clear to the reader that the mere possibility of Odette’s infidelity has become an all-consuming obsession for Swann. His actions seem to indicate that he has lost all sense of equilibrium, and is in fact behaving like a psychopath pursuing his prey.

Although the melody is not present in the incident that we just discussed, this scene helps to explain the extreme sadness that overwhelms Swann when he hears Vinteuil's composition again. To everyone who is present at the Princesse de Laume's social gathering, it is obvious that Swann is clearly in anguish. For example, the narrator states that "Ce pauvre Swann, dit ce soir-là Mme des Laumes à son mari, il est toujours gentil, mais il a l'air bien malheureux" (337). Swann attempts to escape, to leave the reception, but to no avail. Then, he hears what used to be his and Odette's song, and the music destabilizes him completely. As the narrator states:

Et avant que Swann eût eu le temps de comprendre, et de se dire:
'C'est la petite phrase de la sonate de Vinteuil, n'écoutons pas !'
tous ses souvenirs du temps où Odette était éprise de lui, et qu'il
avait réussi jusqu'à ce jour à maintenir invisibles dans les
profondeurs de son être, trompés par ce brusque rayon du temps
d'amour qu'ils crurent revenu, s'étaient réveillés et, à tire-d'aile,
étaient remontés lui chanter éperdument, sans pitié pour son
infortune présente, les refrains oubliés du bonheur (339).

The melancholy ecstasy of this moment engulfs Swann's inner being so quickly that he does not have time to analyze what is happening to him. Moreover, even if he did have time to stop and reflect about the nature of the event that was transpiring, Swann would hardly be able to propose a logical, plausible theory for the reappearance of these dark recollections formerly hidden deep in the abyss.

However, it is also important to note that ironically as the decrystallization of his relationship with Odette progresses, Swann begins to relate in some way to other human beings who have suffered from being mistreated and deceived by loved ones. In particular, he imagines the life of the composer of the “petite phrase” named Vinteuil. As the narrator states: “Et la pensée de Swann se porta pour la première fois dans un élan de pitié et de tendresse vers ce Vinteuil, vers ce frère inconnu et sublime qui lui aussi avait dû tant souffrir; qu’avait pu être sa vie? Au fond de quelles douleurs avait-il puisé cette force de dieu, cette puissance illimitée de créer ? ” (342). As this citation clearly indicates, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, privileged moments related to music have the ability to create feelings of solidarity and compassion towards others. Bettina Knapp affirms that “He (Swann) feels transformed by the tones he hears, as if something within him has been tapped: he no longer feels isolated” (253). Swann shows us that one can at least begin to appreciate the lives of others and his or her “unknown brothers and sisters” through the force of the music they compose.

Although discussing the mysterious power of music or musical vibrations might seem a little odd to a Western ear, science has proven that certain vibrations of sound can alter our state of consciousness (Knapp 250). In particular, speaking of Vinteuil’s little phrase, Knapp states that “As musical interludes transliterated by Proust into verbal images and motifs swept auditors into new dimensions, they experienced deeper levels of reality—altered states of consciousness” (250). In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the particular vibrations of Vinteuil’s musical phrase that penetrate Swann’s auditory faculties

allow him to “entrer en contact avec un monde pour lequel nous ne sommes pas faits” (233). In other words, these particular tonalities invoke a mysterious dimension far away from our limited world. Our senses, in this instance, hearing, allow us to enter into this other world. Here, we can recognize concealed truths that we cannot see in the everyday world. Speaking of this phenomenon and of the importance of transcendence in Proust, Knapp reiterates:

That the magic of sound should have taken on archetypal magnitude in Proust’s novel is not surprising. He had always been captivated by music, not only for the emotions it actuated in him but also for philosophical, aesthetic, and scientific reasons. Music was a way for him to penetrate the hidden meanings of things, people, and events. It paralleled emotional states; it enabled him to slip into mythical modes of consciousness. Like a mantra, music allowed him to feel attuned to the universe (250-251).

Music is also important in many major religions, both Western and Eastern, because of its power to alter our state of consciousness. For example, the concept of a mantra is an important notion in Buddhist philosophy. For Buddhists, physical vibrations or mantras are essential if one wishes to attain a higher level of spirituality (Knapp 250-51). For Swann as well, the musical vibrations produced from this little phrase enable him to transcend his anguish and his solitude. As far as specifically Western religion is concerned, Knapp also reminds us that the repetition that exists in musical refrains such as Vinteuil’s phrase and Sartre’s “Some of These Days” (which we will later explore in this

chapter) is similar to Gregorian chants (259). Choirs sing these hymns in order to transport believers beyond the boundaries of everyday reality. Here too, music serves as a bridge that makes transcendence possible.

Furthermore, in his article entitled “The Architecture and Music of Thinking: Proust and the Stones of Combray,” Walter Strauss speaks of religion and art as parallel quests for the truth (301). What is an artist, writer, or musician attempting to do? An artist seeks to explore the mysteries of life and inspire the spectator, reader, or listener to do the same through his or her unique perception of the world. In other words, both religion and the arts attempt to probe the enigmas of the world that surrounds us. André Benhaim emphasizes this mystical power when he refers to music as an “*élixir des dieux*” or an “*elixir of the gods*” (29). Patrick Labarthe likewise describes music as participating in what he calls a “*communion des âmes*” (114). In *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Vinteuil’s little musical composition has definite spiritual connotations, in addition to philosophical and aesthetic implications.

Perhaps the most important aspect of privileged moments in Proust, however, is their revelatory nature as epiphanies. Although *A la recherche du temps perdu* can be appreciated on many different levels, on the most basic level the work describes the narrator’s search for meaningful activities to fill the void of his existence, in essence his quest for a vocation. In particular, many literary scholars have discussed in great detail the importance of Vinteuil’s ethereal composition to Marcel’s revelation concerning the possibility of aesthetic salvation through literary creation. For example, Patrick Labarthe states that “La

critique a depuis longtemps établi le lien profond entre Vinteuil, le musicien imaginaire d'*A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, et la vocation littéraire du narrateur proustien ” (105). Thomas Donnan, who also discusses the possibility of aesthetic salvation in *A la recherche du temps perdu* affirms that “Indeed, it is as though Vinteuil’s septet in its cyclical configuration [...] were a musical micro-version of Proust’s novel, inducing in Marcel a state of mind wherein he reviews and relives his spiritual life and glimpses with uncertainty its culmination in the artistic vocation” (420).

In the volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu* entitled “Le Temps Retrouvé,” it becomes clear that the narrator will indeed pursue a literary vocation. This particular volume contains a plethora of references to this ultimate decision and to the value of works of art. For example, as the narrator states,

Ainsi j’étais déjà arrivé à cette conclusion que nous ne sommes nullement libres devant l’oeuvre d’art, que nous ne la faisons pas à notre gré, mais que, préexistant à nous, nous devons, à la fois parce qu’elle est nécessaire et cachée, et comme nous ferions pour une loi de la nature, la découvrir. Mais cette découverte que l’art pouvait nous faire faire, n’était-elle pas, au fond, celle de ce qui devrait nous être le plus précieux, et qui nous reste d’habitude à jamais inconnu, notre vraie vie, la réalité telle que nous l’avons sentie et qui diffère tellement de ce que nous croyons, que nous sommes emplis d’un tel bonheur quand un hasard nous apporte le souvenir véritable (881).

Not only does the narrator highly valorize artistic creation, he elevates it to the most precious endeavor to which we can commit ourselves. In addition, it is important to note, as we have already indicated, how this mysterious joy that “fills us with such happiness” can fundamentally alter our perception of reality.

Our discussion of the concept of salvation through the arts in *A la recherche du temps perdu* would not be complete if we failed to discuss the concept of artistic immortality. Just as the belief in an after-life fills believers of numerous faiths with hope, many writers and other artists have found solace in the possibility of leaving an artistic creation that could survive for generations. In other words, for an artist who has no illusions about an afterlife, artistic creation does appear to be a viable alternative to traditional religious beliefs. Speaking of Vinteuil’s “petite phrase,” the narrator states “Nous périrons, mais nous avons pour ôtages ces captives divines qui suivront notre chance. Et la mort avec elles a quelque chose de moins amer, de moins inglorieux, peut-être de moins probable” (345). As ephemeral beings we must all face death not as a possibility but as a certainty. Nevertheless, it is up to the individual to decide what if anything justifies his or her own existence. In the final volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the narrator appears to have discovered a viable *raison d’être* through the creation of a novel that will embody privileged moments and will survive after his body succumbs to death itself.

However, Proust is not the only twentieth century French author in whom we find evidence of the inexplicable ecstasy of privileged moments. Antoine Roquentin, the narrator of Sartre’s *La Nausée*, is overcome by this same type of

strange joy when he hears the refrain “Some of These Days.” Nonetheless, the authenticity of Sartre’s account of Roquentin’s “privileged moment” is problematic as we will see in the following pages. In other words, is Sartre criticizing the Proustian aesthetic or is he being sincere? The usage of the word “sincere” in this context should be taken to indicate whether Sartre is affirming a legitimate way to lighten the weight of existence, or whether he is in fact critiquing this particular Proustian notion. The answer to this question is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain because of the ambiguous nature of Sartre’s philosophical “message” in *La Nausée*. Michel Contant underscores what he calls “cette ambiguïté philosophique de *Some of These Days*, dans *La Nausée*” (34). And, E.R. Davey emphasizes the question of sincerity as follows: “The problem is that it is not easy to see what Sartre was getting at when he makes Roquentin speculate at last on the possibility of an aesthetic redemption” (43). In other words, it is very difficult to ascertain whether Sartre is being ironic and facetious in the sections related to the jazz tune, or if artistic creation offers Roquentin a genuine form of hope or salvation.

Nonetheless, the importance of this privileged moment should not be underestimated. Regardless of whether Sartre was “flirting” with the notion of aesthetic redemption or launching a critique against Proust, several pages of *La Nausée* are dedicated to this jazz composition (Davey 46). Many critics have simply chosen to not make reference to this musical refrain because of the inherent difficulties involved in a comprehensive analysis. As Davey notes in his study “one is inclined to believe that it was an important matter to him. All the

more surprising, therefore, that so few critics have bothered with it, except perhaps in passing” (43). In other words, it seems rather strange that research in this particular area is so incredibly scant due to the obvious personal and philosophical significance of this subject to the author.

Before we further explore Sartre’s sincerity or lack thereof in *La Nausée*, it is important to discuss the overall significance of the novel in order to place the song in its proper context. The protagonist Antoine Roquentin lives an austere and solitary existence in a small provincial town named Bouville. Much like other existential characters such as Camus’s Meursault, Roquentin has a difficult time relating to others, and is not at all integrated into the local society. In fact, Roquentin lives in this small provincial city for only one reason. He uses the library in order to research the life of the 18th century Marquis de Rollebon, whose biography he is preparing. By writing this work, the narrator hopes to discover his own *raison d’être*. Roquentin’s life appears to be humdrum and monotonous with the exception of his contact with two people and one song. In order to break the banal routine of his daily life, the narrator talks to the Self-Taught Man who tries to read or rather to absorb each book in the library by alphabetical order, and also to a former lover named Anny.

In addition to these two individuals, a song with the words “Some of These Days, You’ll miss me honey” breaks the narrator’s routine and appears to touch him deeply, even bringing about a sort of epiphany. Speaking of the jazz composition, Roquentin states that “Il y a un autre bonheur: au-dehors, il y a cette bande d’acier, l’étroite durée de la musique, qui traverse notre temps de

part en part, et le refuse et le déchire de ses sèches petites pointes ; il y a un autre temps” (37). It is important to note that not only is the same type of inexplicable ecstasy present when Roquentin hears his favorite tune at “Le Café des Cheminots” as when Swann heard Vinteuil’s little phrase, but also time itself appears to be cyclical in nature as we have previously mentioned with Proustian privileged moments. Reaffirming the significance of this little melody, Roquentin states that “Rien ne peut l’interrompre et tout peut la briser” (37). Not only is this jazz composition too important to be interrupted, Roquentin also recognizes its fleeting nature. Although he wishes that the brief moments of “bonheur” he experiences through the worn jazz record could last, he clearly understands that they will soon disappear.

Throughout the entire novel Roquentin suffers from existential nausea, “le dégoût d’exister,” which occurs when one realizes that all of the typical things which usually give meaning to one’s life are illusory, and one can find nothing to fill this inner void. Speaking specifically of Roquentin, Davey describes his existential nausea as a “dispossession of everything that makes life possible” (43). Michael J. Brogan effectively and succinctly summarizes this crisis in one sentence “Nausea paints a classically existentialist portrait of a solitary individual coming to an awareness of the intrinsic meaninglessness of existence” (147).

However, it is not just the apparent insignificance of life that fills the narrator with nausea, various objects also visibly disturb Roquentin. As he affirms, “Les objets, cela ne devrait pas *toucher*, puisque cela ne vit pas. On s’en sert, on les remet ne place, on vit au milieu d’eux : ils sont utiles, rien de

plus. Et moi, il me touchent, c'est insupportable. J'ai peur d'entrer en contact avec eux tout comme s'ils étaient des bêtes vivantes" (22). Although most people think of objects in terms of utility, common physical items heighten Roquentin's nausea. For Roquentin, objects that many individuals take for granted do not appear to be normal, solid, or fixed. In particular, objects appear to have the ability to break out of their form and physically touch the narrator. This particular revelation sometimes induces a genuine state of panic inside of him. The protagonist's extreme consciousness of objects and the world in which they are found is an epiphany that preoccupies him throughout the novel.

After he recognizes the terrible weight of existence itself, how does Roquentin attempt to cope with the situation? He tries traveling or adventure, historical writing (Marquis de Rollebon), love (Anny), and dialogue (Self-Taught Man), but none of these things succeed in alleviating the narrator's "dégoût," his "nausée." As Michael Brogan states "Having seen the ultimate emptiness of the bourgeois values held by the respectable citizens of Bouville, the groundlessness of the humanism of the Self-Taught Man, and the futility of his own earlier beliefs in "adventure" (his travels), history (the Rollebon biography), and love (his relationship with Anny), Roquentin stands on the threshold of despair" (151). However, although all of his previous attempts in dealing with his existential crisis ended in failure, Roquentin continues to search for something that might exist beyond what life has offered him up until this point. He continues to ask himself, "Est-ce qu'il y a quelque chose plus grandiose que nous, si oui est-c'est possible de le toucher? " In other words, if there is a world outside of this world, is it even

possible to approach it or is it inaccessible to us? And as if in response Roquentin hesistantly declares, “dans cet autre monde qu’on peut voir de loin, mais sans jamais l’approcher, une petite mélodie s’est mise à danser, à chanter” (245). With this particular citation, the narrator appears to answer his own question by admitting the existence of a transcendental dimension but also by denying the possibility of bridging the gap that exists between this other world and his own existence.

Critics also disagree as to whether Roquentin has the possibility to be “saved” at the end of the novel, or if this other world is unattainable. Regardless, for the first time in the novel, Roquentin has some semblance of hope, even if this hope is questionable. He decides to become a fiction writer thanks to the effects of listening to the jazz number. Like Marcel in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, he is inspired to create something that has the possibility of lasting after his death. Although it is far from certain whether Sartre is simply making fun of the Proustian aesthetic or whether this redemption is possible, it is certain that the only form of hope in the novel lies in the aesthetic creation inspired by the tune *Some of These Days*. Just as the “Juif” and the “Négresse” were “saved” from the “sin of existence” through composing and singing the jazz tune, Roquentin likewise searches for a similar transcendence in an artistic vocation. Speaking of the composer and the singer, he states that “En voilà deux qui sont sauvés: le Juif et la Nègresse. Sauvés [...] ils se sont lavés du péché d’exister” (247-248). After this revelation, the narrator speaks of his potential work of art, all the while listening to the music: “ Est-ce que je pourrais pas essayer [...]

Naturellement, il ne s'agirait pas d'un air de musique [...] mais est-ce que je ne pourrais pas, dans un autre genre? [...] Il faudrait que ce soit un livre : je ne sais rien faire d'autre" (248). Like Marcel, it appears as if Roquentin might indeed test his writing ability in an attempt to dissipate the nausea.

In addition, privileged moments related to musicality have the power to enable the protagonists of both *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *La Nausée* to come to a greater understanding of life itself thanks to the epiphanies that they receive during these fleeting instants, and to relate to others as well. Vinteuil's "petite phrase" and the jazz number *Some of These Days* offer Swann and Roquentin a means of identifying in some way with humanity. In an article entitled "Some of These Days: Sartre's Petite Phrase," Zimmerman insists that the only function of the female singer in *La Nausée* is to "bear witness to the creative act and to its redemptive qualities" (377). In other words, although the song is inspirational for Roquentin and perhaps gives him the possibility of salvation by means of artistic creation, the author does not speak of the "Négresse" herself. As Zimmerman states "Sartre's negro singer and Jewish composer are not, properly speaking, characters at all [...] They never enter into contact with any of the other characters of *La Nausée* and have no social selves worth mentioning" (377). A careful reading of *La Nausée* shows us, however, that Zimmerman is mistaken in making this particular claim. Speaking of the original composer of "Some of These Days," Roquentin states:

"Mais je ne pense plus à moi. Je pense à ce type de là-bas qui a composé cet air, un jour de juillet, dans la chaleur noire de sa chambre. J'essaie de penser à

lui à travers la mélodie, à travers les sons blancs et acidules du saxophone. Il a fait ça. Il avait des ennuis, tout n'allait pas pour lui comme il aurait fallu : des notes à payer-- et puis il devait bien y avoir quelque part une femme qui ne pensait pas à lui de la façon qu'il aurait souhaité " (Sartre 247). For the first time, Roquentin associates himself with another human being, just as Swann associated himself with Vinteuil after Odette has left him for Forcheville, and he once again hears the refrain. As a direct result of a specific combination of musical tonalities, Roquentin realizes that he is not alone in his suffering.

Although the sections of *La Nausée* related to the song "Some of These Days" are important to the novel as a whole, the author's intentions are, as indicated earlier, unclear. Many researchers have simply chosen to avoid an in-depth analysis of Sartre's "petite phrase," but we believe it is necessary to further probe Sartre's philosophical intentions in relation to the significance of aesthetic creation. In his article entitled "Some of These Days You'll Miss me Honey: Aesthetic Redemption in Sartre's *La Nausee*," E.R. Davey effectively summarizes both dominant literary points of view. To some researchers, Roquentin's privileged moments triggered by the refrain at his favorite cafe are indeed genuine and possibly represent a "short-lived flirtation" with the Proustian aesthetic that we have previously discussed (Davey 44). To other researchers, however, it is "obvious" that Sartre is criticizing Proust for his beliefs in the transcendental value of artistic creation.

We will begin our exploration of Sartre's "sincerity" in terms of the concept of aesthetic redemption with Davey's article. After clearly outlining the strengths

and weaknesses of both dominant points of view concerning the significance of “Some of These Days,” Davey reaches the following conclusion: “I think it would be more accurate to speak [...] of a critique of the Proustian aesthetic rather than a discipleship” (46). Davey justifies his conclusion by discussing at great length the philosophical importance of Roquentin’s failed “adventures” and of Anny’s character in *La Nausée*:

Roquentin had already considered the fusion of art and life, only to dismiss it in the long run, when playing with the notion of ‘adventures.’ If he had indeed had adventures, then it was possible for life and art to be one. Due thought revealed their incompatibility, but this incompatibility had already been demonstrated by Anny’s attempts to create ‘moments parfaits,’ ‘ces tragedies instantanées,’ which had always seemed so artificial (49).

In other words Davey is hardly convinced that Roquentin’s new literary endeavor will be any more successful than his previous attempts to render his life significant. In addition, Anny’s belief in “moments parfaits” appears to be rather ridiculous and unrealistic. While discussing these “perfect moments,” Anny displays an impeccable knowledge of French literature and history. For example, she can recall entire passages of plays that she has not read or seen in quite some time. However, despite all of her knowledge of the past, her obvious obsession with it does not appear at all to justify her present existence.

In his article, Davey also discusses two other important matters related to the notion of aesthetic redemption. In addition to his detailed analysis of the

significance of Anny's role, Davey also questions whether Roquentin or Anny have anything left to save in the first place: "What makes the Proustian idea of redemption utterly beyond Roquentin and Anny is that they have nothing, or very little, to save" (46). In other words, even if some sort of redemption through the arts might be possible for the protagonists in *La Nausée*, with nothing at all to save would it really matter anyway? Along this same line, Davey is convinced that even if Roquentin had anything to save, redemption might not be possible. In particular, Davey states that "One could say [...] and with considerable truth, that the song 'Some of These Days' does not symbolize the possibility of redemption through art, but a nostalgia for a mode of existence beyond reach" (46-47). Therefore, after highlighting both sides of the debate, Davey believes that a Proustian critique is a more feasible explanation for the passages related to the jazz tune.

Although Davey and other critics who have laboriously dissected the passages related to "Some of These Days" believe that Sartre was not suggesting the possibility of aesthetic redemption but in fact critiquing this idea, other scholars such as Michael Brogan, Jean-Louis Pautrot, Eugenia Zimmerman, and Michel Contant are not quite as certain that this is the case. After highlighting Roquentin's existential anguish, Brogan states that "In the depths of Roquentin's despair, the one thing that remains capable of producing in him a measure of happiness, and even temporarily dispelling his nausea altogether, is a scratchy record of an American jazz tune he often listens to in his favorite café" (150). In other words, even if the mysterious joy triggered by the

song is ephemeral, it appears to be a form of hope in an otherwise bleak and dreary existence. Brogan goes even further by suggesting that these musical chords do represent a possible permanent redemption from Roquentin's empty existence: "But then he hears his song one last time, and rather than providing him, as it usually does, with just a moment's reprieve from nausea, this time it suggests the possibility of a more lasting redemption" (151). The possible "lasting redemption" that Brogan is referring to is found in the last pages of the text when Roquentin meditates upon his potential work of fiction. Describing his future creation, the narrator muses "Un livre. Un roman. Et il y aurait des gens qui liraient ce roman et qui diraient: 'C'est Antoine Roquentin qui l'a écrit, c'est un type roux qui traînait dans les cafés, et ils penseraient à ma vie comme je pense à celle de cette négresse : comme à quelque chose de précieux et d'à moitié légendaire'" (249). As Brogan freely admits, however, Roquentin's prospective novel merely represents a "possibility" of redemption not a certainty.

In his article entitled "Robbe-Grillet, Sartre, Duras: mer, musique, écriture," Jean-Louis Pautrot also recognizes the significance of the American jazz tune in *La Nausée*. In particular, he discusses the song's ability to temporarily relieve Roquentin's suffering, or to help him "échapper au malaise" (276). Music helps Roquentin transcend the physical weight of existence, for as Pautrot states, "A plusieurs reprises, Roquentin se réfugie, selon ses propres mots, 'dans la musique'" (276). Although Pautrot recognizes "Some of These Days" as a form of hope, he does not speculate as does Brogan about the long term effects of this musical refrain on the narrator. In fact, Pautrot identifies this tune and the

possibility of some kind of artistic creation that it represents as providing only a somewhat feeble hope when he admits: “Finalement, c’est en écoutant une dernière fois la chanson de jazz que Roquentin entrevoit une maigre chance de s’en sortir par l’écriture du roman, qu’il conçoit de devenir écrivain” (277).

From the very beginning of her article entitled “Some of These Days’ : Sartre’s Petite Phrase,” Eugenia Zimmerman establishes the rapport between Vinteuil’s “petite phrase” and “Some of These Days” which she even refers to as “Sartre’s Petite Phrase.” Unlike Davey and other critics, Zimmerman does not appear to doubt the sincerity of the accounts that we receive from Roquentin concerning the nature of the mystical, revelatory experiences invoked by the record. Indeed, Zimmerman emphasizes that “the standard popular song ‘Some of These Days’ functions in *La Nausée* very much as Vinteuil’s petite phrase functions in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. The petite phrase reveals to Swann and, afterward, to the narrator a realm of supernatural experience and a means of redemption from the impoverishment of everyday life” (375).

Perhaps, the best defense of Sartre’s “sincerity” in *La Nausée* comes from an article written by Michel Contant entitled “Sartre be-bop,’ Un Anatole.” At many different points in his discussion, Contant poses the question: “Why would Sartre critique Proust by means of a genre of music for which he was incredibly passionate?” It was no secret that Sartre much appreciated American jazz. In particular, he was greatly impressed with the talents of Coltrane and Charlie Parker. Reportedly, what impressed Sartre the most were the improvisation skills of the great American jazz artists and the great masterpieces that they were

able to “freely” create during extended improvisation sessions (Contant 35). In the latter pages of his article, Contant offers a very plausible explanation as to why Sartre was indeed such an avid enthusiast of American jazz. The inherent liberty or freedom of creation inspired during improvisation sessions, many of which were directly recorded and marketed to the public, meshed with Sartre’s philosophical beliefs. As Contant indicates, “Et si l’existentialisme est une philosophie de la liberté et de la création à l’intérieur de structures données, le be-bop est une musique existentialiste” (35). Although it might seem strange to discuss the “existential quality” of a particular genre of music, it is possible, as Contant lucidly outlines in his article, that the musical tonalities generated by American jazz did not just appeal to Sartre’s ear, but also to his philosophical value system as well.

Sartre appears to be someone who greatly appreciated originality in all of the arts. For example, this could help to explain why Sartre agreed to write the preface for Nathalie Sarraute’s “new novel” entitled *Portrait d’un Inconnu*. Returning to the end of the novel, it appears that Roquentin would also like to create something new and different. This is why he indicates that he does not want to write a “livre d’histoire,” because he has already realized the complete lack of originality in his earlier literary project concerning the Marquis de Rollebon and the impossibility of “saving” oneself by appropriating someone else’s existence (248). Instead of a historical biography, Roquentin wants to write “une autre espèce de livre” (248). In particular, he wants to produce a work similar to “celle de cette Nègresse: comme à quelque chose de précieux et d’à moitié

légendaire” (249). Since the little jazz tune and its originality obviously influence his decision to be a writer, it is possible that the freedom of associations in the song could possibly inspire Roquentin to write something that is indeed totally new and different.

In addition to Proust and Sartre, we also find other manifestations of privileged moments in the works of Albert Camus. The same type of enigmatic ecstasy that we have identified in Proust and Sartre is present in several of Camus’s literary creations as well. In particular, Camusian protagonists experience this odd joy when they are directly communing with nature, and not as often but occasionally these experiences of intense ecstasy are of a sensual nature and are also shared with another person. In particular, much like Le Clézio, Camus confers upon nature the status of an “endroit privilégié.” In his collection of essays entitled *Noces* (1938), Camus discusses in great detail the importance of reducing the distance between humanity and nature. He meticulously describes the importance of what he calls “milieux privilégiés” in the natural world that surround us. However, he also recognizes the paradox of nature just as we shall see Le Clézio does when he underscores “la tendre indifférence du monde” (*Noces* 33). Despite the substantial number of pages directly dedicated to nature in Camus’s early collection of essays *Noces* as well as many references of interest in his later works as well, surprisingly little has been written about this subject. Given this neglect or lack of interest on the part of the literary community in what appears to be a very important matter to Camus, I will mostly be referencing Camus’s works themselves as well as one

very comprehensive analysis written on the subject, perhaps the only one, by Lionel Cohn entitled *La Nature et L'Homme dans l'Oeuvre d'Albert Camus et dans la Pensée de Teilhard de Chardin*.

Before examining the complexities and nuances of privileged moments in Camus's works, we must briefly discuss how privileged moments in his writings fit the operational definition presented in the introductory chapter. His early essay "Noces à Tipasa" describes in an almost idyllic manner the remarkable beauty of the former Roman town called Tipasa with its stunning "ruins" and close proximity to the Mediterranean Sea. The narrator of this essay is struck by a type of "ivresse" brought on by a direct, organic rapport with the natural world that surrounds him in this site. For example, as he walks through the countryside of Tipasa and the surrounding ruins, the narrator acknowledges "mon ivresse n'aura plus de fin" (18). In fact, "Noces à Tipasa" and indeed the entire collection of essays that make up *Noces* are full of references to the "intoxicating" feeling of communing with nature. In other words, this "alcool généreux" inundates or floods the narrator when he is strolling through the "pleine campagne" or the middle of the Tipasa countryside in Algeria (12). Speaking of this mysterious intoxication that often permeates the Camusian narrator, Cohn states, "Il pare des vertus les plus secrètes et prolonge du plus mystérieux lointain, l'ivresse des unions que la Nature lui ménage" (132-33).

As with the narrators of *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *La Nausée*, the mysterious joy that the narrator of "Noces à Tipasa" feels appears to have no logical or rational explanation. This is another research area that has been

scantly probed in literary studies of Camus. In other words, Camus like Proust placed little faith in Western logic and “cold-hard” science based on empirical observation and experimentation to solve humanity’s afflictions. In fact, it appears that modern-day science had little if anything to offer Camus. As Cohn underlines in his analysis, “On ne peut préciser avec plus de clarté les réticences qu’éprouve Albert Camus pour les hypothèses scientifiques et, surtout, le rôle limité qu’il réserve à la science” (94). Although it is doubtful that Camus spurned the usefulness of Western logic entirely, it seems evident that he clearly recognized its limitations. For example, in the essay “L’Été à Alger” which is written as an elegy to Alger and the simplicity of the Algerian way of life, Camus discusses the significance of another “façon de voir et de vivre” that does not resemble the typical rational discourse of Western society (45). Speaking of this opposing world view, Camus states “Ici, l’intelligence n’a pas de place comme en Italie. Cette race est indifférente à l’esprit. Elle a le culte et l’admiration du corps” (45). Whereas logic reigns supreme in Western society, the inhabitants of Alger seem to valorize a different type of thought that corresponds to a lifestyle which is much more organic in nature.

In addition to the essays in *Noces*, we also find evidence of this intoxication triggered by a close rapport with nature in some of Camus’s novels as well. For example, in *La Peste* Tarrou and Rieux experience one such privileged moment. The physician and the mysterious stranger have been engaged in a struggle that appears to be meaningful but hopeless, much like that of Sisyphus in “Le Mythe de Sisyphus.” In fact, they work night and day in a

desperate attempt to fight the spread of the disease. As the contagion spreads and their colleague Castel's serum at first shows little or no promise in helping patients recover, Rieux feels more and more like a "Fossoyeur" than a physician. He is also frustrated by the fact that many people in Oran simply refuse to do their part in this struggle.

However, when Rieux and Tarrou undress and swim out into the Mediterranean Sea, the two men no longer feel like prisoners, as a strange moment of peace pervades them both. As the narrator states, "pendant quelques minutes ils avancèrent avec la même cadence et la même vigueur, solitaires, loin du monde, libérés enfin de la ville et de la Peste" (232). As soon as their senses come into contact with the ocean, Rieux and Tarrou are inexplicably inundated by what the narrator refers to as an "étrange bonheur" which appears to transport them out of the claustrophobic cemetery or hell that Oran has become. As the narrator emphasizes, "Rieux, qui sentait sous ses doigts le visage grêlé des rochers, était plein d'un étrange bonheur. Tourné vers Tarrou, il devina, sur le visage calme et grave de son ami, ce même bonheur qui n'oubliait rien" (231). Like all privileged moments, this "fugitif instant de paix," although not soon forgotten by our protagonists, cannot be made to reappear nor can it be reproduced. As the narrator admits, "Oui, il fallait recommencer et la peste n'oubliait personne trop longtemps [...] Quant au docteur, le fugitif instant de paix et d'amitié que lui avait été donné n'eut pas de lendemain" (233). However, it should be noted that the fleeting nature of this privileged moment related to nature or in particular to the Mediterranean does nothing to diminish its

importance for Tarrou or Rieux or for the reader. Indeed, the liberating nature of this moment enabled them to return to the struggle against the disease the following morning.

In addition to the Algerian countryside in *Noces* and the Mediterranean in *La Peste*, the desert and isolated, sparsely-populated islands also appear in Camus' texts as "milieux privilégiés" where various protagonists experience intense moments of joy. The desert, in particular, might help shed some light on the aforementioned famous citation from Camus, referring to what he calls "la tendre indifférence du monde." According to Cohn, Camus is not referring to our westernized concept of indifference, but to an Eastern type of "indifference" which is found in religions such as Buddhism. Speaking of Camus and his love for the desert, Cohn states that "Camus fait, en effet, appel à Bouddha comme exemple typique de cette indifférence" (63). In other words, being "indifferent" in many Eastern religions or Native American religions simply means silently contemplating the cosmos without trying to create or impose a meaning upon it or our place in it. Cohn reiterates that "Cet instinct profond caractérise bien Meursault. Il ne veut ni détruire, ni créer; il se contente d'être" (64). In other words, Meursault often silently contemplates the raw beauty of nature in an almost Zen-like state throughout the novel.

As mentioned above, small, desolate islands are also spaces that Camus identifies as "milieux privilégiés." These areas represent nature in its purest form before it was corrupted by humanity. Speaking of the significance of these types of islands in the philosophy of Camus, Cohn states that "Elle est chargée d'un

double symbole: dans l'ordre cosmique, l'île représente l'élément physique premier, la nature dans sa pureté originelle, la permanence du monde. L'île s'oppose à la ville, pour laquelle Camus éprouve une profonde répulsion" (64). As we will later discuss, much has been written about Le Clézio's so-called "love-hate" relationship with the city as well. Le Clézio's views about nature, like those of Camus, however, are not as idealized as some critics would like us to believe. The powerful, destructive force of nature that is capable of inflicting great suffering upon humanity coexists along with the "gentle" side of nature with which Le Clézio's and Camus's protagonists attempt to commune in order to live a more meaningful life.

In addition to sparsely populated islands and deserts, Camus highly valorizes the privileged nature of the elements themselves in what he refers to as their "nudité." In particular, the ocean and sunlight are elements that Camus identifies as "mediators" that facilitate communion between humanity and nature. Underscoring the privileged nature of these elements in Camus' writings, Cohn states that "la nature en général et le soleil en particulier jouent le rôle de "catalyseur," d'élément médiateur, permettant l'union de l'homme avec la nature" (22). For example, Meursault appears to be striving for complete harmony with the Mediterranean Sea along with the sun like other Camusian protagonists. Speaking of the one room of the house in which he lives, Meursault states earlier in the novel that "La pièce était pleine d'une belle lumière de fin d'après-midi" (15). Throughout the novel, Meursault also loves to sunbathe on the shores of the sea. In particular, he likes to lie in the sand underneath the sun in a near

vegetative state. As Meursault affirms “Je ne pensais à rien parce que j’étais à moitié endormi par ce soleil sur ma tête nue ”(85). Thinking of “nothing” in direct contact with the elements, Meursault attempts to make himself as “vide” as possible, and importantly does not try to attach a specific philosophical significance to this communion.

However, Cohn also reminds us of the importance of the sun or light in *L’Étranger* with the absurd or inexplicable murder of “l’Arabe.” As a matter of fact, Camus is very deliberate in his descriptions of the blinding sunlight, reflections, etc. that “force” Meursault to commit this bizarre crime (Cohn 22). For, Meursault defends his questionable actions in *L’Étranger* as follows :

“l’Arabe a tiré son couteau qu’il m’a présenté dans le soleil. La lumière a giclé sur l’acier et c’était comme une longue lame étincelante qui m’atteignait au front. Au même instant, la sueur amassée dans mes sourcils a coulé d’un coup sur les paupières et les a recouvertes d’un voile tiède et épais. Mes yeux étaient aveuglés derrière ce rideau de larmes et de sel ”(94). In his analysis of this scene, Cohn states that “Chaque rayon de lumière est ressenti par Meursault avec une acuité particulière” (54). Although the incident with the “Arabe” can hardly be classified as a privileged moment, it does clearly demonstrate the significance of light in Camus’ narratives. Moreover, this absurd crime is all the more shocking given the fact that Meursault appeared to be in harmony with the sun and the sea before this unfortunate event occurs. If it was indeed the blinding sunlight, reflections, etc. that “caused” him to commit this inexplicable

crime, what destroyed the former equilibrium or harmony that existed between the narrator and the natural world?

The ocean and in particular, the Mediterranean Sea, however, is often an “endroit privilégié” where the irrational and inexplicable intoxication manifests itself in the works of Camus. We have just identified one of these brief but poignant moments with Rieux and Tarrou’s liberating nighttime swim. In addition, the final lines of Camus’ essay “La mer au plus près,” the final essay of the *Été* collection which is in many ways a long prose poem dedicated to the grandeur of the ocean, describes the joy that often pervades Camusian protagonists and narrators when they come into direct contact with the sea. The narrator of “La mer au plus près” states that “J’ai toujours eu l’impression de vivre en haute mer, menacé, au coeur d’un bonheur royal” (183). This “royal happiness” permeates the entire essay from beginning to end. In addition, the narrator tells us that his effort to fuse or become one with the sea has specific religious connotations as well. As the narrator adamantly declares “Grande mer, toujours labourée, toujours vierge, ma religion avec la nuit” (182). A careful reading of this particular essay clearly illuminates the pantheistic aspects of such a union.

Privileged moments related to nature and to sexuality also appear to have a quality that momentarily allows Camus’s protagonists to transcend the human condition. In other words, the mysterious joy that is conjured up by these brief but poignant moments also appears in his works to represent a type of salvation or redemption from the poverty of everyday life. Unlike his contemporary Sartre who never appeared to place any value upon nature, “Camus refuse de

s'aveugler et d'être indifférent à la beauté du monde" (Cohn 29). Whereas salvation or redemption comes in the form of an afterlife in Western religions, for Camus salvation does not come from above but is found only on this earth. As Camus states in his essay entitled "Le Désert," "Le monde est beau, et hors de lui, point de salut" (67).

In particular, existential redemption takes the form of a pantheistic fusion with nature. In his discussion of this phenomenon in the Camusian repertoire, Cohn affirms "Albert Camus se confond avec le monde, il s'unit intimement à lui, il le "connait" au sens biblique du terme, qui exprime l'union amoureuse" (13). Camus' belief in the necessity of bringing humanity and nature closer together or, as the narrator of "Le Vent à Djémilia" discusses, the need to "diminuer la distance qui nous sépare du monde" helps us to understand the very title of his collection of essays *Noces*, a hymn for "les noces de l'homme et de la terre" (50). And, this marriage has a definite spiritual connotation. As Jean Onimus states, "Pour Camus, le divin existe: il l'a ressenti dans les purs moments d'extase [...] Mais ce divin est dans le monde: il est à la vie ce que la fleur est à la plante" (Cohn 10). In other words, Camus does not deny the existence of the divine. In fact, Camus adamantly affirms his belief in its existence, but in order to discover the divine we do not look above. We inhabit the same realm as the sublime, and it is up to us to find our place in it.

Although Camus often discusses the importance of "fusing" or becoming one with the natural world that surrounds us, he also admits the impossibility of realizing such a perfect union or harmony. Our unhappiness and existential

angst, which Camus calls the absurd, comes from the realization that the absolute unity that we so desperately seek with the rest of the cosmos is not possible. As Cohn states, “Cette tentative jalonne la recherche métaphysique du bonheur, et c’est de l’impossibilité de réaliser l’union absolue avec le monde que découle le malheur de l’homme”(13). Nonetheless, this realization does nothing to diminish his faith in the importance of reducing this distance to the greatest extent possible, nor does it appear to weaken the ecstasy that Camusian narrators feel when they successfully shrink the gap. As the narrator of “Noces à Tipasa” states, “Ici même, je sais que jamais je ne m’approcherai assez du monde. Il me faut être nu et puis plonger dans la mer, encore tout parfumé des essences de la terre, laver celles-ci dans celle-là, et nouer sur ma peau l’étreinte pour laquelle soupirent lèvres a lèvres depuis si longtemps la terre et la mer ” (15). Although Camus’ protagonists might not be able to fuse with nature in a true pantheistic union, this does nothing to negate the enigmatic ecstasy triggered during these privileged moments that enables them to live more fully and more lucidly.

In addition to privileged moments related to nature, this “strange joy” also arises from sensual encounters between a man and a woman. For example, the narrator of “Noces à Tipasa” describes privileged moments related to sexuality as follows: “Eteindre un corps de femme, c’est aussi retenir contre soi cette joie étrange qui descend du ciel vers la mer” (16). It is also important to note that the “joie étrange” that the narrator is describing is also linked to nature or to a particular element of nature (la mer). Furthermore, in his essay, “l’Été à Alger,”

Camus identifies “les corps bruns des femmes” as one of man’s greatest treasures alongside the ocean. As the narrator states, “Avec les premiers, nous descendons ensemble vers le port et les trésors de l’homme: tiédeur de l’eau et les corps bruns des femmes” (35). This citation provides another concrete example of how privileged moments in Camus’s works related to sexuality are also sometimes connected to nature or to privileged spaces that exist in the natural world.

It is also essential to note that Camus’ protagonists relate to the world around them by using “tout leur corps” or their entire body. As the narrator of “Noces à Tipasa” so fervently declares, “Il me suffit de vivre de tout mon corps et de témoigner de tout mon coeur” (18-19). In strong opposition to Christianity which warns believers to suppress sensual pleasure because “The flesh is weak,” for Camus the pleasure experienced through sexual encounters as well as through fusion with nature appear to offer a sense of liberation. For example, in “L’Été à Alger,” Camus criticizes puritanical tradition that seeks to “diminuer la chair” and emphasizes the need to “vivre [...] près des corps et par le corps” (36). Much as Rieux and Tarrou discover that “spiritualité sans Dieu” can be found in the fraternal struggle against physical and moral evil, Camus also seems to suggest that a closer rapport with nature and sensual privileged moments shared with an Other can also add meaning to one’s life and can possibly even be considered to be “spiritual experiences.” When we begin our detailed analysis of privileged moments in Le Clézio’s works, we will return to this notion of immediate pleasure through nature and sexuality.

In conclusion, the complex phenomenon of a “privileged moment” plays an important role in the works of the early to mid-twentieth century writers Proust, Sartre, and Camus. Although each of these authors describes these experiences differently, the same enigmatic ecstasy characterizes each and every one of the various types of privileged moments that we have discussed. For Marcel, the narrator of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, although accessing his voluntary memory proves to be entirely futile, his entire childhood village of Combray crystallizes or takes shape after his privileged moment with “les madeleines.” For Swann and Roquentin, it is a simple refrain that reveals things about the nature of life itself and allows these two protagonists to identify with other members of humanity in a way in which they were incapable of before. Although research is equivocal in terms of the sincerity of Sartre’s account in *La Nausée* because of the nebulous nature of his writing, several pages of this particular novel are dedicated to this notion with which Sartre was obviously very familiar. For Camusian protagonists, and as we will see with Le Clézio’s works, it is a close rapport with nature and sometimes a sensual encounter with an Other that facilitate or foster these experiences of pure joy. In addition, many of the privileged moments that we have highlighted can be considered as a form of “salvation without God” and/or “aesthetic salvation” or redemption from the existential anguish of the human condition. Although Le Clézio writes about different subjects and in a different manner from Proust, Sartre, and Camus, privileged moments in his narratives are open to many of the same philosophical and aesthetic considerations that we have explored throughout this chapter.

CHAPTER II

Le Clézio's Early Texts: From Existentialism to Lyricism

Before we delve further into the three types of privileged moments that we wish to explore, (those associated with various elements of nature, music, and sexuality), we must briefly turn our attention to another important matter which will greatly enrich our understanding and appreciation of these enigmatic instants. We must examine the existentialist nature of some of Le Clézio's early writings and explore how his powerful experiences with the Embreras in Panama and the Waunanas, with the indigenous cultures in Mexico, etc. drastically transformed him and his writings. We will discuss how the existential angst which was so striking in many of his early works gradually began to dissipate and be counterpointed by the pulsating "Joie de vivre" that permeates his later texts. Although many of his early protagonists suffer from the "maladies quotidiennes de l'existence," many of Le Clézio's later literary characters appear to be living their lives to the fullest extent possible in harmony with themselves and with nature as part of an authentic community. The invaluable lessons that he learned from so-called more "primitive" or "magical" cultures clearly resonate in his later fiction, as we will soon discover.

We will begin our analysis of the existential nature of Le Clézio's early works with his first novel *Le Procès-Verbal*, for which he received the coveted Prix Renaudot in 1963, at the age of 23. The solitary, austere, and alienated existence of the protagonist Adam Pollo is clearly reminiscent of earlier

existential characters from the French literary tradition such as Camus's Meursault and Sartre's Antoine Roquentin, both of whom we discussed in the preceding chapter. In her book entitled *J.M.G. Le Clézio*, Waelti-Walters identifies this relationship to Camus's and Sartre's protagonists and comments as follows: "His (Pollo) rejection of society is an extensive one [...] He is dishonest [...] He is not sociable [...] he has rejected it, and he is locked up. We have, in fact, in Adam Pollo a more self-conscious version of Meursault, who was also condemned for refusing to conform to social norms" (19). His attempts to limit his contact with other human beings as much as possible make this refusal evident. Adam Pollo is a squatter living in an abandoned house near the sea, detached from the rest of society. In addition, the protagonist/narrator reveals to the reader that he cast his motorcycle into the ocean in order to make everyone believe that he is dead. As Adam Pollo states, "Quand j'ai décidé d'habiter ici, j'ai pris tout ce qu'il fallait, comme si j'allais à la pêche, je suis revenu la nuit, et puis j'ai balancé ma moto à la mer. Comme ça, je me faisais passer pour mort" (13). Given his difficulties in relating to others, the narrator has allowed himself to become an entirely estranged individual who lives on the periphery of society in order to avoid any type of "unnecessary" human interaction, with the important exception of one individual who occasionally frequents his illegal residence. In fact, this "monstre de solitude" rarely leaves his refuge unless it is to acquire basic items necessary to sustain him. As the protagonist states, "De temps en temps, je vais en ville acheter de quoi bouffer, parce que je bouffe beaucoup, et souvent. On ne me pose pas de questions, et je n'ai pas trop à parler; ça ne me

gêne pas parce qu'on m'a habitué à me taire depuis des années, et que je pourrais facilement passer pour un type sourd, muet, et aveugle" (13). From Pollo's account of his sporadic excursions outside of his claustrophobic domicile, it is obvious that no meaningful communication occurs during these outings. He engages in the minimum amount of discourse required in order to receive the items that he needs. He does not appear to make any effort to engage even in casual conversation during these obligatory trips to town. Conversely, no one appears to reach out to the introverted protagonist either for that matter.

However, as previously mentioned, one person periodically breaks Adam's monotonous routine. Nonetheless, his relationship with this individual named Michèle is both unusual and extremely disturbing. Throughout the novel, they meet each other on several occasions, during which Adam often makes reference to the night he attempted to forcefully coerce her into having sexual intercourse with him. The protagonist describes the incident as follows: "Oui, j'ai déchiré tes vêtements, parce que tu commençais à avoir peur et à crier; je t'ai giflée, pas très fort, deux fois en pleine figure" (32). Although Adam seeks to justify his actions by explaining that he did not hit his lover "very hard" and that he only did so in order to make her stop screaming and crying, this revelation is one of the first outward manifestations of his inner rage. It is also important to note that despite the considerable amount of ambivalence which exists in the passages where the narrator discusses this unfortunate night, it appears that his efforts to compel Michèle against her will to engage in sexual activities with him were at least partially thwarted. Summarizing his ultimate "failure" with the young

woman and once again attempting to rationalize his disconcerting actions, he states, “Hein, et quand tu as été nue, je t’ai fixée sur le sol [...] Et en principe je t’ai violée comme ça [...] J’ai dit en principe. Parce qu’en fait c’a été raté” (33). Although Adam admits that he did not ultimately satisfy his sexual desire, it is unclear why his violent attempt was unsuccessful. In other words, the reader must ponder what prevented him from raping Michèle and fulfilling his erotic urges. Did his conscience finally awaken and force him to stop? Was Adam perhaps too inebriated to complete his plan? Or, was Michèle somehow able to fight back enough in order to bring Adam’s advances to a halt? These unanswered questions along with the protagonist’s aberrant and destructive conduct continue to haunt the reader throughout the text.

In addition to his anti-social behavior and aggressive tendencies, Adam Pollo evokes associations with other existential characters because he frequently contemplates death and suicide. During a discussion with Michèle, Adam interrogates her about death, asking “Si tu m’avais dit ce que tu ne m’as pas dit, par exemple, que tu l’as l’impression d’attendre quelque chose, et que tu sais, tu comprends, tu sais ce que ce doit être la mort [...] Je te comprends. Parce qu’on finit toujours par avoir raison, un jour, d’attendre la mort ”(54). However, this “waiting game” that Adam Pollo reflects upon and to which many other existential protagonists make reference does not appear to have entirely negative connotations for him. In fact, one of his favorite hobbies is reading the obituaries in the newspaper. He affirms this morbid curiosity as follows: “Ainsi, ma plus grande occupation serait de lire la rubrique nécrologique dans les journaux”

(104). Death is a phenomenon that fascinates him, and from which he perhaps even derives erotic pleasure. For instance, in a startling confession, the narrator reveals to the reader that “J’aimerais aller dans les cimetières, et je toucherais avec plaisir le front des morts” (104). Adam Pollo appears to be captivated with the idea of “touching,” coming physically as close to it as possible before he experiences it himself. Whereas many people distance themselves as far away as possible from the reality of mortality, the protagonist would like a “front-row seat.” He would like to reach out and touch human decomposition and putrefaction “with pleasure.”

Indeed, Adam seems actually to embrace and long for death to put an end to his suffering. While discussing various types of “dangers” that could end his life, the narrator speculates:

Chacun de ses pas était un danger nouveau; qu’un coléoptère vînt à pénétrer par sa bouche ouverte et bloquât sa trachée-artère; qu’un camion en passant perdît une roue et le décapitât, ou que le soleil s’éteignît; ou qu’il prit soudain à Adam la fantaisie de se suicider. Il se sentit las tout à coup; peut-être las de vivre, las d’avoir à se défendre sans cesse contre tous ces dangers”(117).

Aware of the fragility of life, Adam contemplates the different scenarios that could ultimately result in his demise. Once again temporarily interrupting the first-person narrative style, the narrator tells us that the protagonist is “perhaps” tired of confronting life’s hazards. Although the writer postulates that Adam might be seriously pondering suicide, no clear indication exists in the text that would

allow us to ascertain whether or not the main character is capable of killing himself.

After his lengthy meditations upon death and suicide, Adam Pollo's social problems once again take center stage. After he leaves a bar "à peu près saoul," he walks through the Jardin de la Gare des Autobus searching for a bench on which to sleep (173). Instead of finding a peaceful place where he can sleep off the effects of the alcohol he has just consumed, he encounters Michèle who is accompanied by an American male. He attempts to borrow money from Michèle, but his penchant for violence and his inability to communicate with others become painfully evident once more when "l'Américain" confronts him. After Michèle initially refuses to lend him any money, she asks him to leave. But instead of leaving, Adam Pollo continues to linger. The protagonist's persistence begins to visibly annoy the American, and when Adam Pollo levels what he calls a "juron américain" at the other male, violence breaks out. "L'Américain" proves to be a much better fighter than our troubled narrator, inflicting much pain upon the young Frenchman in the course of the struggle. Summarizing the American's total physical domination, Adam Pollo states:

Alors, il m'a envoyé un premier coup à gauche du menton, puis un autre, sous l'œil [...] Il a posé ses deux genoux gras sur ma poitrine, et il a tapé de toutes ses forces sur ma figure. Il m'a presque assommé, et il m'a cassé une dent de devant [...] Au bout d'un moment, j'ai réussi à me redresser et j'ai marché à quatre pattes jusqu'au banc. Je me suis assis et j'ai essuyé ma figure

avec un mouchoir; à part ma dent cassée, je ne sentais rien, mais je saignais beaucoup (175).

After being overpowered and humiliated by the American, a bleeding Adam Pollo must crawl back to the bench “à quatre pattes” in order to try and regain his composure.

Michèle and her new acquaintance further compound this embarrassment by disclosing the location of his secret illegal residence to local law enforcement authorities. Adam Pollo is unaware of Michèle’s “treachery” until one morning two or three officers suddenly rush in on him:

Michele et l’Américain ont dû porter plainte à la police et dénoncer ma cachette. Très tôt ce matin, j’ai été réveillé par du bruit; j’ai eu peur, je me suis levé et j’ai regardé par la fenêtre. J’ai vu deux ou trois types qui montaient à travers la colline sans rien dire. Ils marchaient vite, et de temps à autre ils regardaient vers la villa [...] en tout cas, j’ai eu juste le temps de prendre deux ou trois trucs, et de sauter par la fenêtre (177).

This episode marks a crucial turning point in the novel, because the protagonist will no longer be able to live as a hermit on the outskirts of town for fear of being caught and reprimanded if he returns to his former abode. This will force Adam Pollo out of his isolation and will compel him to interact in some way with those around him. He tells the reader that he is now obliged to share communal places to sleep and to eat with others, such as the facilities at the “L’Armée du Salut.”

However, before we examine the crisis that occurs shortly after the discovery of Adam's hideout and which thrusts him into contact with others, we must briefly note another important event that occurs around the same time. Adam receives a touching letter from his mother in which she reaches out to him and begs him to let her and his father help him with whatever he might need. In this letter she also reiterates the need for Adam to express some feeling for his parents: "Écris-nous une lettre affectueuse, Adam, qui montre que nous sommes encore ton père et ta mère, et pas des étrangers vis-à-vis desquels tu restes hostiles" (187). The protagonist's short and indifferent reply to his mother's moving pleas concretizes the existential paralysis that encloses him. Seemingly without any emotion whatsoever, Adam responds to his mother's request for an "affectionate letter" with this reply: "Ne vous inquiétez pas pour moi [...] Ne vous en faites pas pour moi tout va bien" (189). Similar to other existential protagonists, Adam is a prisoner of his own solitude.

After revealing to the reader how truly devoid of sentiment and compassion he seems to be with his cold, harsh reply to his mother Denise, the crisis which appears to have been taking shape since the beginning of the narrative explodes in the small provincial town of Carros, northwest of Nice. For no apparent reason, Adam inexplicably and abruptly starts to "preach" to anyone who will listen. His aberrant behavior both attracts and disturbs a sizeable crowd that gathers to hear his inarticulate ranting. Painting a mental portrait of this bizarre event while temporarily abandoning the first-person narrative, the text states "Entre 14H. 10 et 14H. 48 Adam parla. La foule des spectateurs s'était

sensiblement accrue. Ils commençaient à se montrer vraiment réticents, et leurs interjections couvraient par moments la voix d'Adam. Lui, il parlait de plus en plus vite, et de moins en moins clair [...] Il avait tant parlé, tant crié" (198). It is no wonder that the crowd becomes more and more impatient for what would be his thirty-eight minute diatribe to end. The newspaper report which describes the scene further emphasizes the gravity of this incident. From this report entitled "Un Maniaque Arrêté à Carros," the reader learns that "Le jeune homme se barricada alors dans une des salles de l'École désertée, et répondit aux sommations par des menaces de suicide" and that "Il était porteur d'une arme blanche, un couteau de cuisine" (202). The reader also discovers that Adam confesses to being a pyromaniac and is probably responsible for burning down several buildings in the region. In a desperate attempt to put an end to this outrageous public spectacle, the police finally have no choice but to use tear gas.

After this ill-fated incident, Adam is forced to undergo psychological evaluations conducted by a head physician and his interns at the mental hospital. Comprising this team, there are "sept en tout, sept jeunes, mâles et femelles, entre dix-neuf et vingt-quatre ans, plus un docteur d'environ 48 ans" (215). Adam Pollo proves to be a formidable challenge for this team or at least for the doctor's trainees. For example, after broaching various subjects, one of the students appears to be duped into thinking that Adam Pollo is completely "normal." However, the lead doctor reminds her that "vous tombez sur des malades extrêmement intelligents" (226). Although many mental patients possess very low levels of cognitive functioning, Adam Pollo is at least a

moderately educated individual with “certificats de géographie régionale” and is even able to converse about philosophical/spiritual subjects such as “panthéisme” (225). During the course of these assessments, Adam Pollo develops an emotional attachment to a young blond girl from the team and fantasizes about her in great detail:

Demain, peut-être, la jeune fille blonde reviendrait le voir. Seule, cette fois. Il lui prendrait la main et lui parlerait longtemps. Il lui écrirait un poème. Avant deux semaines, si tout allait bien, on l'autoriserait à correspondre. Puis ils pourraient aller se promener ensemble dans le jardin, vers la fin de l'automne. Il lui dirait, je peux rester ici encore un an, moins, peut-être; après ça, quand j'en sortirai, nous irons vivre dans le Sud, à Padoue, ou à Gibraltar (247).

Considering the gravity of his present situation, the reader has no reason to believe that this ecstatic union will take place. Furthermore, it is far from certain that Adam will ever be released from this facility.

Moreover, the final lines of the text cast doubts on Adam's desire to be discharged from this hospital. Despite his elaborate fantasy concerning the young blond student, he appears to have mixed feelings about leaving. The protagonist clearly expresses a desire to remain in the asylum, removed from the outside world: “avec de la chance, c'est pour longtemps, à présent, qu'il est fixé à ce lit, à ces murs, à ce parc, à cette harmonie de métal clair et de peinture fraîche” (248). With a “little luck,” perhaps he will be able to exile himself

definitively from the society that he failed to embrace and which never accepted him. The narrator's usage of the word "harmony" must not be overlooked. However, the conclusion of the novel, "En attendant le pire, l'histoire est terminée," provides little hope for Adam Pollo (248). Because of this ending, we must consider the sense of the word "harmony" to be ironic in nature. As we have outlined, it is not inner peace that best characterizes Adam Pollo's condition, but extreme alienation from the rest of humanity that defines his very essence.

Although not as much has been written about Le Clézio's earliest collection of short stories published in 1965 entitled *La Fièvre*, the same type of alienation described in *Le Procès-Verbal* is also evident in this work. *La Fièvre* is a collection of nine tales, which range from nine to sixty pages in length, and explores a variety of different subjects such as existential nausea, the ephemeral nature of time, the importance of communing with nature, old age and death, etc. Although several of the protagonists of this collection do indeed suffer from the physical malady that we call "fever," the opening lines of the preface make it clear that Le Clézio is not merely probing the realm of the physical. He is also and more importantly referring to a type of "intellectual fever" that appears to be similar to the philosophical "nausea" from which Roquentin suffered. As Le Clézio states in the preface, "Si vous voulez vraiment le savoir, j'aurais préféré ne jamais être né. La vie, je trouve ça bien fatigant. Bien sûr, à présent la chose est faite, et je ne peux rien y changer" (7). The tone of the preface is reminiscent of Sartre's notion of being condemned to exist; we are all thrown into

the chaos of existence through absolutely no choice of our own and we will all one day die and return to the earth from which we came.

After the preface, the reader encounters Roch, the protagonist of the individual tale “La Fièvre.” Roch is a vintage existential character who leads a mundane existence and appears to be enslaved by his banal routine. He and his wife Elisabeth do speak to each other, but their exchanges are void of any real meaning; they speak simply to avoid an awkward silence or to pass the time. Roch does not appear to be able to share anything significant with his wife or, for that matter, with anyone else. Explaining the abyss that exists between the main character and his fellow humans, the narrator states that “Il ne riait jamais [...] Il parlait vraiment peu [...] Personne ne le connaissait vraiment, pas même sa femme Élisabeth, et on ne lui trouvait pas d’amis” (9). Roch and his wife are almost complete strangers to one another. Similarly, although Roch does have a sister who writes to him on one particular occasion, it is evident from the letter that he is no closer to her than he is to his wife. His sister writes to inform him that she will be visiting Venice, but she does not expect any type of response to her letter in the near future, or perhaps ever for that matter: “Je serai à Venise mardi prochain, et j’y resterai une quinzaine de jours. Je ne te donne pas mon adresse, mon cher Roch, parce que je sais tu ne m’écrirais pas ”(12). After nonchalantly, and even coldly reading and discarding this letter, Roch picks up the newspaper and reads about the violence occurring in the Southern United States during the Civil Rights Movement.

After reading the article about racial strife in the South, and then the one describing the tragic death of two elderly women, the “fever” invades Roch for the first time. As he begins to comprehend that “Ces vieilles femmes sont mortes, comme ça, sans difficulté [...] Une sorte de frémissement étrange monta dans le corps de Roch [...] Roch se contracta sur le lit, sentit la douleur se répandre; il claqua des dents ”(18). During this first existential fever attack, Roch recognizes the fragility of human life which can be taken away “sans difficulté.” This epiphany shatters his stability as the pain permeates his entire being and immobilizes him. When his throbbing momentarily dissipates, Roch attempts to go to his job at a travel agency, one of the many places where he has temporarily worked before deciding to try the next “petit boulot.” However, as soon as he leaves his house, he is once again stricken by another wave of unbearable, paralyzing pain: “A cinq cents mètres, les frissons recommencèrent” (20). When this crisis passes, Roch implies that these episodes occur on a daily basis. He comments upon the latest incident as follows: “C’était cela la maladie quotidienne; l’insolation de tous les jours” (22). In other words, the first apparition of this enigmatic “douleur” is probably not the first time that Roch has experienced this agony. In this section of the narrative, it also appears as if the narrator is generalizing Roch’s suffering to include all of humanity. We are all stricken by this “daily malady” known as existence whether we realize it or not. For, as the narrator underscores, “Nulle part on n’était à l’abri”(22). There is no escape from existence and all the suffering that it entails. Roch has simply reached a higher level of physical and psychological awareness than most

people, and he is unable to deal with the ramifications of this knowledge. He sees beyond the comforting illusions that allow us to cope with the hardships we all must face; his revelations have destroyed his “shelter” but he cannot move beyond the impasse of his own pain.

In the tale which follows “La Fievre” entitled “Le Jour où Beaumont Fit Connaissance avec sa Douleur,” it becomes even clearer that the existential suffering of the protagonists of *La Fièvre* is not merely physical. In reference to the anguish that the protagonist Beaumont experiences, the narrator states that “Un malaise très intellectuel et cependant physique, grandit dans son esprit” (60). As with Roch, the extreme pain that Beaumont experiences renders him incapable of doing anything even sleeping. The entire story takes place during a period of less than twenty-four hours. On the most basic level, it depicts a man who is suffering from what is probably an abscessed tooth, which causes him to act in an extremely irrational manner. He drinks himself into a feverish stupor and takes what little pain medication he has. But when these efforts do little to alleviate his physical torment, Beaumont calls his female friend Paule in the middle of the night to ask her to come and stay with him until he is able to go to the dentist. When she refuses, he begins dialing numbers at random in a desperate attempt to reach out to someone to lessen his misery. Most of these strangers are not terribly empathetic since Beaumont admits that he is just acting out of desperation. Yet, his frantic efforts to communicate with and seek the company of others to help alleviate his suffering suggest that he is not as totally alienated as Adam Pollo. Although morning finally comes, and a beleaguered

Roch goes to the dentist to stop the incessant throbbing which has incapacitated him, the text implies that he will be forever changed by this event. The narrator's incessant and excruciating toothache acts as a catalyst that helps to enlighten him: "J'ai besoin de ma douleur, maintenant, je ne suis plus rien que par elle. Et je l'aime. Il y a des choses qu'on ne doit pas connaître, et moi, maintenant je les connais" (82). Like Roch, Beaumont's eyes have been opened, and he is fully conscious of the "malaise" that torments us all. It is important to note that this enlightenment is inseparable from the physical suffering that induced it. Yet, in spite of the paralyzing pain, the narrator expresses a need for this knowledge mingled with anguish. Without this affliction, he is "nothing."

However, perhaps the most "existential" of all of the stories that comprise *La Fièvre* is the last narrative entitled "Un Jour de Vieillesse." In this short tale, the protagonist Joseph is running errands and performing other tasks for an elderly woman named Maria, who appears to be near death. Maria is often simply referred to as "La vieille femme," and Joseph's relationship to her is ambiguous. In other words, the reader is left to imagine whether Joseph is a member of her family, whether he works for a health care agency that might simply be taking care of this woman, etc. Since he is described as being fairly young, it is plausible that Joseph could be her son or grandson. However, this is merely speculative considering the ambiguous nature of the narration. Despite all of the uncertainty surrounding the identity of the two main characters, it is apparent, however, that "La vieille femme" is dying. First of all, the text contains a number of references to death, upon which the old lady reflects incessantly.

Moreover, as soon as Joseph enters her residence, he senses “L’odeur de la mort (qui) imprégnait ces lieux” (213). Not only does Maria constantly discuss death and, in particular, her death with Joseph, her flesh already reeks of mortality itself.

To comfort the old lady, Joseph asks her to tell stories from her past. But Maria’s recollections can only provide a momentary relief from the present. With certain death staring her in the face, the old lady begins to reflect upon the notion of an afterlife. Although she is religious and seems to believe in the existence of a heaven, fear overcomes her, and she wonders what will really happen after death. As Maria states: “Je pense (que cela existe), et si ce n’était pas vrai? Et s’il n’y avait rien? Rien du tout? Toute cette vie, tout ça [...] pour rien. J’ai peur” (211). Terrified and uncertain of her own beliefs, the old woman adamantly states that she does not want to simply “disparaître, non, pas disparaître” into the cosmic void (212). After Joseph listens to her reflections concerning the existence or non-existence of a celestial paradise, he gets her a glass of water and encourages her to go to sleep. Although she admits to being weary, “très fatiguée,” she cannot rest because of her anguish and uncertainty.

In this stifling atmosphere, Joseph begins to consider the futility of his own life and of human existence in general. As the narrator affirms, “Le vide était entré complètement dans l’esprit de Joseph [...] Mais ce n’était pas encore l’heure, pour Joseph. Pour lui, la vie devait être encore longue; un fardeau sans avenir et sans joie” (220). The narrator reiterates that for Joseph there is no escape or “no exit” to use a Sartrean term from the anguish of existence: “Il faut

marcher toute sa vie, au milieu de ce désert [...] Pas moyen, non, pas moyen d'échapper" (222). After these epiphanies strike him, Joseph briefly ponders if God exists, then watches the same film at the movie theater "deux ou trois fois" which hardly seems to interest him in the least (224). In fact, as the end of the narrative indicates, after watching this movie, he is uncertain whether he just finished watching "Quand la Marabunta gronde, Sept heures avant la frontière" or simply "quelque chose de ce genre" (224). In short, this film cannot hold his attention, because existential revelations monopolize his thought. Although Joseph's existential torment does not appear to have diminished at the end of this short narrative and although he has not found a way from which to escape the human condition, the reader is given the indication that he has decided to live his life to the fullest, to take advantage of the opportunities that life affords to him. The narrator conveys this classic "Carpe Diem" message when he states, "Respirez, respirez fort et profond, soyez vivants jusqu'à l'extase. Parce que bientôt, en vérité, il ne restera pas grand-chose de vous" (225). It is also important to note that it is as if the narrator is speaking directly to the reader in this section and actively encouraging all of us to live our lives to their full potential. The narrator has abandoned the third-person narrative position, and openly addresses the reader using the "Vous" form. This abrupt change in the style of narration helps to convey this important message to the reader. However, we must not neglect the precipitous shift in tone from the first half of this important acknowledgement to the last part. Although the reader is indeed encouraged to take advantage of every opportunity that life affords, he or she is

reminded that “bientôt, en vérité, il ne restera pas grand-chose de vous.” In addition to the carpe diem message, the author reminds us of our own mortality. In this brief commentary on human existence, hope and desperation coexist.

Despite the obvious presence of existential torment in Le Clézio's early narratives, brief flashes of insight such as the one described in “Un Jour de Vieillesse” also sometimes occur as well. These mystifying instants will become much more frequent and powerful in his later works, and they will change into something much more profound and complex opening into new dimensions without negating the anguish of the experiences described in these early works. Indeed, Le Clézio's writing style and his entire literary undertaking will undergo a profound transformation. In order to probe the nature of this metamorphosis, we must briefly examine the significance of the travels that brought him into contact with various indigenous cultures that were drastically different from his own. Le Clézio's first encounter with another civilization occurred when he opted to fulfill his obligatory military service by teaching French literature in Thailand at the Buddhist University of Bangkok, instead of pursuing a traditional combat role in the Armed Forces (Waelti-Walters 13). Buddhist thought intrigued and fascinated him, and the effects of this exposure to another thought system are quite evident in some of his early works as well as those from later in his career. Referring to the significance of this initiation, Waelti-Walters states that “We see influences of Buddhist thought in much of his later work, particularly in *L'Extase Matérielle* and *The Book of Flights*” (13). Although the “later work” to which she is referring is no longer considered to be Le Clézio's recent efforts, since her

book was published in 1977, and he continues to write prolifically, many scholars such as Michelle Labbé have noted the significance of the Eastern concept of the never-ending circle of life and death that permeates many of Le Clézio's texts. As Labbé states in her book entitled *Le Clézio, L'Écart Romanesque*, "Le samsara hindo-bouddhiste, c'est à dire la chaîne ininterrompue de la vie et de la mort, de la transmigration [...] obsède l'œuvre de J.M.G. Le Clézio" (126). As Waelti-Walters indicates, it is perhaps in *L'Extase Matérielle* that this lack of separation between life and death finds its greatest manifestation. For example, this Buddhist notion could explain reflections in *L'Extase Matérielle* such as "Non, vie et néant [...] sont l'un dans l'autre, mêlés indistinctement. Vivre, c'est être mort, et la mort est vivante" (48). However, this is a subject too vast to be investigated properly for the purposes of our study. Furthermore, other researchers have already explored this phenomenon.

During his short time in Thailand, Le Clézio could not remain silent and chose to speak out against the exploitation of the indigenous population. In particular, prostitution rings, frequented often by his fellow soldiers and commanders, revolted the young author. Le Clézio could not find a justification for this appalling behavior of profiting from young girls and economic destitution. Because of Le Clézio's refusal to ignore the blatant injustices that he observed, the French government relocated him to Mexico for being overtly critical of French policy in the Indochina region (Waelti-Walters 13). Although his experiences in Thailand were crucial to his development as a writer and as a human being and their value should not be diminished, it is perhaps Mexico that

truly “changed” the young Le Clézio and compelled him to “voir différemment.” In an article entitled “Entretien Privé avec J.M.G. Le Clézio,” conducted on May 29, 1997, which appears in *Le Chercheur d'Or et Ailleurs: L'Utopie de J.M.G. Le Clézio*, the interviewer asks Le Clézio if certain literary works were responsible for the drastic evolution in his writing style and in the themes he would explore. He responds thus:

Oui, le changement ça s'est fait progressivement autour des années que j'ai passées au Mexique. C'est-à-dire, je suis allé au Mexique en 68, 1968, et j'y suis resté, puis je me suis éloigné un peu. Je suis allé au Panama pendant trois ans. Je suis rentré en France, mais je ne m'adaptais pas bien et je suis allé au Mexique entre 70 et 88-dix-huit ans, pas tout le temps, tout le temps, mais une assez longue période, parfois un an, parfois un peu moins. Donc, au cours de ces dix-huit ans, ce n'est pas Huxley qui m'a changé, c'est le Mexique, avec tout ce que ça me faisait réviser des idées reçues (284).

From this section of the interview, it is apparent that Le Clézio attributes the progressive transformation in his texts directly to his contacts with so-called more “primitive” civilizations, in particular to specific indigenous Amerindian cultures with which he lived on numerous occasions during this vital eighteen-year period of his life.

What was it in particular about the rich Mexican culture that he discovered and greatly admired that modified his belief system? In a series of interviews

conducted with Jean-Louis Ezine published under the title *Ailleurs*, Le Clézio singles out Mexico as a “milieu privilégié” and further describes this space as a “monde qui n’était pas fondé sur la raison [...] mais sur d’autres choses. Un monde animé par cette danse, cet élan vers la magie, le surnaturel; fondé sur une perception différente, une perception plus intuitive du monde” (44). Just as Proust and Camus recognized the limitations of rational thought as we explored in our previous chapter, so too Le Clézio become profoundly aware of its inherent weaknesses and of the necessity of going beyond its restrictions. Amerindian cultures with their holistic approach to life and their valorization of “magie” allowed Le Clézio to move beyond the framework of Western ontology. In other words, “primitive” civilizations taught him to be more open to “autres formes du savoir” or other ways of living and writing.

In another interview published in *Le Magazine Littéraire* and compiled by Gérard de Cortanze, the author describes the effect of this direct contact with Amerindian populations as follows: “J’ai cessé d’être purement cérébral et intellectuel. Ce grand changement, cette non-cérébralité ont par la suite nourri tous mes livres ” (*Errances et Mythologies* 27). This “non-cérébralité” clearly manifests itself in his later works, and in particular in the privileged moments we will soon investigate. When the interviewer asks him to name some of his literary influences, Le Clézio once again emphasizes: “La même histoire: comment passe-t-on de l’être cérébral à l’être physique. Kipling, Conrad, Stevenson ne parlent que cela” (*Errances et Mythologies* 107). And although he gives much more credit for his appreciation of this “nouvelle intelligence” to his encounter

with Mexico and its people than he does to other authors, alternative, “magical” ways of thinking appear to have always intrigued him, as evidenced by his literary tastes. In other words, Le Clézio seems to have been aware that other explanations exist outside of the rational realm even before he had the privilege of living with and learning from these Amerindian populations. Le Clézio does not totally reject rational thought systems. He simply does not believe that these schools of thought valorize the kind of balance he came to see as essential. Referring to one of the many lessons that he learned while in Mexico, the author muses:

Je crois que ces civilisations offraient toutes sortes de leçons qu'on devrait bien écouter: des leçons d'écologie, d'équilibre de l'homme avec la nature, d'équilibre de l'homme avec lui-même. Elles étaient fondées sur l'équilibre, sur la notion de l'équilibre. L'équilibre entre le magique et le réel, l'équilibre entre la vie et la mort, entre l'individu et la société, toute une série d'équilibres (*Ailleurs* 124).

In other words, it seems clear that Le Clézio recognizes the validity of “le réel,” but he also does not discount “le magique” or what some would classify as alternative possibilities of relating to the cosmos. In such a world, the rational and the magical do not exclude each other; they coexist and nourish one another.

Although Le Clézio often discusses in interviews the role that Mexico played in helping him to achieve this balance, we must not forget that he also spent a significant period of time in another more “primordial” civilization. From

1970-1974, he lived periodically with the Emberas of Panama and the Waunanas, an experience that also greatly modified him and his writing. In order to comment on the significance of this extended sojourn upon the author who was then a young man, we need only to examine a few of the texts that he wrote during this transforming time frame. Jennifer Waelti-Walters and other scholars classify these works as ‘The Indian Texts.’ (107). *Haï*, published in 1971, is the first of these writings that we wish to discuss. Although Waelti-Walters correctly categorizes this reflection as a “volume on art,” this is an oversimplification. Perhaps “A long meditative essay upon the value of Amerindian culture and life” would be a more appropriate description of this particular work.

From the very first sentence, the author’s strong identification with and appreciation of Amerindian societies is evident when he writes “Je ne sais pas trop comment cela est possible, mais c’est ainsi: je suis un Indien” (7). In other words, he is fully conscious of the “transmutation” that has taken place within him. Not only does he deeply respect this culture, he considers himself to be a part of this community; he has shed his strictly Western cloak and become “un Autre.” This strong sense of belonging could help to explain why Le Clézio mentions in his contemplations of Mexico that “mais je ne m’adaptais pas bien” in reference to when various obligations forced him to leave the solidarity of these tight-knit enclaves and to return to Western society. In other words, he appears to have embraced the beliefs, values, traditions, etc. of these peoples to the extent that his own culture became foreign to him.

However, although Le Clézio acknowledges that these experiences drastically transformed him, he also realizes that this metamorphosis is not and will never be complete. As the author muses :

Je ne suis peut-être pas un très bon indien. Je ne sais pas cultiver le maïs, ni tailler une pirogue. Le peyotl, le mescal, la chicha mastiquée n'ont pas beaucoup d'effet sur moi. Mais pour tout le reste, la façon de marcher, de parler, d'aimer ou d'avoir peur, je peux le dire ainsi: quand j'ai rencontré ces peuples indiens, moi qui ne croyais pas avoir spécialement de famille, c'est comme si tout à coup j'avais connu des milliers de pères, de frères et d'épouses. Mais comme toujours, lorsqu'un individu veut parler d'un peuple, lorsqu'il se mêle de deviner les passions et les desseins d'une communauté qui n'est pas la sienne, même s'il ne croit pas forcément à la science, il court de grands risques (7-8).

Le Clézio fully realizes the pitfalls of trying to explain and to understand another culture through the filter of his own. Regardless of how precise we consider our methods to be, the potential for error is significant. In addition, although the Embreras clearly accepted him as “one of their own,” he could not perform certain essential activities such as cultivating corn which are second nature to the whole community. Le Clézio has “became” an Indian to the greatest extent possible, but he will always be somewhat of an outsider despite the affection that he received during his stay and his deep respect for their way of life.

One of the most important lessons that Le Clézio acquired from his cultural “entraînement” with the Emberas was that certain matters defy logical explanation. Furthermore, coming from the outside permitted him to become conscious of certain problematic intellectual tendencies of his own culture. For instance, as Westerners, we tend to believe that all human knowledge can be appropriated or possessed by some type of rational means. In stark contrast, “L’Indien sait que le monde n’est pas explicable” (57). Whereas much of modern society expresses a deep desire to fully understand the world around them and their place in it, some social groups, such as the Emberas, simply live their lives and do not seem to need an elaborate compartmentalizing ideology to guide them. As the narrator states, “Les Indiens ne représentent pas la vie. Ils vivent” (42). Even more significantly, Amerindian societies believe that “Plus on veut l’expliquer, plus il nous échappe,” or the more we try to explain or quantify something in logical terms, the more its true essence escapes us (13).

In Panama, Le Clézio recognized the value of “apprendre à se taire” (40). Although one often repeats the old adage “Silence is golden,” most people in Western society will talk to anyone about anything, listen to any kind of music, watch a television program, etc. in order to avoid silent contemplation. Moreover, Westerners are inclined to conceptualize communication itself too much in terms of discourse or dialogue. Conversely, “par le silence, l’Indien sait d’autres langages” (40). In other words, by allowing the silence to speak, one becomes attuned to other “systèmes signifiants.” The narrator of *Haï* affirms his desire to probe these other “languages” when he states, “Silence qui est interprétation

possible de plusieurs langages, écoute de plusieurs voix. Je veux essayer de l'apprendre. Pour cela, il va falloir ôter des mots de moi, ôter" (39). It is important to note that although the narrator confirms that it is not always easy to allow silence to convey its message, these other means of communicating with and understanding the outside world are just as if not more valuable than spoken language.

During his stay with the Emberas, Le Clézio also recognized what he calls an "Idéal Zen" or an "absence de philosophie et de morale" in their spiritual and cultural practices (86). In other words, their forms of religious meditation and reflection do not seem to be as didactic and dogmatic as their Christian counterparts. Although the Indians do often meditate, their reflection is not "goal-oriented" or directed to instill specific moral foundations of "right" and "wrong," since no other aim exists besides that of contemplation itself. Likewise, "Le chant indien n'a pas d'autre but que d'être chanté "(86). Their hallowed chants or "songs" are considered to be magical although they are not designed to conjure up anything in particular. They are simple repetitions that are expressed by the entire community. According to Western criteria, these chants could not even be considered to be songs since they are not comprised of words but rather are made up of basic sounds and syllables. And the same holds true for their music itself, "La musique indienne n'accomplit aucune œuvre d'intelligence [...] il est une action commune" (61). Since their sacred beliefs do not impose answers to explain the enigmas of the world around us, the individual possesses a considerable amount of freedom in terms of interpreting the universe. In

reference to Amerindian attitudes and perspectives, the narrator informs the reader that “Sa pensée ne lui donne droit à aucune victoire définitive, à aucune certitude” (112). Whereas much of Western ideology seems to be geared towards ascertaining absolute truths, “definitive victories” do not seem to appeal to more “organic” civilizations such as the Embreras. According to this point of view, we can acquire only possible insight not absolute understanding of the world around us.

This is not to say, however, that the Embreras have no moral codes of conduct. Every society has certain fundamental rules that each member of the community is expected to follow. Although Le Clézio is quite vague in terms of what constitutes these guidelines in Amerindian civilizations, he emphasizes that the community is always more important than the individual. Amerindian art valorizes this holistic focus, as individual artists do not attempt to create “original” works. In fact, “L’indien refuse la création individuelle” (51). Their artistic creations are not an attempt to glorify the individual. Art “n’est qu’un outil, comme le chant, la musique des chiru, comme le langage ”(115). Reiterating the utility of this “tool”, the narrator asserts: “Peinture héréditaire, qui ne cherche pas à affirmer la supériorité d’un individu sur tout le reste de la tribu. Hommes, femmes, enfants, tous sont peintres, tous ‘artistes’ ”(116). Whereas Western art separates or distinguishes the artist from the rest of society, Amerindian artwork promotes social cohesion. Every member of the community, whether old or young, is an artist. Although Le Clézio does not specifically address the issue of what fundamental aspects ground Amerindian morality, his discussions about the

fine arts clearly indicate that the community, not the individual, is the basis of their ethical considerations. Therefore, any actions that are detrimental to the society as a whole might be deemed as “wrong” or “immoral.”

While living as an Indian, Le Clézio also experimented briefly with mind-altering substances which were used in sacred rituals. He documents his first experience in an intriguing thirty-four page account entitled “Le Génie Datura.” This was originally intended to comprise part of a larger project bearing the title of *Au Pays d’Iwa*. However, after apparently finishing the work, Le Clézio refused to allow the prestigious publishing house Gallimard to publish it. He changed his mind because he imagined that this work might reflect negatively on a culture that he greatly admired or even be considered as an act of “trahison” against those who taught him so much. Jennifer Waelti-Walters summarizes this incident as follows:

a book called *Au Pays d’Iwa* [...] was announced by Gallimard but withdrawn before publication by the author who felt that his text would be a travesty of experience he was trying to transmit—that of the life of the Embera Indians in Panama—a betrayal of the teaching that he received and also a blatant manifestation that either he had not understood or had refused whatever knowledge had been offered him. As neither of these states of mind were applicable to his case, Le Clezio would not release the manuscript (107).

Although Waelti-Walters outlines the major reasons for Le Clézio’s ultimate refusal to permit Gallimard to publish this particular work in its entirety, she

appears to have made a minor oversight when she states that “only one extract definitely from the text is available” in reference to “Le Génie Datura” (107). Most critics believe that “Le Jardin aux Serpents” which also appeared in *Les Cahiers du Chemin*, albeit in the next volume, was also destined to be a part of *Au Pays d’Iwa*. However, perhaps she was aware of this fact, and simply chose to not make reference to this other short tale because no one seems to be entirely sure that this was indeed the case. This plausibly could justify her usage of the word “definitely.” Regardless, for our purposes, we will focus exclusively on “Le Génie Datura.”

“Le Génie Datura” begins with a synopsis of the different names and uses of the plant “Iwa” or “Datura” around the world. For instance, the reader learns that “Iwa,” “Datura,” “Tatorah,” “Neura,” “Chosen Asagao,” “Ololiuhqui,” etc. are just a few of the many linguistic labels used to refer to this substance (95). The narrator also describes its many different purposes as well. For example, people in India use datura “pour soigner la rage,” whereas the Yokuts and Luisenos Indians utilize iwa “lors des rites de passage” (95). Perhaps, the most extraordinary practice involving this herb takes place “Chez certains peuples, [où] les femmes et les esclaves buvaient le jus de Datura, avant d’être enterrés vivants”(95). The ethnobiologist Wade Davis highlights the role of datura in such burial practices in Haitian popular folklore in his fascinating study entitled *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*. In this work Davis outlines the function of “Datura stramonium” or what the natives call the “concombre zombie” in these macabre ceremonies (98). In addition to intriguing

academic circles, the Harvard scholar Wade Davis also sold the rights to his earlier publication entitled *The Serpent and The Rainbow* involving datura and Haitian voodoo to the big screen. The much acclaimed horror film maker Wes Craven directed the production of the movie in 1988.

After briefly reviewing the significance of this substance and the variety of its uses in many different parts of the world, Le Clézio begins his account of his personal experiences with the drug. He first informs us that “En Amérique du Sud,” Datura is considered to be an “arbuste pour entrer en communication avec les esprits” (95). However, according to the spiritual beliefs of the Emberas, an experienced guide must initiate the one who wishes to partake of this extract and to enter into this other dimension. Colombie is the author’s companion/mentor who at first prepares the proper dosage derived from this magical plant and administers it to him. It is also very important to note the significance of the rapport that exists between Colombie and the writer. Le Clézio fully trusts Colombie, and truly considers him to be a friend. The fact that Colombie has accepted him as part of the community facilitates Iwa to do likewise and to permit the author to assist Colombie in the making of this beverage. After Iwa’s spirit deems Le Clézio worthy to participate fully in this procedure, he soon realizes that creating this powerful potion is a painstaking process. As the narrator asserts, “Depuis la deuxième épreuve, je suis devenu digne de préparer le breuvage. Iwa m’a accepté”(111). This “travail brutal, sans intermédiaire” proves to be quite labor intensive, as it causes the author’s hands to throb (111).

Nonetheless, he does not complain and considers it an honor that Iwa has allowed him to participate in this procedure.

Although Le Clézio experiences visions or flashes of an alternate reality during his first three “épreuves” or trials, these initial efforts ultimately disappoint him. In a clear expression of his frustration at the “failure” of one of these early attempts, he grumbles in disgust: “Iwa, n’a pas d’effet sur moi. Un verre de bière [...] Rien d’autre [...] Est-ce que je vais voir, cette fois?” (99-100). It is evident that the narrator was hoping for much more than what he experienced as a result of these initial efforts. He feels deceived and perhaps even betrayed by the potent substance, as he compares its mild effects to a simple beer. Before the fourth and final dose, the author reiterates his frustration and desperation:

Je suis au bord de la perte de conscience [...] Pas réussi à passer de l’autre côté [...] Je hais Iwa. Sale plante somnifère, qui donne comme ça des choses et puis les reprend [...] Je n’y crois plus. Comment ose-t-elle m’abandonner [...] Mais peut-être, précisément, que j’attendais trop d’elle, que je voulais trop savoir (113).

The fact that he feels as if he is “au bord” or “on the brink of” something grandiose further compounds his dissatisfaction. In other words, he has witnessed certain phenomena in his visions under the influence of this substance, but he still wants to “aller plus loin” to cross to the “other side” and encounter the unknown. Ultimately, he is afraid that his expectations are too great and nothing can satisfy them.

Although he adamantly voices his displeasure with Iwa's ultimate ineffectiveness after the first three episodes, the narrator does perceive certain things that are rather extraordinary. "Le pont des esprits" or the "bridge of the spirits" is one of the most revealing of these first drug-induced apparitions. Trying to remember all of the details of this bewildering incident which occurred while he was on the edge of this "autre versant de la réalité," the author posits "Le pont [...] Jamais rien n'a été aussi réel, et pourtant, en même temps que mes yeux le voient, je sais que les yeux des autres ne le voient pas" (103). Although no one else was able to visualize this astonishing bridge, these moments are so real to him that he refuses to believe that they are merely part of a hallucination. Speculating on the legitimacy of these images, the narrator unwaveringly insists, "Pas une hallucination, enfin, pas un trouble des terminaisons des nerfs optiques, pas une chimère" (104). Although the writer voluntarily admits that many skeptics would simply dismiss these events as illusions, he is not swayed by these arguments. Relating his prior experience to Colombie, the author's guide and friend concurs that "C'est vrai, il y a un pont qui franchit le fleuve un peu plus bas [...] Mais ce n'est pas un pont pour les hommes. C'est un pont pour les esprits"(104). The narrator also tells us that he and Colombie are the only individuals to have ever perceived this bridge. Unfortunately, Le Clézio at first provides the reader with only sketchy details about the nature of this structure and what lies beyond it. In other words, while the impact of this particular event is never in question, the reader like the individual experiencing this event himself is left wanting more.

The other early incident, albeit also an unsatisfying one, which challenges the protagonist's preconceived notions of reality and fiction takes place when the "maison d'araignée" or the spider's web inexplicably manifests itself. He paints the following portrait of this bizarre encounter: "L'air, devant moi, s'est métamorphosé en une gigantesque toile d'araignée [...] Je ne vois plus rien. Je ne vois plus qu'elle [...] elle est devenue la seule réalité, la seule image vraie" (107). This web is so large that everything else has disappeared. While this all-encompassing reality mesmerizes him, this unexpected happening also visibly destabilizes the writer. The following day, when he talks with Colombie about the experience, he realizes why the spider and its web troubled him so deeply. Colombie reveals that "L'araignée est un mauvais esprit" (108). The guide inquires if Le Clézio also noticed the spider's white dwarf masters who walk on their head, and he responds, "Je n'ai pas vu les maîtres, mais j'ai eu très peur" (108). Even though he did not experience this event in its totality as did Colombie, fear overcomes him because of the menacing nature of this wicked insect and its colossal creation.

After the two captivating but somewhat disenchanting episodes that Le Clézio submits himself to in the first three trials, he is now ready for his fourth and final attempt. But before he once again drinks from the juice of the sacred leaf, Colombie makes sure that Le Clézio is aware that if he does not cross over into the "other side" on this particular effort, then he must never try again. For, if Iwa or Datura does not deem one worthy by the fourth time, "she" will never allow this

individual to fully enter into her kingdom. The narrator signifies his comprehension of this simple fact when he asserts:

Mais, passé les quatre tentatives, elle n'accepte personne...Je sens que je suis tout près de la vérité, tout va se décider maintenant [...] Mais si j'échoue : expulsé alors, rejeté loin d'Iwa, renvoyé a mes ténèbres de petit homme raisonnable, et Colombie n'acceptera plus de me faire boire. Je n'aurai plus droit qu'à mon rôle d'acteur de ma vie, sans jamais passer de l'autre côté (117).

The stage is now set and the "acteur" is both energized and anxious because of what could or could not transpire during the next few moments. Will Iwa grant him access to her domain where secret truths will be revealed to him, or will she cast him aside forever?

Just after he starts to suffer from "le désespoir, la solitude, [et] la haine" because he thinks that Datura will reject him, Le Clézio enters into his first out of body experience (119). In his description of this transformative event, the writer claims that "Je ne suis plus chez Colombie. J'ai quitté mon corps [...] (je suis) de l'autre côté de la vie" (122). After crossing to this other domain, the narrator penetrates beyond the bridge and into the "village of the dead," or "village of the ghosts." Whereas many of the images from his previous attempts were blurred, this time they become much clearer and well defined. Commenting upon this newfound clarity, the author states that "Ce qui m'était apparu au cours de la deuxième épreuve maintenant se précise, éclaire son énigme, se libère, merveilleuse carte du monde des fantômes" (123). In this strange newly-

illuminated land, the inhabitants “n’ont pas de chair” (123). These fleshless specters seem to welcome him warmly by waving at him and greeting him. Nevertheless, his stay in this ghost town does not last long. Almost as soon as he arrives, Colombie is afraid that something dreadful will happen to his friend. Consequently, he emphatically cries out to Le Clézio: “Non, non, n’y allons pas!” (124). Colombie, having been the only other person to enter into this village, is plausibly trying to warn Le Clézio of the imminent danger that lies ahead. Colombie’s concern for his companion foreshadows Iwa’s bizarre, abrupt, and violent outburst. Regrettably and seemingly for no reason, after finally allowing him to reach this plateau and to inhabit the same space as these phantoms, Datura herself suddenly interrupts his visit to “Iwaland.” She begins to scream expletives such as “Va te faire foutre” which visibly frighten the narrator (125). After the incessant repetition of the word “anus,” the initiated one finally awakens from his reverie and his voyage to the other side. As the trance progressively loosens its grip, Colombie reassures his companion that “Il n’y a pas de serpent, ami” (128). After Colombie consoles him, the narrator fully wakes up as his last “épreuve” has now come to its dramatic conclusion. Although the end of the narrative is mysterious and poses yet further questions, the protagonist is content that he successfully crossed the other side. Moreover, it is evident that this incident has radically altered him and that he will forever be changed by what he has experienced “au pays d’Iwa.”

During this same time frame, Le Clézio also published another short narrative dedicated to the subject of hallucinatory substances entitled *Mydriase*.

Whereas “Le Génie Datura” was never fully released to the general public, the publishing house Fata Morgana made *Mydriase* commercially available in 1973. Despite being published in its entirety, critics have written relatively little about this work, mentioning it only briefly when discussing Le Clézio’s repertoire. The title “Mydriase” is also indicative of the kind of experience the text describes. “Mydriase” or “Mydriasis is a medical term to describe the dilation of the pupil of the eye, and can be caused artificially as one effect of taking certain drugs” (Waelti-Walters 113). Whereas the distorted perception described in “Le Génie Datura” seems to be more eclectic in nature, *Mydriase* focuses exclusively on vision and in particular that of dilated pupils.

The very first line of the account “Au commencement, les yeux ne voient pas” depicts the struggle of the enlarged pupils which are attempting to adjust to the effects of “le breuvage noir” (9). At first, total darkness overcomes them, and consequently the narrator is unable to see anything but shadow. Like a blind person, his eyes have lost their capacity to differentiate between all of the different forms and shapes that surround him. Or, as the narrator admits: “les yeux insensibles sont pareils aux yeux pâles des aveugles” (9). The way in which the author describes this period of adjustment makes it seem to be quite lengthy in nature. And the next few pages of this narrative underscore the fact that the “pouvoir des yeux a disparu” (12). Total darkness surrounds the writer; the potion has “drowned” his eyes’ normal abilities of discernment.

However, the ambivalent nature of the descriptions of this mixture makes it difficult for the reader to ascertain exactly what the protagonist is drinking.

Throughout the entire description, the narrator simply refers to the liquid as “le breuvage,” “le breuvage noir,” or “le breuvage amer.” This is in stark contrast to *Le Génie Datura* in which the storyteller discusses the Iwa leaf as well as how it is prepared. On the other hand, if one has read *Le Génie Datura* before turning to *Mydriase*, one is almost entirely convinced that *Mydriase* also deals with the powerful results of exposure to Iwa or Datura. Since Le Clézio often uses the same term “breuvage” to identify the drink in both works, we can plausibly surmise that these two works refer to the same juice. Effectively summarizing this point of view, Waelti-Walters speculates that “and since, in this work, Le Clézio refers to le breuvage (“the potion”)-the term he uses consistently in “The Spirit Datura” to describe the juice he drank-we may assume that he is describing the visions produced by Iwa” (113).

Regardless of whether or not it is indeed Datura that continues to cause the narrator’s eyes to not be able to differentiate properly, it is evident that the protagonist is under the influence of a strong mind-altering substance. Moreover, while mydriasis inflicts a certain amount of pain upon him, this physical suffering is also accompanied by a considerable amount of pleasure. In reference to this mingling of physical satisfaction and pain, the narrator feverishly exclaims:

Et pourtant, quelle ivresse que ce regard! Il sort des deux yeux froids, invisible rayon pâle qui fore l’obscur épaisseur, et son passage par les fentes des pupilles est une douleur mêlée d’un plaisir si grand, que même l’orgasme d’un géant durant trois jours et trois nuits ne serait rien du tout en comparaison (20-21).

The intoxicating “orgasmic” sensations that he experiences during these fleeting instants of mydriasis seem to outweigh any pain that he might feel, and the ecstasy he attains during these moments continues to be a recurring theme throughout the rest of the narrative.

As in *Le Génie Datura*, this powerful mode of perception allows the protagonist to transcend the limitations of what he thought comprised reality and to enter into another dimension that is just as, if not more, real to him. In other words, his fully-opened eyes allow him to embark on a voyage to “l’autre côté de la vie.” While on this at once anguished and exhilarating journey, “les yeux sont des moteurs, pour aller dans l’autre sens, vers le futur, vers les pays inconnus, vers les rêves ”(22). The dilation of his pupils functions as an “engine” that permits him to probe the depths of these unknown regions. He is no longer subject to the laws and contingencies of physical space, because he has entered into another dimension. As the author enthusiastically affirms, “On a quitté. On n’est plus sur cette terre” (22). These out of body moments in *Mydriase* are similar to the ones we described in *Le Génie Datura*. Nevertheless, Le Clézio calls more attention to the presence of ecstasy during these instants in *Mydriase* than he does in *Le Génie Datura*. Using the analogy of a (re)birth, he declares:

On est, au moment de rejoindre la vie, si loin du monde, tellement extrait de lui, que c’est comme si on était en train de jaillir du ventre secoué de spasmes, tête la première, vers le lit dégoulinant. Le crâne allongé, pétri par les bords du vagin, apparaît comme un

astre, rouge de sang, et jaune de placenta, et plongé dans le ciel froid (28-29).

The author has discovered this strange new “versant” or aspect of reality during his trip to the other side. It is also important to note once again that despite the orgasmic ecstasy he experiences from this voyage, this trip does induce suffering as well. The image of rebirth meshes well with the narrator’s earlier comments that mydriasis is both painful and pleasurable. Just as a mother draws much happiness from the birth of her child who enters a new world, childbirth itself is an arduous and painful process that literally tears open the body.

On this other side of reality, the “newborn” acquires a new type of awareness. Although he does not know how to express this “autre forme du savoir” in rational terms, he recognizes its significance when he declares, “On sait des choses. Ce ne sont pas les choses qu’on peut dire facilement” (36). Even if this “espèce d’intelligence immediate” is not easy to convey to others in a manner which is simple to comprehend, this does nothing to diminish its importance to the protagonist. Just as Le Clézio learned to allow silence to transmit its message while living with Amerindian societies, our novice voyager in *Mydriase* becomes mindful of this same necessity. In particular, he proclaims that “On n’a rien à dire [...] On voit, c’est tout [...] ce breuvage [...] par les pupilles ouvertes à l’extrême, se libèrent les vraies sources de l’énergie. Il fallait anéantir tous les mots, tous les sales mots” (36). By ridding himself of the polluting influence of these “dirty words,” this other reality is now accessible to the liberated narrator. As he so eloquently states, “Les pupilles ouvertes ont

laissé entrer une autre raison” (51). This “autre raison,” which was made possible by the potion and by allowing the silence to communicate, has greatly enriched his “understanding” of the outside world and of himself. At the end of the journey, it is an “Autre” who speaks to the reader.

In conclusion, the existential torment of many of Le Clézio’s early literary protagonists such as Adam Pollo and Roch is quite poignant. In addition, many of these characters have great difficulties communicating with those around them, and they express little if any interest in socializing with others at all. After examining the alienated existence of such individuals, it is understandable that one of the original labels applied to Le Clézio was that of an “existentialist.” Yet, if one begins his or her study of Le Clézio with his more poetic and lyrical works for which he has become famous over the last twenty-five years, the existential angst that is evident in these early literary efforts can be extremely shocking. In many of the later works which we will begin to investigate in the next chapter, this suffering has changed dimensions or registers, or in many instances all but disappeared. Replacing this solitary agony is an insatiable thirst for life or an unquenchable desire to live life and all it has to offer to its fullest at every moment. As we will soon uncover, privileged moments are part of this intense yearning. What was it that radically altered Le Clézio and his writing? As we have explored, this progressive literary evolution can be traced to his contacts with indigenous cultures and the lessons that he learned from these civilizations. As a direct result of being a part of these communities, Le Clézio became a more “balanced” person who was willing to embrace the idea that “le réel” and “le

magique” can indeed inhabit the same realm. As we will discover during the course of our study, privileged moments represent part of this “autre forme du savoir” first encountered during his years with the Emberas and the Waunanas.

CHAPTER III

Privileged Moments Related to Nature's Elements

Now that we have probed the role of privileged moments in earlier twentieth century works in chapter one and investigated Le Clézio's transformation in chapter two, we will begin our exploration of privileged moments in his works with instants of ecstasy and revelation that occur as a result of a close rapport with nature. Like Camus, Le Clézio emphasizes the significance of communing with nature. He believes that modern society with all its technological conveniences has "dulled" our senses, and we no longer have a direct rapport with nature (Fanchin 23). For this reason, the vast majority of his protagonists are either marginalized individuals who already live far away from modern society or people who have fled it. However, although his later characters often evade modernity to the greatest extent possible, they are not alienated as were earlier protagonists such as Adam Pollo. For Le Clézio, nature represents the possibility of stimulating and restoring our senses to their primordial vitality. As Gérard Fanchin states, "C'est-à-dire que pour Le Clézio aussi bien que pour les personnages, nos facultés sensorielles sont d'abord et avant tout des facultés vitales, que les habitudes du monde moderne ont engourdies, ankylosées" (22). Hence, his predilection for protagonists who live "directement en contact avec les éléments" (Onimus, 520). And, as Agnès Clavareau emphasizes, "Les âmes sont à nu, et il n'y a pas d'obstacles entre le cosmos et sa créature" (402). Just as in Camus's works, this notion of removing

barriers that separate us from the rest of the universe and “fusing” with the one is much more nuanced and less idealistic than many critics would have us believe, as we will soon discover.

We will begin our study of privileged moments related to nature with an analysis of three of the short texts that comprise *Mondo et D’Autres Histoires*. Published in 1978 by Gallimard, *Mondo* is a compilation of eight stories ranging from fifteen to sixty-seven pages exploring varied topics. This collection is crucial to our investigation, because it is perhaps in *Mondo* that we see the first concrete manifestation of the evolution that we outlined in the preceding chapter. All eight of these tales are lyrical in nature, and the adolescent protagonists in this collection all have an insatiable thirst for life that pulsates throughout the entire work. Moreover, all of the texts that we will probe in the first section of this chapter “Lullaby,” “La Montagne du Dieu Vivant,” and “Celui qui n’avait jamais vu la mer” have also been published in the Folio Junior collection for young people. I have chosen to explore these three short texts, because the theme of nature’s force is most prevalent in these particular tales. The author’s emphasis on this subject helps to distinguish these stories from the rest of the collection.

“Lullaby” is the story of a young female adolescent who skips school one day and decides to stroll through nature instead of attending class. Given what she experiences on this first day, “Lullaby décida qu’elle n’irait plus à l’école” (81). When she makes this choice, her adventure begins in earnest. In particular, the splendor and the force of both the sun and the sea mesmerize Lullaby during her solitary walks. The sun shines down upon her inducing a

powerful state of intoxication: “Lullaby sentit son cœur battre plus fort. Il s’agitait et faisait du bruit dans sa poitrine. Pourquoi était-il dans cet état-la ? Peut-être que c’était toute la lumière du ciel qui l’enivrait” (84-85). Throughout the entire tale, this euphoria takes hold of Lullaby: “La lumière continuait à entrer, jusqu’au fond des organes, jusqu’à l’intérieur des os” (99). The intoxicating effects of this elemental light seem to open the gates to another dimension that Lullaby had never encountered before. In reference to this newly-discovered domain, the narrator affirms that “La lumière envoyait ses rayons rectilignes, et on était dans un autre monde, aux bords du prisme” (94-95). Although Lullaby does not understand the power of the sun or how it produces these mysterious effects upon her, she is not afraid to embark on this voyage to an “autre monde.” She does not attempt to explain these enigmatic sensations in rational terms. Lullaby simply embraces them, allowing the ecstasy of the moment to engulf her entire being, while she lives each of these precious privileged moments to their fullest.

Not only does the “ivresse” of the sun envelope the protagonist and allow her to enter into this other dimension, it also appears to decrease the physical separation that exists between Lullaby and her absent father. At the beginning of the narrative, the reader learns that her father is in Iran, and there is no indication that he will be returning in the near future. Moreover, although Lullaby’s mother is her primary guardian, she is emotionally absent. After an unspecified accident, her mother takes medication that causes her to sleep all day. With a father living abroad and a dormant mother, Lullaby receives little if any parental guidance or affection. The protagonist is what modern-day anthropologists would call a “latch

key kid,” who is entirely left to her own devices because of parental neglect.

However, during one of these fleeting moments of ecstasy while the sun shines down upon her, Lullaby hears her father’s voice calling to her from across the ocean:

Lullaby entendit une voix qui venait dans le vent, qui parlait près de ses oreilles. Ce n’était plus la voix de M. Filippi maintenant, mais une voix très ancienne, qui avait traversé le ciel et la mer. La voix douce et un peu grave résonnait autour d’elle, dans la lumière chaude, et répétait son nom d’autrefois, le nom que son père lui avait donné un jour, avant qu’elle s’endorme. ‘Ariel...Ariel...’ (95).

In addition to uttering the name that he used to call his daughter when she was a small child, Lullaby’s father serenades her with a song from the past. This English melody begins with “where the bee sucks, there suck I” (95). After her father communicates with her through the elements and sings this little air to her, Lullaby starts to remember all of the other songs that he composed and sang for her. During this encounter, Lullaby’s father, although many miles away in a distant land, reaches out to her and gives her some much needed affection.

Just as she does not flee from the piercing light, Lullaby does not resist the power of the ocean either. She gives in to its primordial force, and allows herself to be transported by it as the text indicates: Lullaby “se laissa gagner encore une fois par l’ivresse étrange de la mer et du ciel vide” (111). In addition to the intoxication that both the sun and the ocean trigger, the contingencies of time and space no longer appear to be fixed. As we outlined in our introduction,

this phenomenon is also an important indicator of a privileged moment. For instance, the narrator declares, “La mer est comme cela: elle efface ces choses de la terre parce qu’elle est ce qu’il y a de plus important au monde” (86). This virtual effacement of the time/space continuum is almost always evident during these instants of joy. In addition, knowing that they have briefly left the world of contingencies seems to deepen the ecstasy that the protagonists experience during these moments.

During her walks, while Lullaby is internalizing the lessons that the elements teach her on this particular day, a larger epiphany concerning the inadequate nature of the Western educational system strikes her. Through her adventures, she realizes that other forms of knowledge exist outside of the classroom. However, although these other means of knowing are not easy to categorize, she recognizes that they are equally as important if not more significant than the knowledge that she has acquired in school. Summarizing Lullaby’s discoveries, the narrator asserts that “C’étaient des lois étranges qui ne ressemblaient pas du tout à celles qui sont écrites dans les livres et qu’on apprenait par cœur à l’école [...] Il y avait la loi de l’horizon [...] Il y avait la loi de la mer, sans commencement ni fin, où se brisaient les rayons de la lumière” (100). Her schooling does not provide her with a means of explaining these “strange new laws” that she experiences. Therefore, she fails to see the practical application of what she has studied thus far in the classroom.

In his study of “Lullaby,” Bruno Thibault describes the protagonist’s sentiments in the following manner : “Lullaby a l’impression que les règles, les

lois, les axiomes, les théories et les théorèmes qu'elle étudie en classe définissent un monde rationnel, figé, et rigoureux qui ne la concernent qu'indirectement "(2). After her transforming experiences, Lullaby starts to valorize more "direct" forms of knowledge obtained from her senses. For this reason, she becomes even more disenchanted with her school and with the entire educational system in general, and does not wish to return. In a letter to her father, Lullaby recounts her experiences in nature and informs him of her decision. As the narrator asserts, "Je suis toute seule ici, mais je m'amuse bien. Je ne vais plus du tout au lycée maintenant, c'est décidé, terminé. Je n'irai plus jamais, même si on doit me mettre en prison. D'ailleurs ce ne serait pas pire" (91-92). For the protagonist, not much difference exists between an academic "prison" and a correctional facility for criminals. She feels just as confined behind school walls as inmates do behind bars.

In addition to the euphoria that Lullaby experiences and the epiphanies that she receives from these moments of intoxication, the elements also appear to be a protective force. For instance, Lullaby's experiences at an abandoned house she refers to as "la maison grecque" certainly seem to validate this notion. Before we probe the significance of one particular incident which transpires here, we must briefly discuss the protagonist's fascination with this deserted site. When she beholds this vacated temple-like building for the first time, Lullaby is immediately mesmerized: "Lullay s'arrêta, émerveillée. Jamais elle n'avait vu une aussi jolie maison. Elle était construite au milieu des rochers et des plantes grasses, face à la mer, toute carrée et simple avec une véranda soutenue par six

colonnes, et elle ressemblait à un temple en miniature”(93). Although this house has been neglected for years and its design is not extremely elaborate, it clearly captivates and intrigues the protagonist. However, one day while Lullaby is communing with the elements at the “maison grecque,” a would-be predator suddenly ambushes her. The narrator describes this dramatic event as follows:

L’homme surgit devant elle, sans qu’elle puisse comprendre d’où il sortait. Ses mains étaient griffées par les ronces et il soufflait un peu. Il restait immobile devant elle, ses yeux verts durcis comme de petits morceaux de verre [...] Il était si près de Lullaby qu’elle sentait son odeur, une odeur fade et aigre de sueur qui avait imprégné ses habits et ses cheveux (108).

This man’s menacing presence terrifies Lullaby, and she instinctively searches for a means of escape. However, she is trapped by her assailant, and she must jump from the roof. After her fall, it seems as if the elements themselves help her to regain her strength. As the narrator affirms:

Le soleil frappait fort sur la mer, et grâce au vent froid, Lullaby sentit que ses forces revenaient [...] Puis soudain, elle comprit que rien ne pourrait lui arriver, jamais. C’était le vent, la mer, le soleil [...] Lullaby s’arrêta sur un rocher en forme d’étrave, au-dessus de la mer, et elle renversa sa tête en arrière pour mieux sentir la chaleur de la lumière sur son front et sur ses paupières. C’était son père qui lui avait appris à faire cela, pour retrouver ses forces, il appelait cela ‘boire le soleil’ (109).

Lullaby gives credit not only to the sun for helping her to regain her strength and composure after her unfortunate encounter, but also to the wind and the sea. Moreover, a little secret that her father taught her about nature enables the protagonist to act in her time of need. Although a great physical distance separates Lullaby and her father, he is present in times of distress. In fact, one might say that the protagonist's absent father initiates her into the marvels of the natural world.

However, despite her deep appreciation of nature and her growing disinterest in school, the protagonist soon realizes that "Ça ne pouvait pas durer toujours. Lullaby le savait bien. D'abord il y avait tous ces gens, à l'école, et dans la rue. Ils racontaient des choses, ils parlaient trop [...] la directrice et tout le monde savait bien qu'elle n'était pas malade" (110). Knowing that her parents will soon be contacted by school authorities if she continues to miss school since she has now been absent for a period of "plusieurs jours," Lullaby has no choice but to return (97). When she arrives, her instructor immediately sends her to the principal. "La directrice" informs her that she received the false letter that Lullaby composed a few days earlier attempting to justify her absence. Also, the principal notifies her that she was immediately suspicious of its authenticity and interrogates her, "Où étiez-vous? Vous avez sûrement des choses [...] intéressantes à raconter. Alors, je vous écoute, mademoiselle "(115). After the director threatens to notify her parents, Lullaby responds to her question and describes the grandeur of all that she experienced during her outings. After listening to Lullaby's explanation in which she struggles to find the proper words

to convey all that transpired during the last few days, the principal becomes noticeably upset. She accuses Lullaby of skipping school to spend time with a “boyfriend” to which Lullaby adamantly retorts “Je ne connais pas de garçon, c’est faux, c’est faux! [...] J’étais seule, je vous l’ai dit, seule” (117-118).

Although the principal still does not believe her, she decides to drop the matter for the time being after Lullaby threatens never to return to school again if she contacts her parents. She allows Lullaby to return to her instructor M. Filippi’s class, and the tale ends shortly. M. Filippi greets her warmly, inquires about her experiences, and informs her that the ocean also fascinates him. In particular, in the final line of the narrative, M. Filippi explains to Lullaby: “Et vous me demanderez ce que vous voudrez, tout à l’heure, après le cours. J’aime beaucoup la mer, moi aussi ” (120). Although he is part of the rigid French educational system, M. Filippi clearly relates to Lullaby’s experiences and understands her concerns. For this reason, he makes himself available to the protagonist outside of class. Although M. Filippi may not be able to examine the grandeur of nature in a classroom setting for fear of being reprimanded or ridiculed by his colleagues, he overtly reveals his passion for the natural world to the protagonist. It appears that M. Filippi and Lullaby will indeed attempt to probe the depths of nature in after-school sessions, as the young protagonist promises to forgo any future adventures and to return to school once again on a regular basis. Although her passion for nature is immense, necessity dictates that she return to civilization. Knowing that she has no choice in the matter, Lullaby eventually decides to cooperate and to follow society’s rules.

As the title indicates, the short story “La Montagne du Dieu Vivant” has many spiritual and religious connotations. Although the site where the tale takes place is a real peak known as Mount Reydarbarmur, which is located in Iceland, this site is anything but ordinary as the solitary narrator Jon will soon discover. It is in fact a magical space filled with wonder. Jon is an enigmatic character who simply appears at the base of the peak in the beginning of the tale. The reader knows little or nothing about him, except that he lives on a farm with his parents and that he has traveled to the site by bicycle. Like many of Le Clézio’s characters, he emerges without any explanation of his origin and begins his long ascent to the summit. When he reaches the highest point, he meets “l’enfant au visage clair” who is the only other character in this short story (136). An intense, bright light surrounds this mysterious child, who captivates the protagonist. However, Jon quickly realizes that this person is no mere child. Before Jon can extend any sort of greeting, the tiny deity calls him by name. In a state of shock, Jon replies: “Comment sais-tu mon nom?” (136). The unnamed being laughs at Jon, and then reveals even greater marvels than inexplicably knowing his name. For instance, he allows Jon to partake of “l’eau des nuages” (142). This water proves to be unlike any that Jon has ever tasted on earth. Although some scholars have speculated that this small entity is a representation of the baby-jaguar of the Olmecs which also had human features, the text provides us with no clear indication as to the precise identity of this being, not even a name or a title.¹

¹ For a discussion of the possible identity of this “god,” See Teresa Di scanno. *La Vision du*

Although Jon has yet to meet “l’enfant au visage clair,” a mysterious type of intoxication strikes him even before he makes his way to the top of the summit, “Jon avançait avec ivresse vers le haut de la montagne” (130). He is not aware of what exactly awaits him when he reaches his destination, but Jon seems to sense that something out of the ordinary will happen. In addition, this intoxicating force compels him to “aller jusqu’au bout.” When he finally reaches the pinnacle and meets the child, his earlier feelings of intoxication intensify immensely. This child divinity initiates Jon into the splendor and the dynamism of nature and specifically into the force of its elements. However, not only does this small divine being oblige him to take note of the stark beauty of his natural surroundings, but he also allows Jon to literally touch and taste these elements in a way that was never possible before. For instance, Jon can caress the clouds and drink the precious water that emanates from them. And this direct contact with nature’s elements in their “nudité” heightens his ecstasy. While he is not figuratively but literally lying on top of the clouds with his special companion, “une ivresse étrange de voir l’endroit même où il se trouvait” overpowers him (134). Jon allows these feeling of euphoria to overwhelm him, as he embraces the transformation that is taking place within him.

Although all of the elements are responsible for this transmutation, it is the presence of an intense light that dominates this short narrative and which appears to touch the protagonist the most deeply. The narrator informs the

Monde de Le Clézio (p. 82-85) and for an analysis of the significance of the jaguar in the Olmec religion see Karl W. Luckert. *Olmec Religion: A Key to Middle America and Beyond* (p. 13-25).

reader that “C’était peut-être la lumière qui lui avait donné envie d’aller jusqu’à Reydarbarmur” (124). Although the narrator does not appear to be certain that these mysterious rays led Jon to this spot, it is evident that this light is unlike any other that the protagonist has ever seen before: “C’était une lumière étrange [...] C’était une lumière très lente [...] comme si elle devait vivre toujours. Jon sentit qu’elle entrait en lui par toute la peau de son corps et de son visage ” (126). As the sea permeates Lullaby’s entire being, so also does this light enchant and penetrate Jon. Reiterating this notion, the narrator asserts that this light “grandissait aussi dans son corps, elle vibrait dans son sang” (130). In addition to being slow, the light from Mount Reydarbarmur possesses other characteristics that one would not typically attribute to a light source. Jon divulges that “C’était une lumière sans chaleur, venue du plus loin de l’espace, la lumière de tous les soleils et de tous les astres invisibles” (131). In addition to luminescence, sunlight always emits heat. Since this mysterious light does not, the reader wonders if it is even terrestrial in origin. In other words, does it take its origin from another realm of existence or from an unknown region of this physical plane? However, although Jon recognizes the foreign nature of this light, he is not afraid. This heatless illumination captivates him and appears to have entirely positive connotations.

In addition to the strong feelings of euphoria that this light elicits and the other unfathomable properties that it displays, it also appears to negate the laws of time and space for as indicated earlier, Jon floats freely amongst the clouds. The narrator describes one of these experiences as follows: “Maintenant il flottait,

couché sur le dos gris des nuages, et la lumière le traversait de part en part” (134). Jon lets himself be carried by the forces of Mount Reydarbarmur. He does not resist the dynamic energy that gently tosses him to and fro, from one cloud to the next. Furthermore, he does not feel threatened by this impetus that softly causes him to glide over the clouds, and he falls into a peaceful slumber.

Before he falls asleep, however, Jon asks the child why he lives here on top of this secluded mountain and if this isolation frightens him. The child responds:

Pourquoi aurais-je peur? Est-ce que tu as peur, dans ta maison? [...] Il y a longtemps que je vis ici. Je connais chaque pierre de cette montagne mieux que tu ne connais ta chambre Sais-tu pourquoi je vis ici ? [...] C’est une longue histoire [...] Il y a longtemps, très longtemps, beaucoup d’hommes sont arrivés, ils ont installé leurs maisons sur les rivages, dans les vallées, et les maisons sont devenues des villages, et les villages sont devenus des villes. Même les oiseaux ont fui. Même les poissons avaient peur. Alors moi aussi j’ai quitté les rivages, les vallées, et je suis venu sur cette montagne. Maintenant toi aussi tu es venu sur cette montagne, et les autres viendront après toi (138).

Although this small deity appears to be a child, he claims that he has resided on this peak for a long time. He alleges that he was present when the first settlers arrived in this area “il y a longtemps, très longtemps.” After these early inhabitants encroached upon the animal population and caused many organisms

to flee, this child too sought refuge on Mount Reydarbarmur. However, although he is not afraid of the protagonist or of being alone, he implores Jon to stay with him until the morning: “Ne pars pas, je t’en prie [...] Ne pars pas. La nuit va être claire, tu peux rester ici jusqu’à demain matin” (141). It is evident that he appreciates Jon’s company, and does not want him to leave just yet. The protagonist and the “enfant au visage clair” share several amicable instants together on this summit. In addition to the privileged moments that we have probed, they often laugh together throughout the night, and they compose music. Jon plays the flute and the tiny deity plays the lamellaphone or as it is commonly referred to the “Jew’s harp” (guimbarde). Although the child lives in seclusion by choice, he clearly expresses a need for companionship. Since the small deity does not perceive Jon to be a threat, he reaches out to him in a meaningful, intimate way.

The following morning, when Jon awakens from his reverie, his companion has disappeared and he is alone on the mountaintop. He frantically searches for his friend, but to no avail. The child divinity has disappeared without a trace. After his encounter with this extraordinary child ends, Jon feels an immense, inner void: “Quand il comprit qu’il ne retrouverait pas son ami, Jon ressentit une telle solitude qu’il eut mal au centre de son corps, à la manière d’un point de côté” (145). Clearly, the anguish that Jon experiences after the small deity abandons him during his sleep is not merely mental but also corporeal in nature. He realizes that the door to this privileged realm is now closed, and that he must return to everyday existence. After he descends from the mountain and

reenters what the narrator refers to as “le territoire des hommes,” emptiness once again engulfs him: “il ne sentait que le vide, la solitude sans limites” (146). Although the tale ends with Jon’s return to the ordinary, physical plane of existence, several indications earlier in the text attest to the fact that he will never be the same after his hike to Mount Reydarbarmur. For instance, the narrator compares the protagonist’s out of body-like experience when he is suspended over the clouds to a rebirth and refers this fateful day as a “jour de la naissance” (135). Regardless of whether our “reborn” protagonist will ever enter into this domain again, his life and his perception of reality have both been forever altered because of his direct contact with nature and with his special guide.

Whereas the reader knows almost nothing about Jon, the narrator presents us with much more information concerning Daniel Sindbad, the protagonist from “Celui Qui n’avait jamais vu la mer.” Similar to Lullaby and Jon, Daniel too is a solitary individual who will embark on a transforming journey through elemental contact with nature. The first few pages of this short story provide us with a profile of Daniel, an eccentric adolescent of few words from an impoverished family. As the narrator explains, “Mais c’était un garçon qui ne parlait pas beaucoup. Il ne se mêlait pas aux conversations des autres, sauf quand il était question de la mer, ou de voyages ”(167). These are the only subjects that can draw Daniel out of his shell. In general, he seems to have little if any interest in material things. As the narrator indicates, “Mais lui, Daniel, c’était comme s’il était d’une autre race. Les choses de la terre l’ennuyaient, les magasins, les voitures, la musique, les films et naturellement les cours du Lycée”

(167). Given his all-consuming passion for the distant sea, Daniel decides to leave his former school, his family, his classmates, etc. He wishes to see the sea that so captivates and drives him for the very first time. One night “Il n’avait rien dit à personne,” and he leaves in secret to begin his march towards the sea (168). After his disappearance, inspectors interrogate all of the children at the boarding school, but his classmates, who plausibly surmise that Daniel left for the sea, do not cooperate with the authorities. In fact, they intentionally try to mislead them (170). The notion that Daniel is free and out in the world living his dream fascinates and inspires his former schoolmates. His comrades do not want the detectives to capture the protagonist, because speculating on his whereabouts fuels their imaginations: “cela nous a fait rêver, cela a commencé au fond de nous-mêmes un rêve secret et envoûtant qui n’est pas encore terminé” (170). If the authorities catch Daniel, then his adventures will end and so will their own. With no leads to follow, the detectives soon close their missing-persons case. Furthermore, since Daniel’s parents are financially destitute and do not have the means to launch an investigation of their own, no one will come to interrupt his initiation.

Daniel’s journey proves to be quite difficult for he faces cold, hunger, and thirst amongst other challenges, but he continues his path. As the narrator asserts, “Maintenant, il était libre, et il avait froid. Ses jambes lui faisaient mal, après toutes ces heures passées dans le wagon. Il faisait nuit, il pleuvait. Daniel marchait le plus vite qu’il pouvait pour s’éloigner de la ville. Il ne savait pas où il allait [...] Il n’y avait personne ici [...] Mais la mer n’était pas loin” (171). Despite

these obstacles, Daniel continues his solitary march towards the ocean. Neither rain nor fatigue can put a damper on his newly-discovered liberty. At the end of his fugue, he finds shelter in a small grotto or cave. Although this dwelling is very modest in nature, the protagonist vows to forever remain close to the ocean. As the narrator affirms:

A l'autre bout de la baie il y avait un cap noir, creusé de grottes. C'est là que Daniel vécut, les premiers jours, quand il est arrivé devant la mer. Sa grotte, c'était une petite anfractuosité dans les rochers noirs, tapissée de galets et de sable gris. C'est là que Daniel vécut, pendant tous ces jours, pour ainsi dire sans jamais quitter la mer des yeux (177).

Despite the difficulties that he encounters, Daniel expresses no reservations whatsoever about his decision to leave society. Although the ocean only existed in his imagination before he fled the boarding school, the "real" ocean at least equals if not surpasses his high expectations. From the very onset of his arrival, Daniel displays a strong desire to never be separated from his true passion.

When Daniel arrives at his destination, feelings of liberation and intoxication simultaneously engulf him. As the narrator affirms, "il y avait une sorte de joie en lui, comme si la mer, le vent et le soleil avaient dissous le sel et l'avaient libéré" (185). However, it is important to note that it is not just the sea which causes this enigmatic joy. As the text indicates, all of the elements contribute to these powerful instants. Similar to Jon, the protagonist of "La Montagne du Dieu Vivant," Daniel too perceives a different sort of light that he

has never seen before: “La lumière était partout à la fois [...] La lumière l’avait rendu libre et fou [...] La lumière n’était pas douce et tranquille, comme celle des plages et des dunes” (182). Daniel’s initial journey to the ocean has taught him that many different types of light exist. It exposes him to a luminescence which liberates and intoxicates him, while also simultaneously driving him crazy. However, this light does not render him “fou” in the sense of being deranged; it makes him “crazy” with passion. As with “La Montagne du Dieu Vivant,” it projects him into a privileged realm: “Il sentit tout a coup l’ivresse de ceux qui sont entrés sur une terre vierge” (181). Daniel feels like a euphoric pioneer who has left civilization in order to blaze a path into the unknown. New sights, sounds, odors, etc. accost Daniel from all sides. For instance, he smells the very strong and distinct odor of the sea, which can easily be recognized even from a considerable distance, for the first time. As the narrator emphasizes, “l’odeur puissante montait des mares et des vallées noires, l’odeur que les hommes ne connaissent pas et qui les enivre” (178). Although the fact that Daniel had never been near the ocean before could explain why this odor seems so strange to him, the narrator highlights the fact that the intoxicating fragrances that surround the sea are not ones with which humanity is familiar. Just as the light in this place is of a different nature, so also all of the elements in and around this sea appear to be endowed with a profound and mystifying force. Daniel appears to have discovered an “autre mer” to which he often made reference in the boarding school (168). This “other ocean” is a privileged space filled with wonder and mystery.

It is important to note, however, that whereas the obligations and realities of modern society compel Jon and especially Lullaby to return to society, Daniel leaves civilization never to return. Even though he suffers from the cold and has little protection from the elements while he resides in his grotto near the sea, the protagonist has never been more at peace. As the narrator affirms, “Il s’allongea sur les galets, à l’entrée de la grotte, la tête tournée vers la mer. Il grelottait de froid et de fatigue, mais il n’avait jamais connu un tel bonheur. Il s’endormit comme cela, dans la paix étalée, et la lumière du soleil baissa lentement comme une flamme qui s’éteint ”(186). At the end of the narrative, it is evident that Daniel has embraced a different kind of life. He has appropriated his solitude, and his rupture with society seems to be definitive. Everyone, including his former classmates, can only speculate as to his whereabouts. Although he has disappeared without a trace, his memory continues to live on in the boarding school that he never considered to be his home. The narrator informs us that the students who remained here often liked to think of the aptly named adventurous Daniel Sindbad: “Mais nous, nous ne l’avions pas oublié. Personne ne l’avait oublié, dans le dortoir, dans les classes, dans la cour [...] nous pensions toujours très fort à lui, comme s’il était réellement un peu Sindbad et qu’il continuait à parcourir le monde ”(187-188). His eagerness to experience the unknown captured everyone’s attention as well as their respect and admiration.

In these three short tales from *Mondo*, a disinterested student named Lullaby misses class and embarks on a solitary outing into nature. Before she eventually returns to the classroom, she experiences the ecstasy of the

elements. In particular, sunlight and the ocean facilitate a type of learning that she has never experienced in an academic setting. Moreover, nature allows this neglected child to communicate with her absent father, despite the immense physical distance that separates them. In “La Montagne du Dieu Vivant,” Jon climbs to the top of Mount Reydarbarmur and meets an enigmatic “child.” Similar feelings of intoxication engulf this protagonist before and upon his arrival at the summit. Although the mysterious deity who lives on this peak alone came here to escape society, he compels Jon to stay with him until the morning. The young adolescent accepts the mysterious child’s invitation, and they laugh, sing, and play music together. In “Celui qui n’avait jamais vu la mer,” a mediocre student named Daniel dreams of fleeing boarding school and living by the ocean. This adolescent has never seen the ocean, but it captivates him and fuels his reverie. Without warning, he decides to run away from school, and to live out his fantasy. After a long journey, he arrives at his destination, only to discover that the grandeur of the ocean even surpasses his high expectations. Whereas Lullaby and Jon return to society, Daniel clearly expresses a strong desire to never leave the sea.

Now that we have investigated privileged moments related to nature in three of Le Clézio’s short texts, we will direct our attention to two of his larger works of fiction. I have chosen to analyze *Désert* and *Le Chercheur d’Or*, because the elements play an indispensable role in both of these novels as we will soon discover. We will begin with *Désert*, published by Gallimard in 1980. *Désert* takes place in Morocco along the Northern coastline in the harsh but

stunningly beautiful Sahara desert. Although it is easy to forget because of the charismatic nature of the main protagonist Lalla, two parallel stories compose the novel as well as two different time frames. In addition to the adventures of Lalla which we will examine in detail throughout this section, *Désert* is also a story about the modern-day struggles of the Tuaregs or as they are better known “les Guerriers Bleus” (Price 9). In his book entitled *The Western Sahara*, David Lynn Price discusses the diversity of the many different ethnic groups that inhabit this region and emphasizes in particular that the Tuareg civilizations are essentially nomadic “whose migratory limits extend from the Atlantic coast to Mali, Niger, Chad, and Southern Libya.” (9). Although they form an important part of society in several different modern-day countries, their origin is debatable. Summarizing several theories concerning the possible origins of this nomadic group of people, Lloyd Cabot Briggs speculates:

And yet the origins of Tuareg culture remain a mystery. Although the Tuareg speak Berber dialects, and although their socio-political organization seems to be fundamentally the same as that of the Berber peoples of the north, their system of descent is quite unlike anything found among either the northern Berbers or the Arab tribes of the Sahara. On the contrary, it seems to be a kind which characterizes a number of West African Negro tribes, notably the Mano and Ashanti, as well as several other Negro peoples who live still farther south. There are tantalizing hints too that the Tuareg may have been in touch fairly regularly with eastern Roman empire

as early as fourteen hundred years ago [...] In short there is no lack of vague and mysterious hints as to the possible origins and evolution of Tuareg culture (166).

Although many fascinating clues exist as to the possible origins of Tuareg society, no definitive evidence has yet to be found. For a researcher who wishes to study this culture, there is much more work to be done.

Although these nomads remain very much of a mystery even today, the narrative *Désert* is grounded in the historical events that unfolded near the end of the great religious and political leader Ma el Aïnine's life. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, el Aïnine was well known in the entire North African region for his religious fervor, his scholarly knowledge, and his political ambitions. As John Mercer outlines in his study of the Western Sahara, "Whilst still young he became known throughout North Africa and, by the time of his death in 1910, was widely acclaimed for his religious zeal, with miracles such as rain-bringing; for his healing powers; for his erudition in theology, law, astronomy, astrology and literature, on which he wrote over 300 works" (502). Although the Western invaders often labeled el Aïnine a "barbarian" and a dangerous fanatic, he apparently was extremely well versed in several academic fields. Describing the discrepancy of the picture painted by the French during their intrusion and the historical facts about this all-encompassing figure, J.M.G. Le Clézio and his wife Jemia affirm in their book entitled *Gens des Nuages*: "Ma el Aïnine, souvent présenté par les officiers de l'armée française comme un fanatique criminel, fut en réalité l'un des hommes les plus cultivés de son temps, lettré, astronome et

philosophe” (47). To the French, Ma el Aïnine represented a menacing zealot who had to be eradicated by all means possible. But, to his own people, the “Blue Sultan” was a highly educated and pious individual amongst other things.

Désert focuses on el Aïnine’s attempt at creating a unified line of defense against the foreign invaders. He forged political alliances with other tribal leaders from the region. Since many of the peoples in this area had been hostile to each other for centuries, this was no minor accomplishment. As Mercer states, “The desert tribes grouped themselves under Ma el Aïnin, this unity following centuries of feuding” (502). After he created a formidable coalition, el Aïnine initiated a sort of “Jihad” to expel the intruders and founded the holy city of Smara. Mercer summarizes the beginning of this political struggle and the birth of this new religious center as follows: “About 1895 Ma el Aïnine proclaimed a holy war against the Europeans and built his own fortress-monastery at a strategic point up the Saguiet-el-Hamra; this was Smara, named after the rushes which had indicated the presence of water” (502). Despite el Aïnine’s intelligence and resourcefulness, his coalition could not keep the aggressors away indefinitely. The battle of Tadla marked a great defeat for these tribal warriors. As Mercer asserts, “In 1910, the French, consolidating their control of Morocco, defeated a combined force of 6,000 makhzen and nomad troops at Tadla” (503). El Aïnine’s untimely death shortly after this monumental setback signaled the collapse of his visionary effort. El Aïnine’s leadership could not be replaced, and the French army would ultimately decimate these indigenous, nomadic peoples and their way of life.

The text begins in the winter of 1909-1910 before the ultimate failure of El Aïnine's dream. The desert warriors are still stubbornly resisting the advances of the French army, but they suffer immensely from this bloodshed as well as from the difficulties of living in an asperous terrain. As we have previously mentioned, *Désert* juxtaposes two different but intertwined tales. In addition to the historically based saga of the *Hommes Bleus*, *Désert* is also the story of Lalla, a young descendant of this group who lives in a bidonville along the coast with her aunt. Lalla's adventures will all take place in the modern world several decades after the aforementioned conflict. But, it is important to note that her people's land still continues to be contested, although the particular hostilities to which we were referring have long since ended. Moreover, survival is still a constant preoccupation in this harsh landscape. However, despite the difficulties that her society still encounters on a regular basis, this does nothing to negate the fact that for Lalla the Sahara is still a privileged space which inspires intense moments of ecstasy. Yet, Lalla, like Le Clézio himself, does not ignore the dualistic aspect of nature, or the fact that it both sustains and kills. For instance, although the ocean fascinates Lalla and she loves to be in its proximity like so many of Le Clézio's protagonists, she is always mindful of its inherent danger. Discussing one of these hazards, the narrator elucidates: "Lalla aime être près de la mer [...] Mais elle ne s'aventure pas loin parce que la mer attrape de temps en temps des enfants, comme cela [...] et puis elle les rend deux jours plus tard, sur le sable dur de la plage, le ventre et le visage tout gonflés d'eau, le nez, les lèvres, le bout des doigts et le sexe mangés par les crabes " (82). Although Lalla

relishes direct contact with the elements, she also understands and respects their power. While communing with nature, she knows how to avert potential threats that it poses to her safety. This awareness is simply part of her extensive knowledge of the universe.

Lalla is a veritable “nature child” whose entire existence appears to be intertwined with that of the earth (Knapp 705). Emphasizing this relationship, Marlies Kronegger in her investigation of *Désert* states: “Lalla. She is bound to the cosmos, as strings are bound to the harp [...] She is bound to her native desert. Lalla, like any organic being, is bound to a center from which she unfolds” (132). Reiterating this synthesis exemplified by Lalla and her culture, Agnès Clavareau in her article entitled “Lecture Mythique de *Désert* de J.M.G. Le Clézio” declares that “Les âmes sont à nu: point d’obstacle entre le cosmos et sa créature” (402). Similar to the Camusian ideal of fusion that we investigated in chapter one, no separation exists between the organism and the universe. Lalla’s attempt to relate and to communicate with all of life’s creatures is a manifestation of this ecstatic union. Whereas many individuals would consider wasps to at least constitute a minor nuisance if not a threat, the protagonist of *Désert* plays with them and “listens” to them. As the narrator affirms, “Les autres enfants ont peur des guêpes, ils veulent les chasser, ils cherchent à les tuer à coups de pierres. Mais Lalla les laisse voler autour de ses cheveux, elle essaie de comprendre ce qu’elles chantonnent en faisant vrombir leurs ailes” (101). Just like Lalla herself, wasps along with the rest of the world’s living creatures are

simply part of a sacred unity. By communicating with them, Lalla is simply trying to become “one with the one” to better relate to the cosmic whole.

While communing with nature, Lalla experiences the same type of joy as does Lullaby, Jon, and Daniel. Although all of the elements have a very profound effect upon her, light appears to trigger the most intense privileged moments of transformation in this text also. First of all, an overpowering type of luminescence encircles the enigmatic prophet Es Ser whom Lalla often visits in times of need, like the child divinity in “La Montagne du Dieu Vivant.” Like the tiny entity, he does not really have a name. Lalla simply refers to him as Es Ser or “Le Secret.” In fact, she tells us that he is called “The Secret” because “Nul ne doit savoir son nom” (96). It almost seems as if his name itself is forbidden knowledge, a common phenomenon in many of the so-called “mystery cults” where knowing the name of the deity would take away his or her power. Moreover, in addition to not knowing Es Ser’s real name, if he indeed has one, the protagonist knows nothing else about him at all either. He simply appears to her “quelquefois sur le plateau de pierres” (96). Nonetheless, whenever Lalla searches for him in times of distress, Es Ser always manifests himself. In addition, the protagonist often thinks about him, for she always feels his protective presence radiating down upon her. As the narrator asserts, “Elle pense à celui qu’elle appelle Es Ser, le Secret, celui dont le regard est comme la lumière du soleil, qui entoure et protège” (91). The force of Es Ser’s luminescence induces a sort of intoxicating trance. As Bruno Thibault affirms, “A chaque fois [...] Es Ser provoque chez la jeune fille une sorte de transe” (363).

Although this warrior prophet never solicits anything specific, the warmth of his rays both comfort and protect Lalla throughout the novel.

Even after Lalla leaves her desert community, she is still sensitive to both Es Ser's presence and to the euphoric power of the sun. Consequently, she even experiences privileged moments related to nature with Radicz, a young Gypsy boy who eventually meets an untimely, tragic death. While they are dining at a restaurant in Marseille, the strange ecstasy that best exemplifies privileged moments inexplicably strikes Lalla. First, the sunlight and the wind outside begin to "dance." As the narrator insists, "*La lumière et le vent continuait à danser pour elle*" (337). These irregular movements on the part of both of these elements are merely a prelude to what soon transpires. Shortly after Lalla and Radicz sit down to eat, a mysterious intoxication engulfs both of them. Although they drink the house wine, "*C'est la lumière qui les enivre plus que le vin*" (337). Like many of the privileged instants related to nature that we have already explored, this moment appears to have temporarily suspended the limitations of time and space. As the narrator states, "*Le temps s'est ralenti, ou bien c'est son regard qui immobilise, avec la lumière*" (337). It is evident that "son regard" refers to Es Ser who has "crossed" the ocean to watch over and console Lalla in Marseille. The great spiritual guide and the ubiquitous light that surrounds him have "immobilized" time and once again reached out to the protagonist. Like the small deity of "*La Montagne du Dieu Vivant*," light embodies much of Es Ser's essence. In fact, both of these inscrutable presences are synonymous with light itself.

Although Lalla and her people live in harmony with nature in their community which they call “La Cité,” we must not fail to mention the importance of le Hartani. Le Hartani is an eccentric but extremely charismatic character in *Désert*. Unlike the rest of his society, le Hartani does not share the same common ancestry. When he was a baby, an unidentified man left him in front of the community well. No one in La Cité wanted him, until finally a wife of a goat herder named Yasmina adopted him and raised him as if he were her child. Although Yasmina’s family provides for him as if he were a “normal” mountain inhabitant, all of the young people except for Lalla ostracize him because he is different from them. Even his name “le Hartani” is indicative of his dissimilarity to those around him. Someone in the community simply gave him this name, because of the darkness of his skin. As the narrator clarifies, “L’enfant était le Hartani c’est le surnom qu’on lui a donné parce qu’il avait la peau noire comme les esclaves du Sud ”(111). However, Lloyd Cabot Briggs claims that the class connotations of the linguistic label “Hartani” or the synonymous term “Haratin” are perhaps more important than the race distinctions that this word entails: “The word Haratin, as commonly used in the desert, carries a connotation of class even more than of race, for these are landless and peaceful Blacks and Browns who work as sharecroppers in the plantation of landlords who are nearly always White and are often warlike nomads” (67). In other words, le Hartani’s skin color gives him away as belonging to this “inferior” group of subservient people. This could indeed be the reason why everyone besides Lalla avoids him, and not his skin color itself. In addition to experiencing racial discrimination, the population

also shuns him because of his inability to speak. Since they do not understand why he cannot communicate by using spoken language, they fabricate ludicrous stories about him claiming that he must be possessed by some type of an evil spirit. As the narrator asserts, “Les gens ont un peu peur du Hartani, ils disent qu’il est mejnoun, qu’il a des pouvoirs qui viennent des démons” (112). Most of the inhabitants of La Cité at best ignore and at worst reject le Hartani, because of their ignorance and their fear. Unlike Lalla, they are incapable of understanding and appreciating what he has to offer.

Although all of the members of this desert-dwelling society possess much knowledge about the land in which they live, le Hartani has a certain “science de la nature” that far surpasses that of a normal shepherd. Whereas most humans rely too much on verbal communication and what their eyes perceive, le Hartani uses his entire body to communicate with the outside world: “il sait des choses que les hommes ne savent pas, il les voit avec tout son corps, pas seulement avec ses yeux ” (129). His body appears to be one integrated vessel that allows him to perceive other phenomena which pass most of us by, and le Hartani imparts this wisdom to Lalla: “Lalla aime passer les jours avec le Hartani. Elle est la seule à qui il montre toutes ces choses” (130). By using his “magical” hands along with the rest of his body, le Hartani exposes nature’s marvels and allows Lalla to experience both life and the universe to their fullest. As with Es Ser, le Hartani often transports Lalla into an “autre monde” or a privileged realm freed from the restrictions of time and space which resists rational explanation. Like Jon in “La Montagne du Dieu Vivant,” euphoria engulfs Lalla, and she is able

to float above the earth when she is alone with le Hartani. As the narrator affirms, “ils ont longtemps volé ensemble, et [...] ils sont tout ivres de vent, de lumière et de bleu de ciel” (128). In addition to the ecstasy that overcomes her when le Hartani reveals nature’s “secrets” to her, Lalla also experiences other powerful instants of joy related to sexuality with her male companion. However, these intense moments will be the subject of a subsequent chapter.

Returning to nature, it is important to note that whereas Lullaby, Jon, and Daniel all leave civilization and discover the majesty of the natural world, economic pressures oblige Lalla to leave her beloved desert and thrust her into contact with modernity. Although Lullaby and Jon voluntarily returned to society as we have seen, Daniel chose to remain close to the ocean. In a sense, Lalla’s tale at least for a time is an inverse narrative from the preceding three because of the reverse nature of her choice. In order to understand Lalla’s motivations for fleeing La Cité and the life that she seemed to treasure, we must briefly explore the events that transpire before she makes this decision. After finding work becomes more and more problematic for Aamma, food becomes scarce at home which forces Lalla to help support herself and her aunt. After her aunt Aamma teaches Lalla how to weave, she sends her to work in a local sweatshop operated by Zora. The conditions here are deplorable, and Zora both physically and verbally abuses the girls who work for her. Although the Tuareg civilization is culturally and geographically isolated from the rest of the Maghreb region, their society like all others is not free from exploitation as this appalling textile factory illustrates. But, since money is in short supply at home, the protagonist at first

says or does nothing: “elle ne dit rien à cause de l’argent qu’elle doit ramener à la maison pour Aamma. Seulement, pour se venger, elle fait de travers quelques nœuds dans le tapis rouge” (188). However, the small act of rebellion is not enough to quell her mounting frustration, when Zora mercilessly beats a little girl named Mina. Mina is a frail little girl whose only offense was that she accidentally broke a weaving loom while at work. When Zora starts to punish this “petite fille de dix ans à peine, toute maigre et chétive,” Lalla explodes: “Ne la battez plus! [...] Ne la battez plus [...] Lâche ! Méchante femme ”(189). Finally, as Zora watches in fear and astonishment, Lalla grabs her cane and breaks it over her knee. After this incident, Lalla vows never again to return to the shop.

Since Lalla possesses too much dignity to ignore Zora’s brutality and her exploitation of humanity for financial gain, Aamma is forced to come up with another solution to their monetary problems and arranges a marriage for her niece. Without first discussing the matter with Lalla, Aamma invites a much older and affluent man to their home. This potential suitor that her aunt has chosen for her bestows gifts upon the family including a transistor radio and much-needed food. Lalla is immediately suspicious and when she questions Aamma’s son Bareki, he responds: “Notre mère a décidé de te marier avec lui, parce qu’il est très riche” (192). After she uncovers the truth, Lalla becomes infuriated and insists that she will never agree to the proposed marriage. Emphatically demanding the return of all of the premarital gifts, Lalla maintains, “Je ne veux pas me marier avec cet homme. Je ne veux pas de ces cadeaux ridicules” (193). With no sympathy from her aunt, Lalla can only think of one option, to

flee. Aware of the power that comes with being wealthy, the protagonist knows that eventually the old man will abduct her by force if she does not consent. For this reason, Lalla must abandon her family, the desert, and le Hartani, whose child she is carrying (a situation we will explore later), if she does not wish to live the existence that others seek to impose upon her.

Forced to flee, Lalla goes to Marseille to find employment. Every year thousands of immigrants from the Maghreb region find their way to “l’Héxagone” in search of a “better life,” and Lalla is no exception. However, she soon realizes that for an immigrant life is horrible. Many legal immigrants and clandestines alike suffer from hunger on a regular basis, as any type of work is difficult for them to find. After much effort, Lalla stumbles upon her first employment opportunity at a grocery store. Unfortunately, on her first day, her boss stares at her constantly in a threatening way: “tout le temps il regardait le ventre et les seins de Lalla, avec ses vilains yeux humides” (267). Given this menace, Lalla does not return the following day, and after several failed attempts, she procures a position as a cleaning lady at the Hôtel Sainte-Blanche.

This hotel is located in the dangerous and impoverished neighborhood called “Le Panier” where Lalla and most of the immigrant population of Marseille live. Like any typical modern ghetto, violence and death are both prevalent in this atmosphere of frustration, misery, and poverty. This section of Marseille literally smells awful, but it also reeks from the pungent odor of abjection and despair. Lalla describes her strategy for dealing with this as follows: “Il faut simplement fermer la bouche et respirer lentement, à petits coups, pour ne pas

laisser entrer à l'intérieur de son corps l'odeur de la pauvreté, de la maladie et de la mort qui règne ici, dans ces escaliers, dans ces corridors, dans ces recoins où vivent les araignées et les blattes" (290). Lalla has left the dangers and hardships of the desert behind only to discover "un autre désert." This urban center is just as destitute as La Cité, but it lacks the natural marvels of the Sahara. Whereas hope and anguish coexist in the desert, those who reside in Le Panier experience only suffering and despair. As Bruno Thibault emphasizes in his study of *Désert*, this modern-day slum is a "sinistre ghetto" (361). Moreover, summarizing the difficulties of living in such an adverse situation, Thibault affirms: "Le Clézio décrit dans *Désert* les conditions de vie très dures qui attendent les travailleurs immigrés à leur arrivée en France "(361). Although almost all of these individuals leave their homeland in an attempt to live a more fulfilling and prosperous life, it is clear that their hopes are not and will not be fulfilled.

After living in abject poverty in Marseille, something almost inconceivable and totally unforeseen happens to Lalla. While she is at a restaurant with Radicz, a stranger asks to speak with her. He introduces himself as a photographer and admits that he has been admiring her from a distance. Before Lalla leaves, he convinces her to allow him to take pictures of her at a later time. Almost instantaneously after the photographer snaps the first photos of Lalla, she becomes an overnight celebrity. Her image is "partout, sur les pages des magazines, sur les planches de contact, sur les murs de l'appartement" (345). Without even searching for it, Lalla has discovered both modern fame and

fortune. She has risen from absolute obscurity in the ghetto to become the most sought-after female model in all of France. In reference to Lalla's improbable ascent to fame, William Thompson states: "She will live and wander through Marseille, experiencing an improbable rags-to-riches tale as she becomes a top model in Paris" (2). However, although Lalla becomes rich beyond her wildest imagination, "Elle ne veut pas d'argent, cela ne l'intéresse pas" (352). In fact, she gives most of the money she earns to beggars or to other people in need. Likewise, Lalla also shuns the fame that she receives from her magazine covers, adds, television appearances, etc.

Despite all of the "success" that she experiences as an exotic cover girl and sex symbol, Lalla feels an immeasurable inner void. Nearly as quickly as she begins her modeling career, she voluntarily chooses to disappear from the public eye. She writes a note to the photographer who made her famous that reads "Un jour, tu sais, je m'en irai, je partirai, et il ne faudra pas essayer de me retenir, parce que je partirai pour toujours" (351-352). When she realizes that neither the money nor the fame have brought her any happiness or peace of mind, Lalla gives up the life of glamour and luxury. Feeling as if she has lost a part of herself, Lalla experiences a veritable identity crisis. "Que cherche-t-elle? Que veut-elle de la vie?" (351). These are questions that Lalla incessantly asks herself during her brief period of stardom, and she finally recognizes what has been lacking in her life since her arrival in France. Lalla is alienated from the ecstasy of nature that she experienced with Es Ser and le Hartani. As Elena Real pinpoints in her article entitled "Un Espace pour le Vide," "l'angoisse de

l'homme séparé de la terre-mère" victimizes Lalla (184). Whereas she felt a profound unity with the cosmos and all of its life forms before the arranged marriage forced her to leave the Sahara and her people, Marseille's "sinister" ghetto and the superficial nature of her eventual fame have destroyed this harmony and plunged her into alienation.

Perhaps more than any other event, it is the dance at a night club that awakens Lalla and causes her to act. Discussing this incident, Kronegger asserts, "her aesthetic experience permits her to see anew the human condition, and to liberate herself from the bonds of slavery" (130). This unexpected event triggers Lalla's "prise de conscience."

Au début, les gens ne font pas attention à Hawa, parce que la lumière les aveugle. Puis, c'est comme s'ils sentaient que quelque chose d'extraordinaire était arrivé, sans qu'ils s'en doutent. Ils s'écartent, ils s'arrêtent de danser, les uns après les autres, pour regarder Lalla Hawa. Elle est toute seule dans le cercle de lumière, elle ne voit personne. Elle danse sur le rythme lent de la musique électrique, et c'est comme si la musique était à l'intérieur de son corps (354-355).

Although the rest of the crowd does not comprehend what is taking place, all of the spectators still clearly recognize the significance of what they are witnessing. They stop dancing themselves, and fix their attention on Lalla alone in her circle of light. For Lalla, the external world ceases to be, as the rhythmical sounds of the music permeate Lalla and transport her into an "elsewhere."

In this other realm, all of the people in the club along with all of the horrors of Marseille disappear for a few fleeting moments. As the narrator describes :
“Dans la grande salle, il n’y a plus tous ces murs, ces miroirs, ces lueurs. Ils ont disparu, anéantis par le vertige de la danse, renversés. Il n’y a plus ces villes sans espoir, ces villes d’abîmes, ces villes de mendiants et de prostituées, où les rues sont des pièges, où les maisons sont des tombes. Il n’y a plus tout cela, le regard ivre des danseurs a effacé tous les obstacles, tous les mensonges anciens” (356). Although surrounded by hundreds of people in a large night club, Lalla is completely alone in this other dimension. For the first time in many months, light, music, and most importantly hope fill Lalla’s entire being. As with her earlier experience with Radicz, the protagonist now understands that she is once again in the presence of Es Ser. Instead of manifesting himself to her on a bed of rocks in the desert, he crosses the ocean and calls to her in the club. As the protagonist affirms :

Alors, au centre de son vertige, tandis que ses pieds continuaient à la faire tourner sur elle-même de plus en plus vite, elle sent à nouveau, pour la première fois depuis longtemps, le regard qui vient sur elle, qui l’examine. Au centre de l’aire immense et nue, loin des hommes qui dansent, loin des villes brumeuses, le regard du Secret entre en elle, touche son cœur (356-357).

Es Ser “touches” her from afar, and Lalla realizes the reason for her desperation. The source of her alienation and frustration becomes clear, and she understands that she must return to the desert. So, she begins her long and arduous journey

back to her place of origin. As soon as she sets foot on her native soil, “Lalla sent encore l’ivresse étrange [...] Est-il possible que quelque chose d’autre ait existé? Y a-t-il un autre monde, d’autres visages, d’autre lumière ”(412). This organic intoxication that she still receives from her close connection to nature in this “milieu privilégié” justifies her decision to return. Lalla is not blind to the inherent difficulties of living in one of the harshest terrains on earth, but this lifestyle is still preferable to the isolation that she experiences in the modern world. In the desert, hope exists in the form of a pantheistic fusion with the cosmos. The slum life of Le Panier and her later life of luxury as a model are both equally empty and devoid of any real substance.

After her return to the Sahara, Lalla’s tale closes to form a transgenerational cycle. First of all, Lalla gives birth to le Hartani’s child in the same manner as her people have done for generations. She seeks shelter underneath a fig tree near the sea, cuts the umbilicus with her teeth, and washes the newborn infant in the salty water. As the narrator describes, “Lalla tient l’enfant dans ses bras, elle coupe le cordon avec ses dents [...] Très lentement, elle rampe sur le sable dur vers la mer, elle s’agenouille dans l’écume légère, et elle plonge l’enfant qui hurle dans l’eau salée, elle le baigne et le lave avec soin ” (422). Moreover, Lalla admits that she does not even understand all of the rituals that she performs; she simply follows her maternal instincts. As the narrator specifies, “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” (422). After Lalla has endured a painful childbirth and ensured the

safety of her newborn, she rests and contemplates the name that she will give her daughter. She decides on the name Hawa, one that has been in her family for generations: “Elle sent contre elle le petit être chaud qui se presse contre sa poitrine, qui veut vivre, qui suce goulument son lait. ‘Hawa, fille de Hawa’, pense Lalla” (423). It is symbolic of the continuation of the family lineage. Despite all of the difficulties that her family has faced over the years, their bloodline and family name still exist. In addition, with her new maternal obligations, it is certain that the protagonist will not be alone. Although the responsibility of nurturing and sustaining this new life is no easy task in such a rugged terrain, this newborn should also greatly enrich Lalla’s existence for many years to come.

Mysterious moments of ecstasy triggered by the forces of nature are also prevalent in *Le Chercheur d’Or*, published in 1985 by Gallimard. This work is the first of the Mauritian sagas. In this novel, Le Clézio explores and confronts his own family’s past as colonial patriarchs on the island of Mauritius. However, although his critique of the colonial system can be scathing, the beauty of Le Clézio’s prose often overshadows these commentaries and makes them appear to be subtle. In the text, it is evident that the colonial “elite” subjugate and debase the indigenous population for monetary gain. But, if the reader is not careful, he or she can become caught in the snares of the author’s alluring writing style and overlook the gravity of the events that are transpiring in the novel. In addition to probing the evils of colonialism, *Le Chercheur d’Or* calls our attention to the Western obsession with monetary wealth. Like his father, Alexis becomes obsessed with the idea of uncovering a hypothetical treasure which will

improve his family's desperate economic situation. During his chimerical search for gold, the protagonist meets a young "Manaf" named Ouma. As we will investigate in great detail, for Alexis, Ouma represents the possibility of a deep, inner transformation.

In the beginning of the novel, the fact that Alexis is so drawn to the ocean immediately intrigues the reader. As the first paragraph of the narrative establishes, "Du plus loin que je me souvienne, j'ai entendu la mer [...] Je l'entends maintenant, au plus profond de moi, je l'emporte partout où je vais " (11). Alexis's fascination for the ocean constitutes a fundamental part of his identity. As he once again affirms: "Pas un jour sans que j'aïlle à la mer, pas une nuit sans que je m'éveille, le dos mouillé de sueur, assis dans mon lit de camp, écartant la moustiquaire et cherchant à percevoir la marée, inquiet, plein d'un désir que je ne comprends pas" (11). Although the narrator does not fully comprehend his fascination, he is fully aware of this inner drive. He visits the ocean every day, and he always awakens to its sounds and smells. Even more striking than Alexis's descriptions of the inner flame that burns within him is his personification of the sea itself:

Je pense à elle comme à une personne humaine, et dans l'obscurité, tous mes sens sont en éveil pour mieux l'entendre arriver, pour mieux la recevoir. Les vagues géantes bondissent par-dessus les récifs, s'écroulent dans le lagon, et le bruit fait vibrer la terre et l'air comme une chaudière. Je l'entends, elle bouge, elle respire (11).

Like a human being, Alexis claims that the ocean “moves” and “breathes.” This “person” stimulates all of his senses, and allows him to experience this euphoria to its maximum potential.

When analyzing the significance of the ocean to Alexis in *Le Chercheur d'Or*, we must not overlook the role of Denis. Denis is a charismatic character who, like le Hartani, serves as a guide who teaches the protagonist the mysteries of the cosmos. Ironically, Denis is a native who experiences discrimination, because of the actions of Alexis's family. In fact, the protagonist's father will later forbid him to have any type of association with this indigenous man. However, before Alexis's father prohibits him from spending time with him, Denis and his “lessons” have already left a profound impression upon the narrator (Alexis). As Gérard Abensour states in his article entitled “L'Épopée de la Fin de L'Insularité,” Alexis “a eu pour ami Denis, un petit Noir qui l'a initié aux joies mystérieuses du monde naturel” (1106-1107). Describing what he learns from Denis, the narrator declares: “Les leçons de Denis sont les plus belles. Il m'enseigne le ciel, la mer, les cavernes au pied des montagnes, les champs en friche où nous courons ensemble ” (38). In addition to sharing all of the knowledge of nature that he possesses, Denis takes him on his first day long outing on the sea, an experience which will determine the rest of his life. Trying to describe his reaction, the narrator muses: “Je ne vois rien d'autre, je ne pense à rien d'autre : la mer profonde, bleue, l'horizon qui bouge, le goût de la mer, le vent. C'est la première fois que je suis en bateau, et je n'ai jamais rien connu d'aussi beau ” (54). During the fleeting moments of his first maritime adventure, nothing else

exists for Alexis. For all practical intents and purposes, the external world has ceased to be. He needs no one else in life, except the “person” of the sea itself. This discovery creates a schism between the protagonist and the rest of humanity. In particular, the reader learns at a very early stage in the novel that Alexis places more value on the sea than he does on his family. As the protagonist admits, “Je pense à Laure qui doit guetter dans l’arbre chalta, je pense à Mam et à mon père, et je voudrais que cet instant ne finisse pas” (57). Although his family occupies his thoughts while he is on the pirogue, he would like to remain forever in this moment, separated from them and the rest of the world. Near the end of the day, Alexis reiterates these sentiments as follows:

Jamais je n’oublierai cette journée si longue, cette journée pareille à des mois, à des années, où j’ai connu la mer pour la première fois. Je voudrais qu’elle ne cesse pas, qu’elle dure encore. Je voudrais qu’elle ne cesse pas, qu’elle dure encore. Je voudrais que la pirogue ne cesse de courir sur les vagues, dans les jaillissements d’écume, jusqu’aux Indes, jusqu’en Océanie même, allant d’île en île, éclairée par un soleil qui ne se coucherait pas (58-59).

This self-discovery, in the early portion of the novel, is important because it foreshadows ethical decisions that Alexis will make later in the narrative. He appears to valorize the sea more than the significant people in his life. However, because of the nuanced nature of ethical considerations concerning Alexis, we will be dedicating an entire section of a subsequent chapter to this matter.

Given the intensity of his rapport with the ocean and the companionship and “instruction” of his friend Denis, the narrator is convinced that his childhood home “Le Boucan” near the shore on the Southwest coast of Mauritius is an idyllic paradise. Alexis spends the first eight years of his life here with his father, his sister Laure, and Mam. As he affirms, “Nous vivions alors, mon père, Mam, Laure et moi, enfermés dans notre monde, dans cet enfoncement du Boucan” (25). Although Alexis idealizes this place, the reader realizes early in the novel that life in Le Boucan is no utopia, as Alexis tries to convince himself. First of all, the financial struggles that the protagonist’s family have to endure because of his father’s chimerical projects such as the “projet d’aérostat” and “le projet de la centrale électrique” are painfully evident (43). The “projet d’aérostat” is a transportation system designed to assist people who want to go from the Mascareignes to South Africa, and “le projet de la centrale électrique” is, as the name implies, a hypothetical electricity company. As Tarcis Dey asserts in his review of *Le Chercheur d’Or*, “De malheureuses spéculations ont ruiné le père d’Alexis” (78). Alexis’s father is a dreamer whose delusions of grandeur result in eventual bankruptcy.

In addition to his family’s ever-worsening economic situation, two other events should have shattered the narrator’s idealistic notions about his childhood. The first of those incidents is the cyclone. Despite the fact that Le Clézio often poetically describes nature as an endroit privilégié that induces many of these powerful instants of “bonheur” in *Le Chercheur d’Or* as in *Désert*,

he reminds us that nature can also be a destructive and lethal force. The narrator describes the arrival of the storm as follows:

Mam fixe de ses yeux agrandis l'espace sombre de la fenêtre, comme pour maintenir au loin la fureur des éléments. Notre pauvre maison est secouée de fond en comble. Une partie du toit a été arraché sur la façade sud. Les trombes d'eau et le vent saccagent les pièces éventrées. La cloison de bois du bureau craque, elle aussi. Tout à l'heure, par le trou fait par l'arbre j'ai vu la cabane du capt'n Cook s'envoler dans l'air comme un jouet (87).

What used to be an idyllic site has now been torn apart. Although the L'Étang residence still stands after the wrath of the tropical storm, many buildings and houses on the island are simply carried away. As the narrator reports, "Les bâtiments publics, les églises se sont écroulés, et des gens ont été brûlés vifs dans les explosions" (91). The same elements that fill Alexis with ecstasy have left behind a path of death and destruction in Le Boucan and the surrounding areas. As in *Désert*, nature itself is both a nurturing and deadly force in *Le Chercheur d'Or*.

The second progressively worsening situation that threatens the L'Étang family are health problems. As the narrator reveals, "Depuis des semaines déjà, Mam est malade, et elle a cessé ses leçons. Notre père, lui, est sombre et fatigué, il reste enfermé dans son bureau à lire ou à écrire, ou à fumer en regardant par la fenêtre d'un air absent" (61). Although Mam recovers, she will remain forever weakened and their father dies eight years later. Before he

passes away, Alexis's father discusses the treasure of the "Corsaire Inconnu" with him in detail for the first time: "Je crois que c'est à cette époque qu'il m'a parlé vraiment du Corsaire inconnu, et des documents qu'il a gardés là-dessus [...] c'est à cette époque qu'il m'en parle longuement, comme d'un secret important" (61). This idea of uncovering a treasure the 'Corsaire Inconnu' allegedly buried on neighboring Rodriguez island fascinates his father. During this trying period of their lives, his father shows his son all of his documents concerning the treasure. After his father's demise, Alexis becomes obsessed with all of this information. He vows to unearth this hidden fortune and restore his family's former "glory." In other words, the protagonist appropriates his father's most precious dream, and makes it his own.

It is this fantasy that inspires Alexis to seek passage on Capitaine Bradmer's vessel the *Zeta*. As the protagonist affirms, "je partirais sur le *Zeta*, ce serait mon navire *Argo*, celui qui me conduirait à travers la mer jusqu'au lieu dont j'avais rêvé, à Rodrigues, pour ma quête d'un trésor sans fin" (119). Aboard the ship, Alexis experiences sensations similar to those that he felt in Denis's pirogue. But, this intoxication is even more intense. Alexis informs the reader that the entire crew experiences this powerful euphoria: "Tous, nous ressentons la même ivresse du premier jour en mer" (125). It is also important to note that Alexis spends all of his free time at the docks near the sea. As he acknowledges :

Mais il y avait les bateaux. C'était pour eux que j'allais sur le port, chaque fois que je le pouvais, quand je disposais d'une heure

avant l'ouverture des bureaux de W.W. West, ou après cinq heures, quand Rempart Street était vide. Les jours de congé, quand les jeunes gens allaient se promener au bras de leur fiancée le long des allées du Champ-de-Mars, je préférais flâner sur les quais (114).

The pull of the sea is so irresistible that Alexis cannot bear to be separated from it, even for a short span of time. Whereas other sailors might prefer to distance themselves from the sea occasionally in order to follow other pursuits, the protagonist appears to be incapable of doing this.

As the voyage continues, Alexis again identifies the presence of this inexplicable intoxication mingled with lightheadedness. As the protagonist asserts, "De nouveau, je ressens l'ivresse, le vertige" (192). As is the case with other privileged moments we have investigated, these intense instants of pleasure change Alexis's conception of time. Alexis feels as if he has entered into another domain where the rules that govern time and space no longer exist: "Mais la mer abolit le temps. Ces vagues, de quel temps viennent-elles" (175). He even fears that he might not be able to return to the world that he had known for as he admits: "Il me semble être hors du temps, dans un autre monde, si différent, si loin de tout ce que j'ai connu, que jamais plus je ne pourrai retrouver ce que j'ai laissé [...] j'ai peur d'abandonner ce que j'ai été, sans espoir de retour" (181-182). Although these moments fill Alexis with joy, he claims to be afraid of this mysterious power, and of the irremediable changes taking place.

Nonetheless, he rejoices in the fullness of his liberty and his solitude: "Ici, la mer

est si belle que personne ne peut longtemps penser aux autres [...] Les amitiés se nouent entre les hommes, se défont. Personne n'a besoin de personne" (165). Regardless of what he might like to believe about himself, it is obvious that Alexis needs nothing else and truly cares about nothing else besides the sea. While he contemplates the ocean, he casts aside any thought of Laure and Mam and the difficulties they must contend with on a daily basis.

As with Daniel, all of the elements act as catalysts for inducing the privileged moments that Alexis experiences while in the pirogue with Denis and while on the *Zeta*. Specifically, light, as is often the case in Le Clézio's narratives, is incredibly dynamic in *Le Chercheur d'Or*. His guide Denis first exposes the narrator to this "lumière aveuglante qui enivre" (56). It is important to note that although this particular type of luminescence triggers intense moments of happiness, it can also result in piercing, blinding sensations. While on the *Zeta* with Capitaine Bradmer, the sun's rays shower down from the sky even more powerfully than on Denis's old-fashioned canoe. While the protagonist is reflecting upon his unrealistic aspirations of returning to the family that he abandoned as a "savior" or a "hero" with the Corsaire's gold in hand, he muses, "C'est à cela que je pense, et l'ivresse de la lumière en moi" (138). Like Jon in "La Montagne du Dieu Vivant," the intoxicating ocean light permeates Alexis and seeps its way down to his marrow.

As we have discussed, Alexis experiences several important privileged moments related to nature, perhaps the most poignant instants of sheer pleasure that he experiences are of a sexual nature with Ouma. We will dedicate an entire

section to these moments and to various ethical questions that they pose in a subsequent chapter, but we must briefly consider one important matter at the moment. Even though nature, music, and sexuality are all capable of triggering these brief flashes of euphoria separately, sometimes they combine to elicit these instants. For instance, Alexis and Ouma experience one such privileged moment related to sexuality while they are swimming together nude in the ocean. In fact, it is Ouma who helps Alexis rediscover some of the “*joie de vivre*” he lost after spending countless, frustrating hours searching for the Corsaire’s elusive treasure. Specifically, Ouma reinitiates him into the “*ivresse*” of the ocean as she plunges into the water, and invites him to join her. Although sexual desire entices him to dive into the water, Ouma helps him to recapture the ecstasy of communing with the elements. As the narrator explains, “*Je me déshabille à mon tour et je plonge dans l’eau froide. Tout d’un coup je me souviens de ce que j’ai perdu depuis tant d’années, la mer à Tamarin quand avec Denis nous nagions nus à travers les vagues. C’est une impression de liberté, de bonheur*” which he will continue to cultivate, although alone throughout the remainder of the work (229). Alexis’s obsessive quest for the Corsaire’s treasure made him forget what he used to valorize the most. As we outlined earlier, before this absurd preoccupation entirely consumed him, Alexis used to commune with the ocean on a daily basis.

Although the short text *Pawana* contains few if any privileged moments related to nature, it is essential to our exploration of these enigmatic instants of ecstasy because of its apocalyptic message. *Pawana* issues a strong warning to

the modern world about what happens or could happen when we destroy various “lieux privilégiés.” *Pawana* is different from most of Le Clézio’s texts, because he originally composed it to be performed on stage in 1988 by the director Georges Lavaudant. Gallimard published the short work of fiction itself in 1992. However, we will be using the edition published by Gallimard in 2003, because of the accompanying notes and commentaries. The title itself, *Pawana*, comes from the Nattick Indian word meaning “whale” or from the often uttered phrase “Awaité Pawana” signifying “Here is a whale.” It is a “direct homage” to Melville’s novel *Moby Dick*, published in 1851 (Thibault “Awaité Pawana,” 723). This short narrative of approximately forty pages takes place in a location known as Punta Bunda along the Baha peninsula off the coast of California. One of the narrators John, de Nantucket grew up in the historical, American port city Nantucket during its brief period as the largest whaling center in the entire world. Discussing the historical significance of this port in the supplementary materials of the text, Alain Le Goff states: “Nantucket était le plus grand port baleiner de toute la côte est des États-Unis, autrement dit du monde entier. Sur les quais on trouvait des matelots qui venaient de toutes les mers du globe : des Norvégiens, des Anglais, des Bretons, des Portugais [...] Nantucket était une Babel où l’huile de baleine coulait à flots” (52). During his childhood, he listened to the tales of New England locals who often recounted a legend of a secret passageway that existed in Southern California: “Ils en parlaient, comme d’une cachette, comme d’un trésor. A Nantucket, ils en parlaient tous, comme on parle quand on est saoul. Ils disaient, là-bas, en Californie, dans l’Océan, il y a ce lieu secret où les

baleines vont mettre bas leurs petits, où les vieilles femelles retournent pour mourir” (27). *Pawana* is a story of this hidden lagoon full of life that will be irreparably transformed into a site of carnage and death, a rending account of the large-scale annihilation of the whale population for monetary gain.

Four main chapters or sections comprise this short narrative, which alternates between two distinct narrators with two conflicting world views. John, de Nantucket narrates chapters one and three, and Charles Melville Scammon recounts the tale in chapters two and four. Although both narrators are now old men who are reflecting upon their experiences on Captain Scammon’s ship the *Léonore* and their discovery of this secret passage where the female whales give birth, it is clear that this site interests them for entirely different reasons. To Charles Melville Scammon, this secret refuge and birthplace represents nothing but economic opportunity. The first company to discover this mysterious bay will own all of the whaling rights to this area, and consequently the entire crew will become wealthy. As Captain Scammon acknowledges, “Nous allons être les premiers à découvrir l’ancien secret des poissons-diables, l’endroit où les femelles se réunissaient pour mettre au monde leurs petits. Nous allons revenir immensément riches, ce serait peut-être la dernière campagne” (59). Motivated by greed, this secret birthplace represents to Scammon a type of “last big score” which will allow him to spend the rest of his life in opulence.

For John, this place symbolizes an austere paradise. Whereas Captain Scammon can originally only speculate about how much profit he can derive from the whales captured in this privileged site, it is the majesty of nature in its purest

form that spellbinds John. Three years after the catastrophe, John, de Nantucket returns to this site. He observes the remnants of what he helped to destroy, and he mourns the loss of what used to be a picturesque location unlike any other that he had ever seen. Reflecting upon the purity of this bay before *Léonore's* arrival, John muses: "Ce lieu jadis si beau, si pur, tel que devait être le monde à son début, avant la création de l'homme, était devenu l'endroit du carnage" (82). However, while he illustrates the grandeur of these natural surroundings in poetic terms, he simultaneously bemoans the total destruction. He and the rest of *Léonore's* crew have forever tainted this utopia.

Captain Scammon and his crew have transformed a sacred place that used to be a "lieu de naissance" into a "lieu de mort." As John declares, "La lagune n'est plus le lieu où la vie pourrait naître. Elle est devenue un lac mortel, le lac lourd et âcre du sang répandu" (88). This tranquil passage where the female whales used to give birth to their young now reeks from the foul odor of commercial slaughter. In their quest for material wealth, the whalers will not be satisfied until they have "processed" every last one of these gigantic creatures for oil. They camp and proceed to eradicate systematically the entire whale population, which takes weeks to accomplish. As John reports, "Le carnage dura un mois entier, jour après jour [...] Au lever du jour, commençait la boucherie, et cela durait jusqu'à midi. Les canots revenaient de la lagune, halant les corps des géantes hors de la lagune jusqu'aux navires. Maintenant, ce n'était plus le lieu secret, sans nom, tel qu'il existait depuis le commencement du monde" (84). At

the end of this period, barrels of oil are the only evidence that these colossal creatures which once roamed this privileged space in abundance ever existed.

Le Clézio uses the analogy of sterility to emphasize the destruction of a place that used to symbolize life itself. After the teams of whalers have massacred all of their prey, they leave behind a now desolate and lifeless lagoon. As John reveals, “La mer devient vide à nouveau, sans un signe, sans un souffle. Comment peut-on oublier, pour que le monde recommence?” (88). Although John wishes that the act of forgetting could cause this lagoon to be vibrant once again, he knows that this is merely wishful thinking on his part. The splendor of this cove has disappeared forever. After the other narrator Charles Melville Scammon’s belated “prise de conscience” which we will momentarily probe, he also uses this same analogy of sterility to express this sense of loss in the closing lines of the narrative. Conveying his desire to turn back the hands of time and to save this refuge, Captain Scammon imagines: “Alors le ventre de la terre pourrait recommencer à vivre, et les corps des baleines glisseraient doucement dans les eaux les plus calmes du monde, dans cette lagune qui enfin n’aurait plus de nom” (93). The Captain feels as if his discovery and his insatiable thirst for material wealth have wounded the very “center of the earth” which will be forever scarred by his greed.

In addition to the powerful image of sterility, Le Clézio’s use of personification makes this narrative even more poignant. Instead of using terms that we typically associate with animals, Le Clézio employs words and expressions used referring to human beings. As Bruno Doucey states in the

supplementary material that accompanies the text, “Au fil du texte, l’auteur abandonne les mots qui appartiennent au champ lexical de la vie animale, pour employer des termes qui servent à designer les êtres humains” (99). For instance, the author substitutes “mother” for female whale, and replaces “offspring” or “progeny” with words such as “newborn” and “infants.” This explains why Charles Melville Scammon poses the question: “Combien d’enfants tués dans le ventre de leur mere, ?” instead of using more neutral language (91-92). Le Clézio does not want the reader to be able to distinguish between the value of human life and that of other living organisms. The author wants the reader to reflect upon the sacredness of life and the cosmos in general.

As briefly indicated earlier, Charles Melville Scammon finally realizes that treasures other than monetary wealth exist in this universe. A little boy who experiences his first hunting expedition on the *Léonore* eventually helps him to reach this realization. At first, the narrator does not understand the inquisitive boy’s dismay. When the child looks at him in a strange manner after the massacre has begun, Captain Scammon is puzzled at first by this strong reaction. Until it was too late, the Captain cannot fathom why “ce jeune garçon qui chassait pour la première fois” glares at him as if he has done “quelque chose d’interdit, quelque chose de mauvais” (89). However, years later he reflects upon the child’s tears and his heart-wrenching question “comment peut-on tuer ce qu’on aime?” (90). Just as Ouma reawakenes Alexis’s awareness of the joy that he has lost in the pursuit of imagined wealth, the little boy encourages the Captain to consider his indifference to nature’s marvels. Albeit

much too late, the former Captain now realizes the message that the boy was trying to convey. Describing how avarice controls his actions as well as those of his crew, Scammon asserts: “Nous n’avions plus d’âme, je crois, nous ne savions plus rien de la beauté du monde. Nous étions enivrés par l’odeur du sang” (90). Now that he recognizes the error of his ways, he wishes he could travel back in time to close the passage that he and his men opened. As the old commander declares, “Je pense aux larmes de l’enfant, quand nous avons halé les corps des baleines vers le navire, parce qu’il était le seul à savoir le secret que nous avions perdu. Je pense à lui, comme si je pouvais arrêter le cours du temps, l’étrave de la chaloupe, refermer l’entrée du passage. Je rêve à cela, comme autrefois j’avais rêvé d’ouvrir ce passage” (93). The narrative ends with this sailor’s realization of the evil that inspired him and his men to obliterate this paradise so many years ago. Although he is fully aware that he cannot make amends for these actions, he does assume responsibility for the crimes against nature that he has committed.

In addition to reminding us of the evils of exploiting the earth and its precious resources, Le Clézio also calls our attention in *Pawana* to the debasement of other human beings. Emilio’s treatment of Araceli makes John conscious of this atrocity as well. Araceli is a beautiful Indian slave whose Spanish master Emilio purchased her and forced her to be a maid in his house of prostitution. As John informs us, “Elle avait été capturée par l’armée, au Sonora, et Emilio l’avait achetée pour qu’elle soit l’esclave des filles, qu’elle leur apporte l’eau, qu’elle lave leur linge” (40). Despite the language barrier that separates

them, John de Nantucket and Araceli communicate with each other by other means. Moreover, they share sexual moments that John remembers in detail even fifty-five years later:

C'est là, à l'aube, dans le sable mouillé, nous nous sommes étendus, j'ai touché son corps, je tremblais de fièvre, de désir. Elle me parlait dans sa langue étrange, dure et chantante, elle me montrait les collines du désert, là d'où elle venait. Je ne comprenais pas. Je ne savais pas pourquoi elle m'avait choisi, pourquoi elle se donnait à moi. Elle était si violente et sauvage, en même temps si craintive, fugitive comme une ombre. Quand le soleil apparaissait, elle quittait les roseaux, elle retournait vers le camp, dans la hutte où dormaient Emilio et les filles (85).

Despite Araceli's tragic murder, the intense moments that he shared with her will remain forever imprinted on his soul.

After vividly describing the experiences that he shared with Araceli, John speaks of her death at the hands of her sinister master. Araceli's free spirit made her a difficult slave for Emilio to subjugate, as she often ran away. In the end, Emilio always tracked down his human possession, and then mercilessly beat her in an attempt to break her will. Although some of these blows nearly killed her, Araceli always survived until one fateful day John waited for her, but she never came. Aware that something was amiss, John started asking questions and searching for her. He realized the gravity of the situation when his Mexican friend Valdés told him that Araceli fled after Emilio had once again physically

assaulted her. John did not find her, but he soon saw an entourage transporting her remains into the camp. As the narrator affirms, “J’étais dans le camp lorsqu’on a ramené le corps d’Araceli. Des hommes l’avaient trouvée dans la montagne” (86). John would never know if Araceli died while fleeing Emilio as a result of the wounds inflicted upon her, or if Emilio tracked her down and sealed her fate afterwards. Nonetheless, an unidentified group of men buried her unceremoniously, and no one seemed to care at all, except for John. Although her grave was unmarked, John returned to the exact spot many years later: “Comme elle n’était qu’une Indienne, ils n’ont pas dit de prières, ils n’ont pas mis de croix, ni rien pour marquer l’endroit où elle était enterrée. Mais moi, je n’ai pas oublié [...] je peux voir exactement l’endroit où est Araceli ”(87). Even though Emilio soon disappeared along with his prostitutes as rumors abounded, this was hardly any consolation to John because Araceli was not “just an Indian” to him.

Pawana urges us to remember that we are all accountable for the transgressions that we commit against other human beings, as well as against all other living things. Emilio’s conduct and abuse of Araceli is deplorable, but the two former sailors also learn an important lesson about nature. Once the marvels of the natural world are destroyed, they will never return. Although many people show little or no concern about exterminating a particular species if they can profit from its demise, many individuals like Le Clézio believe that this disappearance affects the entire “chain of life.” As Bruno Doucey so emphatically declares:

Qu'il s'agisse de bisons ou de baleines, la problématique est la même. Nous aurions tort de croire que leur disparition n'affecte que le monde marin ou le règne animal. Toutes choses étant liées, l'extinction de diverses espèces de cétacés entraîne des déséquilibres écologiques qui menacent également les êtres humains (114).

We must learn how to live more harmoniously with nature. If we cause too many links in this chain to disappear, then human existence on this planet becomes precarious as well. We must preserve the kind of equilibrium that Le Clézio discovered with the Embreras.

In conclusion, moments of intense ecstasy abound when Le Clézio's characters commune with nature. Direct contact with the elements triggers this extreme "Joie de vivre." Specifically, sunlight and the sea both possess mysterious qualities in Le Clézio's privileged realms. During these powerful instants of euphoria, nature often transports his protagonists into an "autre monde." In these privileged spaces, the terrestrial laws of time and space no longer bind them. Jon floats effortlessly on the clouds with the child deity, Lalla "flies" with le Hartani in addition to being all alone in the club although surrounded by at least hundreds of people, and the ocean "abolishes" time for Alexis. However, although Le Clézio's critics often accuse him of being "naïve" because of his focus on nature, the fury of nature's elements coexists with these flashes of intoxication. In *Désert*, daily life is extremely difficult and survival is a constant preoccupation in the Sahara, but the alienation of modern life that Lalla

experiences in Marseille induces far greater suffering. In *Le Chercheur d'Or*, the cyclone reduces much of the island to mere rubble, but being on the ocean fills Alexis with inexplicable joy. Behind our closed windows and doors, we have become blind to the wonders of the natural world. As *Pawana* reminds us, we have become indifferent to these marvels, and we are eager to destroy what few privileged spaces that we have left when economic opportunity presents itself. We no longer exploit the earth in search of the same type of oil, but fuel still controls our economic policy as well as our foreign policy. But, before we drill anywhere and everywhere as part of our insatiable thirst for crude oil, maybe we should take into consideration the delicate balance of the ecosystem. If not, perhaps we will one day reach the same belated realization as Captain Scammon, who finally understood that life is the greatest treasure of all.

CHAPTER IV

Musicality and Privileged Moments in Le Clézio's Works

In addition to being triggered by elements in nature as explored in chapter three, inexplicable instants of ecstasy related to music are also prevalent in Le Clézio's narratives. Similar to Proust, whom we discussed in chapter one, music plays an indispensable role in a number of Le Clézio's works as well. Many different types of music can induce these moments of intoxication. For instance, chants, prayers, incantations, a musical voice telling stories, popular music, ethnic melodies of marginalized peoples, jazz, blues, etc. all generate these poignant experiences. However, before examining the role and the significance of music in his works, we must define the term "music" itself. Although determining what constitutes music might appear to be unnecessary, this task is both essential and much more complex than it at first seems because the *Oxford English Dictionary* contains a plethora of entries for the word. Three of these many listings define music as follows:

- (1) The art or science of combining vocal or instrumental sounds to produce beauty of form, harmony, melody, rhythm, expressive content, etc.; musical composition, performance, analysis, etc., as a subject of study; the occupation or profession of musicians. (2) Sound produced naturally which is likened to music in being rhythmical or pleasing to the ear, as the song of birds, the sound of running water, etc." (3) Something likened to music by virtue of its

beauty or charm, or the pleasure which it produces (“Music.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

The first entry meshes well with traditional conceptions of music and musicality in the Western world. Specifically, it discusses the various components of this discipline, such as form, harmony, rhythm, etc. which one typically associates with this term. However, the next two listings assert that other sounds or vibrations besides those which we commonly call “music” can indeed be considered to be “musical” in nature. Moreover, individuals often derive immense pleasure from these “natural” tonalities, which can be quite rhythmical in nature. Throughout this chapter, the privileged moments that we will investigate will affirm that all kinds of music are valid and should be equally valorized.

In this section we will examine the complex role that music plays in all of its various forms in Le Clézio’s works for both those who listen to and those who compose different kinds of musical creations. Specifically, we will explore the importance of music in the short story “La Roue d’Eau,” as well as in the novels *Étoile Errante*, *Désert*, *Le Chercheur d’Or*, and *Le Poisson d’Or*. I have chosen to analyze “La Roue d’Eau” first in this chapter because the theme of nature’s inherent musicality is most prevalent in this particular tale. The author’s emphasis on this subject helps to distinguish this short story from the rest of the *Mondo* collection. After analyzing this short narrative, we will probe the significance of M. Ferne and his piano, in addition to other musical elements, in the poignant work *Étoile Errante*. It is perhaps in this moving narrative that we

find the greatest number of privileged moments that correspond to our definition, and to other instants that we have already explored. Then, we will direct our attention to *Désert* and *Le Chercheur d'Or* because both of these novels likewise contain certain privileged moments that are generated by sounds that do not correspond to typical notions of what is musical. Finally, we will investigate the importance of music in *Le Poisson d'Or*. In this novel, music and the question of identity construction are inseparable, and the theme of aesthetic redemption clearly resonates with the adventures of the adolescent protagonist Laïla.

In Le Clézio's short story entitled "La Roue d'Eau," music originates from the earth for all to hear. This narrative of approximately fifteen pages appears in the anthology *Mondo et Autres Histoires*. As with the other tales in this work, the reader knows relatively little about the protagonist Juba except that he comes from an impoverished family and lives with his mother, father, two sisters, and brother in a tiny one room dwelling: "Dans la maison sombre, il y a d'autres formes enroulées dans les draps, d'autres corps endormis. Juba reconnaît son père, de l'autre côté de la porte, son frère, et, tout à fait au fond, sa mère et ses deux sœurs serrées sous le même drap" (149). It is from this humble abode that Juba will embark on a solitary and transforming voyage to an enchanted realm.

In this enigmatic narrative, it is difficult to ascertain the exact location where the action takes place because literature, history, mythology, and fantasy are inseparably intertwined. As the protagonist is performing his daily chore of leading and attaching the family's oxen to a water wheel early one morning before daylight, he gazes at the object, and watches the ancient Himyar capital

city Yol appear before his eyes.² It is “la roue d’eau” or the water-wheel itself which appears to act as the catalyst for these apparitions and is the central focus of the narrative. However, the structure itself does not appear to be anything out of the ordinary. As the narrator describes it, “Au bout du long madrier, il y a la grande roue de bois qui tourne en même temps que les bœufs, et son axe entraîne l’engrenage de l’autre roue verticale. La longue lanière de cuir bouilli descend au fond du puits, portant les seaux jusqu’à l’eau ”(151). From this account, the apparatus itself seems to be something that one would find on any traditional farm.

However, despite its ordinariness, this water-wheel has a very profound and powerful effect upon Juba, and he contemplates and reflects upon its specifically musical properties:

Juba regarde l’eau qui coule par vagues le long de la gouttière, ruisselle, dans l’acequia, descend par poussées régulières vers la terre rouge des champs [...] C’est l’eau que Juba regarde, sans se lasser, assis sur une pierre au bord du puits. A côté de lui la roue de bois tourne très lentement, en grinçant, et le bourdonnement continu de la courroie monte dans l’air, les seaux cognent la gouttière de tôle, l’un après l’autre, versent l’eau qui glisse en chuintant. C’est une musique lente et gémissante comme une voix

² Himyar was a state in Ancient South Arabia. For a discussion of the significance of this political entity, see Bafaqīh, M. A., *L’unification du Yémen antique. La lutte entre Saba’, Himyar et le Hadramawt de Ier au IIIème siècle de l’ère chrétienne*. Paris, 1990.

humaine, elle emplît le ciel vide et les champs. C'est une musique que Juba connaît bien, jour après jour (153).

Juba observes the wheel, and all of the places where the water flows. He also compares its mechanical sounds to those of a human voice. This is a crucial analogy because the wheel now becomes a character in the tale. Moreover, these vibrations help to reduce the affective distance between the protagonist and machine as they penetrate and fill Juba's entire being: "Juba entend le chant qui monte en lui, qui traverse son ventre et sa poitrine, le chant qui vient de la profondeur du puits" (154). Equally importantly, the music from this human-like voice fills the sky and resonates everywhere:

C'est une musique qui ne peut pas finir, car elle est dans le monde entier, dans le ciel même [...] Les sons profonds, réguliers, monotones, montent de la grande roue de bois aux engrenages gémissants, le treuil pivote autour de son axe en faisant sa plainte, les seaux de métal descendent dans le puits, la courroie de cuir vibre comme une voix, et l'eau continue de couler sur la gouttière, par vagues, inonde le canal de l'acequia. Personne ne parle, personne ne bouge, et l'eau cascade (155).

The organic music of the wheel is part of the cosmos and, as such, has no beginning or end; it will continue indefinitely. The repetitions of the water-wheel and its gear mechanisms demonstrate this musicality on a microcosmic level. It is also important to note that these natural tonalities momentarily appear to efface the contingencies of time and space, for as the narrator declares:

Juba est sur les ailes d'un vautour blanc, très haut dans le ciel sans nuages. Il glisse sur lui-même, à travers les couches de l'air, et la terre rouge vire lentement sous ses ailes [...] tout pivote autour du puits, en faisant un bruit qui cliquette et qui grince. La musique monotone des roues d'eau, le souffle des bœufs, le gargouillement de l'eau dans l'acequia, tout cela tourne, l'emporte, l'enlève. La lumière est grande, le ciel est ouvert. Il n'y a plus d'hommes maintenant, ils ont disparu (156).

Similar to Jon in "La Montagne du dieu vivant," Juba "flies" over the earth. It is the musical properties of the water-wheel and the innate musicality of the cosmos itself that allow him to hover in space and causes the rest of humanity to "disappear." This experience transports Juba into another realm where he is initially solitary. But he does not remain alone for long for the earth's music coupled with the force of the sea conjure up visions of the capital city of the lost Himyar civilization where Juba's experiences assume even more other-worldly dimensions as he walks through Yol where he is acknowledged as king. It appears that Juba II is once again perched on his throne where he had been placed by Julius Caesar centuries ago.³ Moreover, his queen Cleopatra Selene,

³ The historical Juba II to which the text undoubtedly makes reference was the son of King Juba I of Numidia. King Juba II's father ruled this territory southwest of Carthage at the time of his son's birth in 48 B.C. After being insulted by Julius Caesar years earlier, Juba I allied himself with Gaius Pompeius against the Roman leader. However, in 46 B.C., Caesar's military triumph over the contested region was complete. To preserve his dignity, Juba I committed suicide. For unknown reasons, the Roman authorities spared the young orphan Juba II. In fact, one of Caesar's relatives raised him as one of their own children giving him a proper education in Linguistics, Roman History, Natural History, and the Arts. For a detailed analysis of the life and

daughter of Marc Antony and Cleopatra, greets him warmly along with the rest of his constituents (Hoffmann 13):

La lumière du soleil illumine le corps de Juba et l'enivre, et il entend grandir la rumeur continue de la mer. La ville autour de lui est légère, elle vibre et ondule comme les reflets du soleil sur les grands lacs de sel. Juba marche, et ses pieds semblent ne pas toucher le sol, comme s'il était porté par un nuage. Le peuple d'Himyar, les hommes et les femmes marchent avec lui, la musique cachée résonne dans les rues et sur les places, et parfois la rumeur de la mer est couverte par les cris qui appellent : 'Juba ! Eya ! Ju-uuu-ba!' (157-158).

Whereas human beings seemed to vanish earlier, he is now listening to the water wheel, surrounded by his loyal subjects. As the narrator affirms, " 'Je suis Juba', pense le jeune roi, puis il dit à haute voix, avec force: 'Je suis Juba, le fils de Juba, le petit-fils d'Hiempasal! [...] Je suis revenu aujourd'hui, et Yol est la capitale de mon royaume" (159). It appears that the musical properties of the water-wheel reinforced by the power of the elements allow Juba to enter into the privileged city of ancient Yol and assume his identity as king. Yet, we must not forget that the protagonist's name itself, Juba, resonates with other echoes. This other Juba to which the text refers was indeed the ruler of this realm. Is the child Juba a modern incarnation of the Juba of antiquity? Or, is it the inherent

literary works of the erudite Juba II, see Roller, Duane. *The World of Juba II and Kleopatra Selene*. New York : Routledge, 2003.

musicality of the cosmos and the protagonist's close rapport with the elements which allow him to reduce the distance between him and this other figure bearing the same name? It is impossible to offer a definitive answer to these questions, because of the ambiguity of the tale itself. But what is important is the description of the city itself and Juba's affirmation of what it represents, for the Yol in this tale like that of antiquity, is a breathtakingly picturesque center of higher learning:

Mais aujourd'hui cette ville est belle, et je veux qu'elle soit plus belle encore. Je veux qu'il n'y ait pas de ville plus belle sur la terre. On y enseignera la philosophie, la science des astres, la science des chiffres, et les hommes viendront de tous les points du monde pour apprendre [...] Sur la place, au centre de la ville, les maîtres enseigneront la langue des dieux. Les enfants apprendront à vénérer la connaissance, les poètes liront leurs œuvres, les astronomes prédiront l'avenir. Il n'y aura pas de terre plus prospère, de peuple plus pacifique. La ville resplendira des trésors de l'esprit, de cette lumière (160-161).

The Yol which unfolds during Juba's moments of ecstasy triggered by the tonalities of the water wheel and the elements is a peaceful and fertile land, and its inhabitants are highly cultivated. Moreover, during this section of the narrative, it becomes almost impossible to distinguish one Juba from the other. These two characters appear to synthesize and become synonymous. After explaining the grandeur of "his" society, the protagonist insists: "Je ne suis pas

venu pour la vengeance” (161). Juba wants all of the inhabitants of this once-dead but now vibrant city to know that he has not returned to exact revenge upon anyone but rather to praise Yol’s inhabitants and express his hopes for the future.

However, as is the case with most privileged moments that we have investigated, these “instants de bonheur” in Yol cannot ultimately last. The modern-day Juba must return to the realities of daily life: “Juba est seul maintenant dans les ruines de Yol [...] Il n’y a plus d’hommes, ni de femmes ici, plus d’enfants. La ville est pareille à un cimetière qui tremble au fond de la mer, et les vagues viennent battre les dernières marches du temple de Diane ” (162). Although Yol as it once existed has vanished yet again, the end of the tale provides hope that it might one day reappear. As the narrator affirms, “Peut-être que demain, quand les grandes roues de bois recommenceront à tourner, quand les bœufs repartiront, lentement, en soufflant, sur leur chemin circulaire, peut-être alors que la ville apparaîtra de nouveau, très blanche, tremblante et irréelle comme les reflets du soleil [...] Ensuite il s’éloigne, il marche vite sur le chemin, vers les maisons où les vivants attendent ”(164). Juba returns to his family, but he is hopeful that he will be “King Juba” once again in the future. It is also important to note that the narrator once again also links the mystical appearance of Yol to the churning of the water wheel. When this musical apparatus begins to play its refrain, it sets these unfathomable events into motion. The cultural and intellectual qualities of this ancient city appear to be part of a model for what Le Clézio himself would consider an idyllic site. Although tempered with realistic

aspects, such descriptions play an important role in many of his works from nearly the last three decades, including his most recent saga *Ourania*.

One final point that we must consider before directing our attention to the larger works of fiction is the similarities and differences between Juba's experiences and the events which transpired when Le Clézio himself tasted the substance *Datura*, as outlined in chapter two. In both "Le Génie *Datura*" and "La Roue d'Eau," the literary character Juba and the author himself perceive a city or a village that defies logical explanation. Yol is magically reanimated, a process triggered by the musical rhythms of the water wheel, and the mind-altering substance *Iwa* or *Datura* allows Le Clézio to cross over to the other side and to communicate with "le village des morts." Since the Himyar civilization has also disappeared, they are both in a sense communing with death itself, but neither of them can stay in these privileged realms for a long time. Their entrance into a different domain is fleeting in nature. Moreover, it must not be overlooked that certain significant factors place both of them in an entirely different state of mind. It is the water wheel's music along with the brilliance of sunlight that alter Juba's perception of the world and permit him to enter into this other realm. A powerful hallucinogen temporarily alters Le Clézio's thought processes and transports him into this "autre monde." However, although no one except Juba enters Yol, he does not have to fear a temperamental and indeed dangerous *Iwa* as did Le Clézio in his initiation experiences. In other words, Yol does not possess the same inherent dangers as "le village des morts" in "Le Génie *Datura*." It is a tranquil, prosperous site of higher learning which has a developed culture of its

own, and the Himyar civilization is one which equally appreciates the contributions of other societies as well.

Although the themes of the two works are quite different, music also plays a fundamental role in Le Clézio's novel *Étoile Errante*. Published by Gallimard in 1992, this complex work deals with events from World War II, the creation of the modern-day state of Israel, and the ensuing Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On a more specific level, *Étoile Errante* explores the struggles that a Jewish adolescent named Esther and a young Palestinian girl named Nejma must face because of decisions made by their respective leaders and by the dominant world powers. As Putnam Walker states in his article entitled "The Poetics and Politics of Space in J.M.G. Le Clézio's *Étoile Errante*," "The fate of the Palestinian refugees, not unlike that of the Jews, has been determined by others" (319). Through no fault of their own, Esther and Nejma are exiled from one another, but although they only exchange glances and their names, the two adolescents cannot stop thinking about each other while the struggle continues to rage around them. As we will see, these two adolescents seem to have a type of mystical bond that will transcend this still unresolved conflict and reveal the kind of suffering shared by both peoples. However, despite its blatant anti-war stance, this novel should not be considered to be overtly political in nature because Le Clézio does not promote any specific ideology. Rather, he wishes to underscore the ramifications of armed conflicts in terms of their toll on human existence and the possibilities for future prosperity. As Walter Putnam insists further in his discussion, "'There is no utopia here, whether on the Israeli or

Palestinian side” (323). In this moving narrative, he compels the reader to reflect upon what waging a war means to men, women, and children of all societies.

This persuasive tale, grounded in historical events, concentrates on the experiences of the protagonist Esther during the Holocaust. Like many other Jews from across Europe, her family has sought refuge in the hills above Nice in the village of St. Martin-Vésubie. Since the crushing defeat of the French in June 1940, this village comprised predominantly of Jewish refugees, has been occupied and administered by the Italian army. Although the Italians strictly control the movements of the Jewish community and force them to register daily to receive rations and other survival essentials, they treat them with much more dignity than their German counterparts. However, when this narrative begins, Italy is on the verge of signing an armistice which will end its active collaboration with Hitler’s regime. In fact, Badoglio will sign this agreement on September 8, 1943. Esther’s family, as well as the rest of the community, is deeply concerned about what will happen to them when the Germans arrive to take the place of the departing Italians. They are bracing themselves for the inevitable transfer of power, which will leave them with little choice but to flee.

When the Italian army receives the order to leave the village, the inhabitants of St. Martin-Vésubie attempt to cross the Alps into Northern Italy to avoid the German authorities and eventual deportation. Unfortunately, a number of Jewish families are ambushed during their retreat, most notoriously, at Borgo San Dalmazzo, and immediately transported eastward. Esther’s father also vanishes when he goes on ahead with the first group of refugees, leaving his wife

and young daughter to mourn his loss over the next forty years. Esther and her mother do escape and eventually find refuge in the Aosta valley village of Festiona where they remain until the end of the conflict. And finally in December 1947, they board an Italian vessel, the *Sette Fratelli* bound for Eretz Israel and then Jerusalem, which they envision as the “Promised Land.”

During this voyage, the protagonist meets Jacques Berger to whom she will later be engaged until his untimely death. It is in a village named Latrun near Jerusalem where Esther meets the aforementioned Palestinian girl Nejma. It is here that she sees first-hand both the struggles of Nejma’s displaced people and the indifference of the Jewish refugees toward their suffering. While Esther and her mother continue their journey north to the Kibbutz of Ramat Yohanan near the Lebanese border, Jacques volunteers to fight with the army in the Israeli-Arab wars that followed Israel’s independence. Originally, Jacques and Esther plan to emigrate to Montreal where he intends to complete his medical studies. However, before they are able to leave the country, Jacques is killed in the crossfire of this sectarian violence. After her fiancé’s untimely death, the protagonist decides to realize his dream of studying medicine in Montreal. She is also pregnant with Jacques’s baby, whom she names for her father. Nearly forty years later, Esther returns to the village St. Martin and the surrounding area where the Germans executed her father and where her people endured so much agony. After visiting the site where she now knows her father died and releasing the ashes of her recently deceased mother into the Mediterranean Sea, she feels a great inner peace. As the novel comes to a close, Esther decides to return to

Israel in 1982 to open a pediatric clinic and attempt in a small way to alleviate some of the suffering that still plagues the country so many decades later.

From the very first page, it is evident that Esther is extremely sensitive to the effects of music. In fact, she claims that one of her first memories involves a “musical” sound which signaled the end of winter. This first privileged moment occurs before the Italians leave and the Germans arrive:

Elle savait que l'hiver était fini quand elle entendait le bruit de l'eau.

L'hiver, la neige avait recouvert le village, les toits des maisons et les prairies étaient blancs [...] Puis le soleil se mettait à brûler, la neige fondait et l'eau commençait à couler [...] C'était peut-être ce bruit d'eau son plus ancien souvenir. Elle se souvenait du premier hiver à la montagne, et de la musique de l'eau au printemps [...] Et l'eau descendait de tous les côtés, en faisant cette musique [...] Chaque fois qu'elle se souvenait de cela, elle avait envie de rire, parce que c'était un bruit doux et drôle comme une caresse (15).

Similar to Juba, Esther recognizes that the sounds from the natural world can have intense melodious qualities, and the calming effects of this music are particularly important because of the sense of impending doom that hangs over the village. The refugees realize that they are living the last precarious days of relative security. Although, as indicated earlier, the Italians strictly control their movements, they do not pursue the refugees aggressively and do not deport them into the extermination camps in the East. For this reason, Esther's father and many others consider themselves to be extremely fortunate: “le père

d'Esther n'en voulait pas aux Italiens [...] Un jour, pendant une réunion dans la cuisine de la maison d'Esther, quelqu'un avait dit du mal des Italiens, et son père s'était fâché : 'Taisez-vous, ce sont eux qui nous ont sauvé la vie, quand le préfet Ribière a donné l'ordre de nous livrer aux Allemands' " (18). But they also understand that the Italians will be leaving soon, hence the reason for their fear.

In the last days of this ever more menacing summer of 1943, it is the piano playing of M. Ferne that serves as a calming and a liberating force. When he was younger, he was a respected and famous pianist in Vienna: "M. Ferne avait été un pianiste célèbre, autrefois, à Vienne, avant la guerre. Il donnait des concerts le soir, dans les salles où venaient les dames en robe du soir et les messieurs en veste noire" (20). He left Vienna after the Nazi occupation, and moved to France to escape persecution. In *Étoile Errante*, he is almost a mythical character whose music resonates across the entire village:

Alors la musique a commencé vraiment, elle a jailli tout d'un coup du piano et elle a rempli toute la maison, le jardin, et la rue, elle a tout rempli de sa force, de son ordre, puis elle est devenue douce, mystérieuse. Maintenant elle bondissait, elle se répandait comme l'eau dans les ruisseaux, elle allait droit jusqu'au centre du ciel, jusqu'aux nuages, elle se mêlait à la lumière. Elle allait sur toutes les montagnes, elle allait jusqu'aux sources des deux torrents, elle avait la force de la rivière (21).

The musical notes created by M. Ferne do not appear to be constrained by the limitations of time and space. They permeate his entire house; they echo in the

streets and throughout the region. And, when they reach the sky, they mingle with sunlight. Equally importantly, M. Ferne's playing transports his listeners elsewhere. As the narrator emphatically declares, "Esther écoutait le langage de M. Ferne. Il ne parlait plus comme le maître d'école, à présent [...] Dans ces histoires, on était libre, il n'y avait pas de guerre, il n'y avait pas d'Allemands ni d'Italiens, rien qui pouvait faire peur ou arrêter la vie [...] Jamais rien n'avait eu tant d'importance"(21). In this other realm, they are far away from the realities of the war and the Holocaust. For a few instants, anguish vanishes; the notes have broken their chains and liberated them.⁴

When the Italian departure is imminent, Esther once again reflects upon the significance of M. Ferne's music for the entire community. Specifically, she reminisces about the day when the soldiers returned M. Ferne's piano which they had earlier confiscated:

Ils l'ont ramené! Ils ont rendu le piano à M. Ferne ! [...] Tous avaient la même expression sur leur visage. Peu à peu les gens se sont rassemblés dans la rue, pour écouter jouer M. Ferne. Et c'est vrai qu'il n'avait jamais joué comme cela. Par la porte de la cuisine obscure, les notes s'envolaient, montaient dans l'air léger, emplissaient toute la rue, tout le village. Le piano qui était resté

⁴ Before we continue with our analysis of privileged moments related to music in *Étoile Errante*, it is important to note that music also proves to be an extremely powerful force for two other secondary characters Tristan and Rachel. However, for the purposes of this study, we will focus on Esther's experiences because they are most relevant to our discussion of privileged moments. To investigate the significance of the music composed by Tristan's mother and its effects, see pp. 26-31. To probe the importance of music in Rachel's act of defiance and desperation facing a hostile crowd, see pp. 47-52.

trop longtemps silencieux paraissait jouer tout seul. La musique coulait, volait, brillait. Esther [...] écoutait presque sans respirer, tellement les notes du piano allaient vite et emplissaient son corps, sa poitrine [...] La musique de M. Ferne était comme cela: elle arrêtait le temps, et même, elle le faisait marcher à l'envers (78-79).

During these ominous summer months, M. Ferne's piano unites the community and provides a sense of release. When the Italians confiscate the instrument for their own pleasure, they are not simply taking away the instrument itself, they are also seizing the last vestige of hope from these villagers. As indicated earlier, the piano allows them to forget their fear if even for a few brief moments. Its reappearance as the Italians are preparing to depart proves how important it is, for its music once again challenges traditional conceptions of the time/space continuum. When M. Ferne's hands touch these keys, time stops altogether. Indeed it goes in reverse, drawing back to a time before the war and racial persecution. It is also clear from the passage that he has never before played with such intensity. This even greater passion signals the beginning of their end with the certainty of deportation. Consequently, M. Ferne's music is more important than ever.

The next stage in Esther's initiation into the force of music happens when she discovers the ecstasy of religion in the form of prayer and incantations and realizes the comforting role it can play during moments of profound anguish. From the very first time she enters the village synagogue, Esther feels a mysterious presence overpower her. Although neither one of her parents

practices Judaism, a sharp religious fervor envelopes and destabilizes her as she listens to the Hebrew chants:

L'odeur de suint des bougies se mêlait à l'odeur de la sueur, au chant rythmé, et c'était pareil à un vertige. Elle n'osait pas bouger, et pourtant, sans même s'en rendre compte, elle a commencé à faire osciller son buste, en avant, en arrière, en suivant le mouvement des femmes autour d'elle. 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).

Olfactory sensations combine with auditory stimuli to overwhelm the protagonist. Although she does not speak Hebrew, Esther admits that this language has a profound effect on her. In particular, she refers to its "musical" properties, and muses about the impact of Hebrew prayers upon her:

Puis une voix d'homme répondait ailleurs, faisait retenir les mots étranges, les mots pareils à la musique. Pour la première fois, Esther savait ce qu'était la prière. Elle ne comprenait pas comment cela était entre en elle, mais c'était une certitude : c'était le bruit sourd des voix, ou éclatait tout d'un coup l'incantation du langage [...] C'était le tourbillon de la parole. Ici, dans cette pièce, plus rien d'autre ne pouvait avoir de l'importance. Plus rien ne pouvait menacer... (82).

Esther does not comprehend the transformation that is taking place within, but she clearly recognizes it. For a few fleeting instants, nothing else matters besides the “ivresse” of the experience. Although the danger of deportation grows more and more intense, these moments in the synagogue fill the believers with an inner peace and give them the strength to continue their efforts to survive. Inside this sanctuary the followers feel as if none of the many daily threats that they have had to endure can harm them. Along with the rest of the congregation, Esther too allows the music, the candles, the fragrances, etc. to transport her “elsewhere.”

Throughout the entire novel, the Hebrew language continues to touch the protagonist deeply. When the refugees are crossing the mountains into Italy in a desperate attempt to avoid the German army, they assemble in an alpine chapel despite the stern warnings issued by the Italians who are aiding their escape. The narrator describes how the rhythms of the Jewish prayers once again penetrate her being: “Appuyée contre le mur froid de la chapelle, Esther écoutait à nouveau les paroles incompréhensibles, dans cette langue douce et saccadée [...] A nouveau, elle a ressenti ce frisson, comme si cette voix inconnue ne résonnait que pour elle, au fond d’elle” (111). It is important to note that Esther’s position against the wall suggests that this sanctuary is once again at full capacity despite “les interdictions des Italiens,” and once again the gentle though insistent incantations provide a refuge from the dangers they must confront: “Les voix des hommes qui grandissaient, résonnaient comme un orage, et devenaient très douces et murmuraient, et les paroles du livre, dans cette langue

mystérieuse, qui entraînent en vous sans qu'on les comprenne" (133). Esther admits her ignorance, but she never questions the power of these rituals themselves, which enable her to become part of the religious community.

Much later in the novel when Esther, her mother, and many others are aboard the aforementioned *Sette Fratelli* bound for Jerusalem, Jewish prayers also help to console them when they are sequestered by the port authorities. When Esther listens to the believers' moving pleas for deliverance, another realm outside of this world of contingencies opens before her: "Ce sont les mots qui vont avec le mouvement de la mer [...] des mots doux et puissants, des mots d'espoir et de mort, des mots plus grands que le monde, plus forts que la mort [...] j'ai compris ce que c'était que la prière [...] le langage m'emporte avec lui... Les mots me portent, ils m'emmènent dans un autre monde, dans une autre vie" (175). Esther allows herself to be carried away by this presence which defies mortality itself. The believers know that despite whatever happens to them, death possesses no power over them. Prayer alleviates their fear of the uncertain fate which awaits them. When they are unsure whether they will be allowed to continue their voyage, these words which are "larger than the world" and "stronger than death" enable them to persevere.

Like many of Le Clézio's protagonists whom we have already explored, Esther too is extremely receptive to the power of the elements. In fact, when the port authorities detain her and the rest of the passengers aboard the *Setta Fratelli*, it is the elements that truly rescue her. Soon after the voyage begins, a vicious storm arises. But even though the ship weathers the storm, customs

officers stop it before it leaves France and sequester all of the refugees: “On nous a tous enfermés dans cette grande salle vide au bout des ateliers de l’Arsenal, sans doute parce qu’on ne pouvait pas nous mettre dans les cellules, avec les prisonniers ordinaires. On nous a donnés des lits de sangles, de couvertures. On a pris tous nos papiers, l’argent, et tout ce qui pouvait être une arme” (178). Although the refugees are not incarcerated with the local criminals, they are still detained against their will. However, it is during this confinement that Esther learns what it means to be truly free. She discovers the power of the elements which liberate her while she is imprisoned: “j’avais tellement envie de voir la mer que j’ai fait un plan pour m’échapperJ [...]’ai réussi à m’approcher de la porte sans éveiller l’attention. Quand l’un des marins me donne l’assiette pleine de soupe, je la lâche sur ses pieds et je m’échappe en courant le long du couloir” (178-179). Esther’s scheme is successful, and she makes her way to the beach. Although she obviously feels free because she has managed to thwart the authorities, she has also discovered another type of freedom: “Il n’y a rien d’autre ici que le vent et la mer [...] j’ai aboli le temps et la distance, je suis arrivé de l’autre côté, là où la terre et les hommes sont libres, où tout est vraiment nouveau [...] C’est une ivresse [...] Je suis libre, j’ai en moi la liberté du vent, la lumière. C’est la première fois” (180). Similar to the privileged moments related to nature that we investigated in the preceding chapter, wind and sunlight intoxicate her, similar to when she listened to M. Ferne’s piano or the Hebrew chants. Here also these instants of euphoria in nature momentarily suspend the limitations of time and space. Esther has once again reached the “other side,”

and her experiences on the beach reinforce the privileged moments induced by M. Ferne's piano and by the Hebrew chants.

Unfortunately her ecstasy is short lived, for the authorities soon recapture her and return her to the Arsenal. Yet even in this prison, Esther experiences another privileged moment, which reaffirms all of the discoveries she has made so far:

Le ciel était si pur qu'on y voyait même la nuit. Moi, je restais assise près d'une fenêtre, enveloppée dans ma couverture, et je regardais la lune glisser entre les barreaux [...] Maintenant il me semblait que la distance qui nous séparait de la grande ville sainte n'existait plus [...] Le temps non plus n'existait plus. C'était le même ciel qu'autrefois, quand Moïse attendait dans la maison de Pharaon, ou quand Abraham rêvait comment avaient été faits le soleil et la lune, les étoiles, l'eau, la terre, et tous les animaux du monde. Ici, dans cette prison de l'Arsenal, je savais que nous étions une partie de ce temps-là, et cela me faisait frissonner de peur et me faisait battre le cœur, comme j'écoutais les paroles du livre (195).

Not only do these moments reduce the affective distance between Esther and the Promised Land, but they also allow her to recognize the bond between herself and the Jewish patriarchs, Moses and Abraham. The refugees' present struggles make Esther reflect upon all of the hardships the Jews have faced throughout much of recorded history. Equally importantly, Esther also relates the

ecstasy that she experiences from the elements to the intoxication she felt when she heard M. Ferne's piano or when she listened to Hebrew incantations.

Although every situation in which this mysterious intoxication overwhelms Esther is different, the strong feelings of euphoria and the ever increasing awareness of her identity are the same in each circumstance.

Moreover, this mingling of music in the form of the Hebrew language and nature becomes even more significant once the refugees are set free and allowed to continue their journey aboard the *Setta Fratelli*. During this trip, Rabbi Reb Joel begins to read from the sacred scriptures:

Dans le silence de la mer, la voix de Joël s'est élevée. Il lisait lentement, dans cette langue étrange et douce, la langue qu'avaient parlée Moïse dans le désert de Sin. Esther ne comprenait pas, mais les mots entraient en elle, comme ils l'avaient déjà fait, se mêlaient à son souffle. Les mots resplendissaient sur la mer si bleue, ils éclairaient chaque partie du navire, même les endroits salis ou meurtris par le voyage, même les taches sur le pont, ou les déchirures de la voile (203).

After enduring a vicious storm and a lengthy detainment, the refugees are close to arriving in what they hope will be the land of their dreams. In this atmosphere of celebration, the powerful words of the Hebrew language, mingled with the stark beauty of the ocean, once again mesmerize the protagonist.

When Esther and the other refugees arrive in Haifa and then proceed to Jerusalem before eventually settling in the Kibbutz of Ramat Yohanan, music

plays less of a role in her experiences. Although Esther reaches what she and the others anticipate would be a “Promised Land,” she soon realizes the creation of their state has displaced the Palestinians who used to dwell there. Now it is Nejma and her people who live in refugee camps with no place to call home. This new political division inaugurates a new chapter in the saga of two groups who claim the same sacred territory. As Walter Putnam states, “The drama is, of course, that the same land is contested by two rival peoples.” (321). The end of this touching work of fiction can offer no resolution to the conflict which has scarred the region for countless generations. It appears as if the relationship between the Israelis and the Palestinians will always be that of oppressor/ oppressed. Although these roles might one day again be reversed, the cyclical nature of this atrocity seems to have no end.

However, as previously mentioned, the novel ends on a positive note, despite the lack of any viable solution to the violence which devastates the region. Esther seeks out the place in Nice where the Gestapo tortured its victims, returns to St. Martin, and discovers the site of her father’s execution. When sitting on the jetty overlooking the Mediterranean in Nice, she disperses her mother’s ashes and at last finds the peace and reconciliation, which in turn dissipates the shadows of the past. It is an unexpected source, coming from a fisherman’s radio that helps Esther reach this stage of tranquility:

elle est contente d’entendre leurs voix, leur musique vulgaire et leurs rires. C’est la preuve qu’ils sont réels, que tout cela existe, cette mer lente, ces blocs de ciment, cette voile qui avance dans la

brume. Ils ne vont pas disparaître. Elle se sent envahir par la légèreté de l'air, par la brume lumineuse. La mer est entrée en elle [...] Il y a si longtemps qu'elle n'a pas connu une telle paix, une telle dérive. Elle se souvient, le pont du bateau, la nuit, quand il n'y avait plus de terre, ni de temps (347).

A site which the Germans transformed into a place of fear and carnage is now filled with life and hope. The intoxication that Esther once experienced because of her close rapport with nature has also been renewed, and she can now attempt to help others. For this reason, even though the odds are stacked against her, Esther returns to Israel to try to make a difference. As indicated earlier, she will open a pediatric clinic, which she hopes in a small but significant way will help those still disenfranchised and encourage others to contribute to the effort.

In the preceding chapter, we analyzed the significance of privileged moments triggered and sustained by nature in *Désert*, but it should also be noted that music plays an important role in this work as well. Specifically, prayers, incantations, and the Chleuh language itself are all significant musical forces in this novel. Similar to Esther in *Étoile Errante*, the ecstasy of religious experiences, in this instance Islam, is a pervasive and powerful force for Lalla and her people. In addition to nature and sexual encounters, these catalysts also allow the characters to transcend the realm of contingencies. As Bettina Knapp states in her study of *Désert*, "The divine experience, be it in the form of prayer, in an animistic relationship with nature, or in the sexual act, invites the

worshipper to penetrate “beyond,” ... through,” or “across” what others, devoid of inner sight, might consider to be impervious opacities” (2). And as she continues her analysis, she probes the significance of privileged moments related to all types of music in this work: “The rhythms, sonorities, movements, and verbal inhalations and exhalations emanating from the performing artists, musicians, and poets are so powerfully incised that time, pain, and even joy are dispelled-inviting Divinity alone to occupy that inner space within the individual” (4). Although she does not employ the specific term “privileged moment,” Knapp clearly admits the significance of these instants. As we will see, many different types of music in *Désert* possess the ability to “dispel” time momentarily and further reveal the role of these transforming experiences in Le Clézio’s fictional undertaking.

From the earliest pages of the novel, it is clear that the Islamic religion is a focal point of the desert people’s society. In the part of the tale which takes place from 1909-1912, it is evident that the religious leader Ma el Aïnine is revered and respected by his people. Similar to the historical prophets of old, this pious individual assumes an almost mythical stature that comes paradoxically from his silence, which is likened to that of the desert itself, and from the force of his voice itself.

As indicated in the preceding chapter, survival is difficult in the Sahara, even for the Tuaregs. In addition, the advances of the French army make their situation even more precarious. Although Nour is a child during the French invasion of this region, he is clearly cognizant of the gravity of the political

situation. The narrator comments upon this ubiquitous menace as follows:

“Encore une fois, Nour sentit son cœur se serrer, parce que c’était l’ombre de la mort qui était sous les tentes” (51). However, in spite of the daily reminders of their own mortality, these wanderers are sustained by both their music and their chants and the power of El Aïnine’s own voice. As Nour approaches the walls of El Aïnine’s city Smara, he begins to listen to the inhabitants who are singing and playing musical instruments in the compound, an experience which at least temporarily dissipates his suffering:

Comme il approchait du mur d’enceinte de la ville [...] Nour entendit le son aigre des flutes [...] tandis que les tambours et les rebecs reprenaient inlassablement la même phrase. Une voix d’homme, grave et monotone, chantait une chanson andalouse, mais Nour ne pouvait pas reconnaître les paroles [...] Nour sentit l’ivresse de la musique et de la danse, et il oublia l’ombre mortelle qui restait sous les tentes. C’était comme s’il était déjà en marche vers les hautes falaises du Nord [...] là où naissent les torrents d’eau claire (51-52).

Nour allows the music to envelop him and displace, at least temporarily, the desperation of his people’s situation. This experience also fuels his own reverie, as he dreams that they have finally reached the prophesied “Promised Land.”

The narrator later informs the reader that this previously-unidentified voice is that of Ma el Aïnine himself:

Mais la voix faible et lointaine touchait chaque homme, chaque femme, comme à l’intérieur de leurs corps [...] les musiciens se

sont mis à jouer, et leur musique légère parlait avec la voix de Ma el Aïnine [...] avec la mélodie pure des flutes de roseau. La voix du vieil homme et la musique des chalumeaux se répondaient maintenant, comme si elles disaient la même chose, au dessus de la voix des hommes et des bruits sourds des pas sur la terre durcie (60-62).

The old spiritual leader's voice blends with the accompanying music to enchant his desperate people and to draw them into a collective ceremony where the limitations of time and space disappear: "Quand la danse a commencé [...] Le nom de Dieu était exhalé avec force [...] Le tambour de terre marquait chaque cri : Houwa [...] C'était une musique qui s'enfonçait dans la terre froide, qui allait jusqu'au plus profond du ciel noir, qui se mêlait au halo de la lune. Il n'y avait plus de temps, à présent, plus de malheur "(68). It is important to note that El Aïnine's subjects are not merely listening to the sound of his voice, they are actively participating in the creation of this music. Although the old leader's voice is the centerpiece of this experience, everyone in the community is playing an instrument or dancing to these rhythms. This common effort momentarily causes their anguish to disappear and the fervor induced by these sacred ceremonies opens a new dimension for these devout believers.

Reiterating the supernatural nature of these vibrations, the narrator paints this picture: "C'était un bruit qui allait au-delà des forces naturelles, un bruit qui déchirait le réel [...] Chaque expiration douloureuse et profonde agrandissait encore la plaie du ciel, celle qui unissait les hommes à l'espace, qui mêlait leur

sang et leur lymphe. Chaque chanteur criait le nom de Dieu, de plus en plus vite” (69). Although the mystical nature of these tonalities is once again evident, it must be noted that this description is different from the others, for the narrator highlights the “violent,” dissonant aspects of these sounds. Instead of simply transporting one outside this realm, they “rip” or “tear” what we refer to as the real world and widen the wound which subjugates humanity to the laws of time and space. The experience may transport them “elsewhere,” but it likewise concretizes the trauma of what they are experiencing and similarly it suggests that they will perhaps continue to suffer. It is, in this sense also, an omen that signals more difficulties ahead for these marginalized desert nomads.

Much later in the novel, Nour once again reveals his sensitivity to the power of music. One day, he hears a mysterious voice singing a little refrain in the Chleuh language, which begins with “Un jour, oh, un jour, le corbeau deviendra blanc” (239). As the narrator explains, “ce qui était le plus extraordinaire, c’était la musique qu’il entendait, quand il s’en allait de son corps. Il n’avait jamais rien entendu de semblable. C’était une voix de jeune femme qui chantait dans la langue chleuh, une chanson douce qui bougeait dans l’air et qui répétait tout le temps la même parole” (239). As with the incantations and religious chants we have explored, repetition plays a crucial role in these combinations of sounds as well. And they too appear to induce a type of out-of-body experience: “D’où venait cette voix, si claire, si douce? Nour sentait son esprit glisser encore plus loin, au-delà de cette terre, au-delà de ce ciel, vers le pays où il y a des nuages chargés de pluie, des rivières profondes et larges où

l'eau ne cesse jamais de couler" (239). Nour might not know the origin of these enigmatic tonalities, but he cannot deny the mysterious power they have upon him. As with many other privileged moments analyzed so far, Nour enters another dimension where he glimpses a fertile and forgiving land. In this realm, water is in abundance; his people do not have to struggle from one well to the next. However, as is the case with all of the privileged moments that we have explored, Nour's journey to the other side is fleeting. After a few instants of euphoria, Nour must return to the stark realities of the desert and the desperation of his people's plight. But it is equally important to note that although so many have died, they are still "hommes libres" who return to the desert and continue to survive and preserve their cultural identity, as Lalla also will nearly a century later.

Many decades later after El Aïnine's dream has evaporated, it is evident that the modern-day Tuareg Lalla is as receptive to the force of music as her ancestors of yore. Specifically, she asserts that the French language itself is musical. Similar to spiritual chants, it is possible that a single word in a particular language can invoke moments of euphoria, such as the word "Méditerranée" for Lalla. As Knapp states in her discussion of *Désert*, "Strange musical sonorities [...] inhabit her soul. If, for example, she hears a word such as "Méditerranée" in a song on the radio, its multiple tones seem to mesmerize her, to nourish her in some way, and she in turn hums or sings them over and over again as in a religious chant" (5). Similar to Esther with the Hebrew language, even though Lalla does not understand the word, it has a poignant effect upon her:

Elle joint ses mains autour de ses genoux, elle se balance un peu d'avant en arrière, puis sur les côtés, en chantonnant une chanson en français, une chanson qui dit seulement: 'Méditerranée [...]' Lalla ne sait pas ce que cela veut dire. C'est une chanson qu'elle a entendue à la radio, un jour, et elle n'a retenu que ce mot-là, mais c'est un mot qui lui plaît bien. Alors, de temps en temps, quand elle se sent bien, qu'elle n'a rien à faire, ou quand elle est au contraire un peu triste sans savoir pourquoi, elle chante le mot, quelquefois à voix basse pour elle, si doucement qu'elle s'entend à peine, ou bien très fort, presque à tue-tête, pour réveiller les échos et pour faire partir la peur (76-77).

For Lalla, the French language possesses such powerful musical properties that an isolated word can result in privileged moments. This single word either reinforces an existing contentment or consoles her and dispels fear. After hearing a French song on the radio, she repeats the word "Méditerranée" until it has the same effect as a religious chant, dispelling all uncertainty and reaffirming her sense of well being. In *Désert*, music in all of its various forms triggers these experiences for both Lalla and her ancestors such as Nour. The musical qualities of both the voice itself or a simple word transforms the characters' sensory perceptions and once again reveal their significance in Le Clézio's fictitious undertaking.

Similar to *Désert* and the other texts probed in this chapter, the music of both nature and language also play an important role in *Le Chercheur d'Or*. As

Alexis affirms in the opening paragraph: “Ici, le bruit de la mer est beau comme une musique. Le vent apporte les vagues qui se brisent sur le socle de corail, très loin, et j’entends chaque vibration dans les rochers, et courant dans le ciel” (15-16). As we saw in the preceding chapter, the personified ocean captivates the young protagonist, and he is sensitive to all its sounds and rhythms. Like Juba in “La Roue d’Eau,” Alexis clearly recognizes the harmonious nature of the vibrations that resonate from the sea itself.

However, perhaps the greatest musical force in *Le Chercheur d’Or* comes from Alexis’s mother Mam. One reason why the private lessons Mam has been giving Alexis and Laure are so effective is because of her voice itself. It mesmerizes Alexis to such a degree that he is no longer aware of what her words mean:

Que dit-elle? Je ne sais plus. Le sens de ses paroles a disparu
[...] Seule reste la musique, douce, légère presque insaisissable,
unie à la lumière sur le feuillage des arbres, à l’ombre de la
varangue, au parfum du soir. Je l’écoute sans me lasser.
J’entends vibrer sa voix, en même temps que le chant des oiseaux.
Parfois je suis du regard un vol d’étourneaux, comme si leur
passage entre les arbres, vers les cachettes des montagnes,
expliquait la leçon de Mam. Elle, de temps à autre, me fait revenir
sur terre, en prononçant lentement mon nom (25-26).

As with many of the other privileged moments related to music described earlier, everything else in the external world disappears except for the “ivresse” itself.

Hearing Mam's voice is one of the most important childhood memories from the period of Alexis's life in Le Boucan before the cyclone devastated their home and their father's chimerical projects ruined the family financially. Indeed, for Alexis, his mother's musical voice constitutes a large part of her identity as a gentle teacher and consoler.

All of Mam's words are melodious, but her voice appears to be most musical when she reads both bedtime stories and religious parables: "c'est une longue histoire qu'elle raconte, soir après soir, ou reviennent les mêmes mots, la même musique [...] c'est cette même interminable histoire qui me revient [...] dictée lentement par Mam [...] et la lumière de son regard brille sur ces phrases incompréhensibles et belles" (28). Mam's voice resonates like an incantation and her reading of biblical passages is even more captivating: "J'aime aussi les leçons de morale de Mam, le plus souvent le dimanche matin de bonne heure, avant de réciter la messe. J'aime les leçons de morale parce que Mam raconte toujours une histoire, chaque fois nouvelle" (29). Whereas the bedtime tale is always the same, Mam tells Alexis and Laure a different biblical story each time, such as that of the Tower of Babel, Jonas and the whale, or the tale of Solomon and the queen of Sheba. Once again: "Ce ne sont pas les mots que je perçois, mais la voix de Mam m'entraîne dans le palais de Salomon"(31). And, throughout the novel, Alexis reaffirms the importance of these moments when he was both enchanted and calmed by the harmonic rhythms of his mother's voice. In addition to his mother's voice, Alexis is equally fascinated by the sounds of words denoting geographical places. When his father allows him to enter his

office before the destructive cyclone, he shares his knowledge of the ocean and of his travels with Alexis. He tells him stories about famous explorers and sailors, and shows him the maps of their voyages. As the narrator affirms, “J’écoute ces histories, les noms de pays, l’Afrique, le Tibet, les îles du Sud : ce sont des noms magiques, ils sont pour moi comme les noms des étoiles, comme les dessins des constellations ”(51). Names of distant places mesmerize the protagonist and will remain one of his most cherished memories of his dreamer father. Equally importantly, it is Alexis’s father who attempts to impart all of his passion for the sea to his son.

Even more than these exotic names, however, it is the sounds of English that fuel both Alexis’s and Laure’s reveries. While reading their father’s British publications, they discover its special attraction, for as Alexis affirms: “Alors nous lisons les épisodes du roman qui paraît chaque semaine dans l’*Illustrated London News*, *Nada the Lily* de Rider Haggard, illustré de gravures qui font peur un peu et font rêver [...] Chacun de ces noms est au fond de moi” (71). Alexis and Laure are enchanted by the sounds of English because they feel as if it is their own private language. As Alexis asserts, “La langue anglaise, que notre père a commencé à nous enseigner, est pour nous la langue des légendes. Quand nous voulons dire quelque chose d’extraordinaire, ou de secret, nous le disons dans cette langue, comme si personne d’autre ne pouvait le comprendre” (72). They feel as if their father is teaching them how to communicate in a type of secret code, and as with the place names referred to earlier, this experience too creates a special bond between them and their father.

With respect to *Le Chercheur d'Or* as a whole, Mam's voice, words referring to geographical locations, and the English language all have powerful musical properties. When Alexis and Laure's mother recounts both bedtime tales and biblical legends, the musicality of her voice becomes more important than the message itself. Moreover, the fact that her words are at times incomprehensible does nothing at all to diminish their force. When Mam begins to read, her words blend together like a powerful incantation, which holds Alexis and Laure spellbound. For Alexis, names of places themselves have a similar effect upon him, and they also help to reduce the affective distance between him and his father. Similar to Esther and Hebrew to Lalla and the French song title, the English language likewise captivates both Alexis and Laure, and the legends that they read from the *Illustrated London News*, and *Nada the Lily* fill them with a joy that temporarily at least dispels their uncertainty about what the future holds for the family. The privileged moments in this text that are triggered by Mam's voice, exotic place names, and the English language itself reinforce those triggered by contact with nature and reveal the significance of musicality as a whole in this narrative.

In *Poisson d'Or*, much more than in any other work that we have explored, music literally plays a life-saving role for the young protagonist Laïla. It rescues her and helps her to define her very identity by the end of the novel. As Jollin-Bertocchi states in her analysis of this novel, "Ainsi la musique a-t-elle un rôle primordial dans l'économie générale du roman, sur le plan fictionnel, celui de l'évolution du personnage [...] et notamment dans le dénouement heureux de

l'histoire. Elle se constitue progressivement un art de vivre, ou de survivre; elle est la source d'une révélation, une quête d'identité" (154). For these reasons, this work is crucial to our investigation of privileged moments in Le Clézio's repertoire. *Poisson d'Or*, published by Gallimard in 1997, recounts the adventures of an adolescent named Laïla who was abducted from her African desert village and sold to a woman named Lalla Asma. As the first person narrator explains, "Quand j'avais six ou sept ans, j'ai été volée. Je ne m'en souviens pas vraiment, car j'étais trop jeune, et tout ce que j'ai vécu ensuite a effacé ce souvenir [...] tout à coup des mains d'un homme qui me jettent au fond d'un grand sac, et j'étouffe. C'est Lalla Asma qui m'a achetée" (11).

Like many of Le Clézio's other characters, her true origin is unknown, for as Laïla confirms:

je ne connais pas mon vrai nom, celui que ma mère m'a donné à ma naissance, ni le nom de mon père, ni le lieu où je suis née. Tout ce que je sais, c'est ce que m'a dit Lalla Asma, que je suis arrivée chez elle une nuit, et pour cela elle m'a appelée Laïla, la Nuit. Je viens du Sud, de très loin, peut-être d'un pays qui n'existe plus. Pour moi, il n'y a rien eu avant, juste cette rue poussiéreuse, l'oiseau noir, et le sac (11).

Although Laïla remembers certain details from the kidnapping, her life before is a complete blank. After her arrival at Lalla Asma's house, she loses hearing in one ear: "je suis devenue sourde d'une oreille [...] Une camionnette m'a cognée, et m'a brisé un os dans l'oreille gauche" (12). Laïla will suffer from this physical

injury throughout the novel, and its implications will, as we shall see, become even more important in the years to come. Immediately, she realizes that she is both physically and socially different from the rest of the community. In this society, her only place as an outsider is one of perpetual servitude. Yet, although Laïla has been purchased and is a servant, Lalla Asma treats her very well. Similar to Mam, the old lady teaches the protagonist various subjects such as grammar, composition, mathematics, religion, etc., and as Laïla affirms:

Elle voulait bien que je l'appelle 'maîtresse' parce que c'était elle qui m'avait appris à lire et à écrire en français et en espagnol, qui m'avait enseigné le calcul mental et la géométrie, et qui m'avait donné les rudiments de la religion-la sienne, où Dieu n'a pas de nom, et la mienne [...] et elle m'enseignait tout ce qu'il ne fallait pas faire, comme souffler sur ce qu'on va manger [...] Qu'il fallait toujours dire la vérité, et se laver chaque jour des pieds à la tête (13).

Although Lalla Asma's insistence that Laïla call her "maîtresse" might seem to validate the master/slave relationship, it is clear that she does not think of herself as the protagonist's "master" but rather her "teacher" both in academic subjects and practical matters as well. Throughout her life, Laïla will reflect upon these lessons, and it is evident that she sees Lalla Asma as a maternal figure who both cares for her and protects her. When Lalla Asma has a stroke several years after Laïla's arrival, however, the girl's life changes drastically. Before this unfortunate event, Laïla rarely ever ventured outside the confines of the house

because of her fear of another accident. She knows almost nothing about the outside world, but when she sees Lalla Asma lying on the floor she rushes out to seek help. Despite the medical care that Laïla is able to obtain for Lalla Asma at this time, she will never fully recover. Consequently, Laïla is forced to think about what will happen to her after the old lady's death, for although the elderly woman treats Laïla well, the rest of the family exploits her mercilessly.

Lalla Asma's tragic death in the months following her stroke closes a chapter in Laïla's life and casts her into the real world. Throughout the next few years the protagonist engages in a variety of different adventures, all of which ultimately result in her exploitation and her subsequent need to escape. She first finds refuge in a mysterious compound called "Le Fondouk," which she does not know is a brothel but where she quickly becomes "la mascotte" (38). Given the affection of the prostitutes, she spends some of the happiest moments of her life here. But her irresponsible tranquility is short-lived, for the Fondouk is shut down and the authorities force her to become a servant in the household of Lalla Asma's son and his wife Zora. She eventually escapes and is reunited with Houriya and Tagadirt, two of the most affectionate "princesses." But their financial situation is so desperate that Laïla and Houriya flee to seek a better life in France.

Along with many other illegal immigrants, they board a ship for the Mediterranean crossing. They then proceed by truck to Toulouse, where they board a train for Paris. While on the train, Laïla meets a young Gypsy boy named Albonico, who introduces her to the power of music. Despite Houriya's

insistence that Gypsies are dangerous and should be avoided at all costs, Laïla befriends him. Although she claims that she only talks to him in order to avoid boredom on the long journey north, the music that Albonico begins to play touches her deeply, beginning what will be a life-saving learning process:

Il jouait une musique étrange, qui faisait comme un roulement mêlé au bruit du train, puis des notes qui éclataient, qui parlaient vite. Je n'avais jamais entendu ça, même sur mon vieux poste. Il jouait, et en même temps, il parlait, il chantait, plutôt il murmurait des mots dans sa langue, ou bien des marmonnements [...] Et moi j'avais envie de danser, je me souviens quand, les premiers temps, au fondouk, je dansais pour les princesses, pieds nus sur le carrelage froid des chambres, pendant qu'elles chantaient et frappaient dans leurs mains. La musique du Gitan était comme cela, elle entraînait en moi, elle me donnait des forces nouvelles (93).

Laïla has listened to various types of music, but she has never before heard these particular sounds, and although Albonico passes briefly through her life, the impact of his music cannot be overstated. These melodies foreshadow other experiences that the protagonist will undergo through the rest of the novel, and it is with Albonico that Laïla's musical initiation begins.

After her first musical experience with Albonico's ethnic melodies, Laïla arrives in Paris, but she soon realizes that the immigrant section of the city in which she resides offers little opportunity for a better life. Aggressive men stalk her and make menacing advances. She and Houriya also have a difficult time

surviving financially, until a sympathetic lady named Marie-Hélène finds the protagonist a position in a hospital as a “fille de sale.” Since this job is only part-time, Marie-Hélène procures her another job as a maid for an affluent doctor’s wife named Mme Fromaigeat. In the beginning, this rich woman appears to be an extremely kind and generous person. Since she has connections with the police commissioner, she even succeeds in obtaining citizenship papers for Laïla. However, one day she does something inexplicable. She drugs the protagonist, and molests her. This abuse enrages Laïla, who discards everything this woman had ever given her and destroys everything she can in the apartment before she escapes.

After her frantic reaction to this inexcusable sexual exploitation, Laïla has no choice but to live with a friend Nono in his illegal residence on the Rue du Javelot. Nono is an illegal immigrant from Cameroun who has unrealistic aspirations of becoming a professional boxer and who would actually like to marry Laïla. With Nono, she essentially lives underground, hiding from the authorities and partying excessively almost every night. But it is Nono who introduces Laïla to Simone, whose music will further alter her life. Simone is a Haitian woman who lives with an abusive Haitian psychiatrist, but her voice, like that of Albonica, mesmerizes the protagonist:

Elle avait une voix grave, vibrante, chaude, qui entrait jusqu’au fond de moi, jusqu’à dans mon ventre. Elle chantait en créole, avec des mots africains, elle chantait le voyage de retour, à travers la mer, que font les gens de l’île quand ils sont morts. Elle chantait debout,

presque sans bouger, et puis soudain elle se mettait à tourner en battant des hanches et sa grande robe s'ouvrait autour d'elle. Elle était si belle que j'en étais suffoquée (144-145).

Simone's beauty and her voice hold Laïla spellbound, and it is she who teaches the protagonist how to sing: "Elle s'était mis dans la tête de m'apprendre à chanter [...] Je ne lui ai rien dit, mais elle savait que j'étais à moitié sourde. C'est incroyable qu'elle ait eu l'idée de m'enseigner la musique, comme si elle avait compris que c'était ça qui était en moi, que c'était pour ça que je vivais " (160-161). Simone recognizes Laïla's musical potential and exposes her to a variety of contemporary music, such as that of Jimi Hendrix, Nina Simone, Muddy Waters, Billy Holiday which, significantly, transport her back to Africa: "Dehors, le monde bougeait, peut-être, les métros, les trains, les voitures [...] J'oubliais tout [...] Tout ça glissait, s'écoulait. La seule image qui venait, qui me submergeait, c'était le grand fleuve Sénégal, et l'embouchure de la Falémé, la berge tranchée dans la terre rouge, le pays d'El Hadj. C'était là que la musique de Simone m'avait amenée "(163). Simone's voice transports her to the Senegal of El Hadj, the grandfather of another of Laïla's friend's named Hakim. It is important to note that this is the first reference to Sub-Saharan Africa and her ever-increasing desire to uncover her true origins. This represents the beginning of Laïla's longing to discover her own African roots from which she had been forcefully displaced.

Before El Hadj dies, he gives the protagonist the passport of his own deceased daughter Marima. He instructs her to change the photo, and to

assume Marima's identity. This gesture on the part of the elderly blind man deeply touches Laïla for as she expresses: "Jamais personne ne m'avait fait un cadeau pareil, un nom et une identité [...] Parce que c'était tout ce qu'il voulait me donner, un nom, un passeport, la liberté d'aller "(184). All of her life, Laïla has been searching for an identity, hoping that one day she would remember her name, and although El Hadj's dying gift does not solve her identity crisis, it does allow her to claim legal status in France and pursue other possibilities.

With yet another companion named Juanico, she leaves Paris for Nice where she discovers that violence and poverty are as widespread here as in Paris. However, it is in Nice that Laïla meets Sara:

Il y avait Sara. Je l'ai vue pour la première fois, un peu par hasard, dans ce bar de l'hôtel Concorde sur la Promenade [...] Et au fond du hall, j'ai entendu la musique. C'est curieux, parce que, en général, à cause de mon oreille gauche, je n'entends pas la musique de si loin. Mais, là, le son arrivait jusqu'à moi, lourd et bas, avec des vibrations qui couraient sur ma peau, dans mon ventre. J'ai marché à travers le hall, guidée par le son. Un instant, mon cœur a battu, parce que j'ai cru que j'avais cru que j'avais retrouvé Simone (200).

Although Laïla is mistaken for a second and thinks that she hears Simone, Sara's voice is equally as powerful as that of her initial "teacher." She normally cannot hear sounds from far away because of her aforementioned childhood injury, but these chords possess such a force that they call out to her from even a

considerable distance. Laïla stays and listens to Sara all night long, and although Sara informs her that she will soon be moving to Boston, Laïla comes to hear her play every day before her departure: “Après, je suis revenue chaque jour, de cinq à neuf heures du soir, et je m’asseyais dans mon coin, au bord du podium [...] Sara a chanté pour moi tout le mois de mai” (201). During this month, Laïla and Sara develop an intense, even romantic bond: “ Je restais jusqu’à la fin, et chaque soir [...] elle passait devant moi sans rien dire, comme si on ne se connaissait pas, juste ses yeux qui s’amusaient, un petit sourire qui éclairait sa figure, et sa démarche ondulante, vers la porte de l’hôtel, vers la nuit. J’ai été amoureuse de Sara tout ce mois-la ”(202). Although their relationship never reaches the physical level, Sara’s music signals yet another essential stage in Laïla’s progressive evolution.

When Sara moves to Boston, Laïla accompanies her as well on an exchange visa. But living with Sara in yet another unwelcoming city, the protagonist realizes how difficult life can be for a musician or any type of artist, even one with much talent: “cette ville pourrie, cette ville de connards d’Anglos, ou personne surtout personne avec du talent, ne pourrait jamais arriver à faire sortir quoi que ce soit de l’ornière de fange dans laquelle il fallait bien vivre” (215). Many of the musicians whom Laïla meets fit the profile of “starving artists,” who desperately struggle to sustain themselves. However, it is in Boston that Sara begins to give Laïla music lessons, yet another step in her development. While the protagonist is washing dishes during “happy hour” at a local bar, the regular pianist becomes sick, and Laïla volunteers to take her

place. The bar owner, as well as his customers, appreciate her music, so when the usual singer leaves he asks Laïla to take her place. One night, a music executive named Mr. Leroy hears the protagonist both play and sing, and, impressed by her performance, he gives her his business card. Although Laïla is not even sure what this individual wants or expects from her, she goes to the studio where Mr. Leroy records her singing a variety of different musical styles:

Je suis allée toute seule au studio d'enregistrement [...] Je ne comprenais pas bien ce que Mr Leroy voulait [...] J'ai joué comme j'avais appris avec Simone [...] Et puis j'ai joué mon morceau, celui ou j'aboyais comme les coupeurs de canne, ou je criais comme les martinets dans le ciel au-dessus de la cour de Lalla Asma, ou je chantais comme les esclaves qui appelaient leurs grand-pères loas, au bord des plantations, debout devant la mer. J'ai appelé ma chanson On the roof (226).

Laïla sings an eclectic assortment from the different musical genres to which she has been exposed, but she also adds a profoundly personal touch to these melodies. It is also important to note that a number of these musical styles are those of marginalized peoples, who have been exploited by a ruling majority. In these refrains, their frustration and despair are fully revealed, and Laïla will soon realize how her songs help give a voice to those who struggle to be heard and respected. In other words, the epiphany will strike Laïla that her music extends far beyond herself.

After she records tracks with Mr. Leroy at the studio, Laïla discovers that she is pregnant with Jean Vilan's baby. She had met Jean in Boston where he claimed to be taking classes at Harvard after having taught for the Alliance Française at Chicago. But since Jean has another serious girlfriend at this time, Laïla continues her sexual adventures and begins a relationship with yet another questionable individual named Bela. While traveling across country with this unsavory character, she becomes extremely ill and has a miscarriage. Bela eventually abandons her in front of a hospital in Los Angeles not caring whether she lives or dies. But despite her illness and miscarriage, Laïla does eventually recover. Although she temporarily loses all of her hearing in her other ear, she is cared for, and even more importantly, continues to play and to sing from memory:

C'est la musique m'a sauvée [...] Je me suis approchée du piano, j'ai touché le bois noir, le clavier d'ivoirine [...] Je me suis assise sur le banc, j'ai commencé à jouer. Je crois que j'avais oublié, au début, mes doigts accrochaient les touches, et je cherchais à retrouver les sons [...] Et puis tout à coup, ça a commencé à revenir [...] Je jouais Billie, je jouais Jimi Hendrix [...] Je jouais tout ce qui venait, sans ordre, sans m'arrêter [...] les sons jaillissaient hors de moi, de ma bouche, de mes mains, de mon ventre. Je ne voyais rien, j'étais dans le coffre du piano...Maintenant, j'entendais la musique, pas avec mes oreilles, mais avec tout mon corps, un

frisson qui m'enveloppait [...] les sons inaudibles montaient dans mes doigts, ils se mêlaient à mon sang, à mon souffle (241-242).

What should have been a debilitating condition is not limiting Laïla's ability to play or to sing. Her body appears to be one integrated organism which helps her to compensate for her deficiency, as she "hears" with her entire body; the music is now part of her very being. It defines her as an individual, and gives meaning to her existence. Similar to the aesthetic redemption that we discussed in chapter one with Proust and Sartre, music gives Laïla a purpose in life. She is no longer a "fish" incessantly attempting to escape ensnarement with no meaningful direction to her wanderings.

Moreover, Laïla realizes even more intensely that she is performing music not just for herself, but also for all those whom she has encountered in her journey across three continents:

Pour eux, pour elle, je jouais, je retrouvais ma musique [...] Ce n'était pas seulement pour moi que je jouais maintenant, je l'avais compris: c'était pour eux tous, qui m'avaient accompagnée, les gens des souterrains, les habitants des caves de la rue du Javelot, les émigrants qui étaient avec moi sur le bateau...plus loin encore, ceux du Souikha, du Douar Tabriket [...] Pour eux tous, et tout d'un coup, j'ai pensé au bébé, que la fièvre avait emporté, et pour lui aussi je jouais, pour que ma musique le retrouve dans l'endroit secret où il se trouve. J'étais prise par la musique (242-243).

Laïla's music seeks to touch and sustain all the marginalized individuals whom she has met. This includes everyone she lived with in le fondouk, on la rue du Javelot in Paris, and in Boston. On a more personal level, Laïla also contemplates the child she lost. If a special place is reserved for him and others like him, she hopes that her music will also reach out and console them.

At the end of the novel, it is evident that the protagonist has discovered her identity through music. Indeed, her musical career seems to be blossoming as she receives an invitation to perform at an international jazz festival in Nice. However, similar to Lalla in *Désert*, Laïla will ultimately reject the glamour and materialism that accompanies this type of commercial success. Although she initially agrees to perform at the Nice festival, she cancels her appearance soon after her arrival. As Laïla explains: "Tout d'un coup la musique m'étouffait. Je voulais seulement du silence, du soleil et du silence. J'ai laissé un message pour l'organisation du Festival, j'ai dit que j'annulais tout "(248). Even though the protagonist is without a doubt aware that she will forfeit a considerable sum of money because of this decision, the glitz and monetary benefits of being a celebrity have nothing to offer her. Those who desperately need to hear her voice will not be present in the festival audience. In other words, it is probable that she will continue to sing in order to ease the suffering of all of those who have been subjugated by the modern world, but she will not misuse her gift for personal enrichment.

Now that Laïla has discovered meaning in life through music, which in her own words has "saved" her, she is able to seek out her African origins. She

travels to the region where her people, the Hilals, reside. When Laïla arrives, she instinctively knows that Houriya, one of the most affectionate “princesses” with whom she lived in le Fondouk and traveled to France with in search of a better life, was correct in her contention that the protagonist is a Hilal. Although she does not have any definitive proof besides a pair of crescent shaped ear rings, she immediately connects to both the land and the culture: “Je n’ai pas besoin d’aller plus loin. Maintenant, je sais que je suis enfin arrivée au bout de mon voyage. C’est ici, nulle part, ailleurs [...] C’est ici que j’ai été volée, il y a quinze ans, il y a une éternité, par quelqu’un du clan Khriouiga, un ennemi de mon clan des Hilal, pour une histoire d’eau, une histoire de puits, une vengeance” (252). Laïla is no longer “sans origine”. The inner void she has felt since her childhood has now all but disappeared. In addition, she provides additional details about the kidnapping which she either did not know earlier or which she could not yet disclose. The text ends with this literal voyage of self-discovery as she becomes acquainted with her homeland and also “meets” her mother: “je touche la terre où je suis née, je touche la main de ma mère” (252). Additionally, the text provides yet another hopeful possibility. Laïla confesses that she is in love with Jean, whom she has contacted and who will arrive the next day. She has freed herself from the chains of her past, and she is ready to begin the next chapter of her life. As Laïla herself affirms, “Maintenant, je suis libre, tout peut commencer” (252).

In conclusion, as we have demonstrated, music acts as a catalyst for a wide array of transforming experiences in Le Clézio’s works. In “La Roue d’Eau,”

the organic rhythms of the earth are endowed with an innate musicality that Juba discovers while tending to the oxen, as the lost Himyar civilization comes alive before his very eyes. In *Étoile Errante*, the notes which resonate from M. Ferne's piano help console and liberate the Jewish community during the Italian/Nazi occupation. In addition, Hebrew prayers and incantations allow Esther to transcend the world of contingencies and to identify with the struggles of her spiritual ancestors, such as Moses and Abraham. In *Désert*, Ma El Ainine's voice induces powerful moments of euphoria amongst the believers, and the single word "Méditerranée" mesmerizes Lalla. In *Le Chercheur d'Or*, Mam's musical voice triggers intense "moments de Bonheur." Additionally, for both Laure and Alexis, English words captivate them and allow them to become closer to their chimerical father. In *Le Poisson d'Or*, Laïla experiences both physical and sexual exploitation and discovers firsthand the realities of economic destitution in the modern world. During her arduous journey, a random encounter with a Gypsy boy named Albonico sets in motion a musical initiation that will forever change her life. After Simone and Sara help Laïla to develop her innate musical talent, music ultimately enables her to uncover her past and to look to the future. And now that we have probed the nuances of privileged moments related to nature and to music with a number of solitary protagonists, we will direct our attention to intense instants of shared euphoria which are triggered by an Other in the final chapter.

Chapter V

Shared Moments of Sexual Ecstasy with an “Other”

In contrast to the other poignant instants we investigated that involved solitary protagonists, privileged moments related to sexuality are shared with an Other. Hence, as we shall see, they are open to much more complex ethical considerations. In Le Clézio's later works, descriptions of sexuality and the sexual act itself are striking both in their beauty and their explicitness. Moreover, sexuality is a force that has the capacity to transform one's inner being and to destroy the contingencies of time and space. In the scenes of sexual ecstasy that Le Clézio creates, nothing else exists for the protagonists. The rest of the world has completely disappeared. However, as with the other powerful instants of euphoria that we have explored, each instance of sexual intoxication is unique. For instance, the initial sexual awakening can be extremely dramatic and rather frightening in comparison to the experiences that follow. In this chapter, we will systematically delve into the complexities, nuances, and ambiguities of the sexual encounters in *Désert*, *Le Chercheur d'or*, and *La Quarantaine*.

We will begin our analysis of sexual “ivresse” with *Désert*, because it is the earliest of the three novels and because the relationship between le Hartani and Lalla is radically different from that of Alexis and Ouma and Léon and Suryavati. Specifically, le Hartani and Lalla deeply care about each other, but they live totally in the moment, knowing that their relationship will not last. Recognizing this fact, neither one of them harbors any feelings of resentment towards the

other. However, although they both are aware of the fleeting nature of their sexual union, the effects of their experiences together will linger throughout Lalla's life. The force of what could be called le Hartani's "absent presence" in Marseilles will sustain the protagonist and be concretized in her daughter, whose welfare she will totally assume. After probing shared privileged moments in *Désert*, we will then proceed to two of Le Clézio's Mauritian sagas. In both *Le Chercheur d'or* (1985) and *La Quarantaine* (1995), the possibility of a long-lasting relationship between two lovers could be realized. In both of these tales, an erotic encounter with an Other will ultimately represent the possibility of inner transformation and a chance to live otherwise for both Alexis and Léon. However, these two male protagonists will respond differently to the summons that will be extended to them by Ouma and Suryavati (Surya) respectively. Although it is the uncommon beauty of these two women that will originally captivate Alexis and Léon, they will eventually be forced to make ethical decisions whose consequences will either reinforce their solitude or lead to a radically new life.

Although we have already explored privileged moments related to nature and music in *Désert*, intense moments of sexual ecstasy also play an important role in this novel as well, specifically, with respect to Lalla and le Hartani. In chapter three, we briefly discussed the situation of the marginalized le Hartani as well as the fact that Lalla experiences privileged moments related to nature with him as her guide. We will now focus exclusively on the sexual intimacy that the protagonist experiences with this enigmatic but charismatic shepherd. Before

they become erotically involved with each other, the two adolescents are friends, who sometimes like to “pretend” to be something more: “Le Hartani joue un moment, sans reprendre son souffle. Ensuite, il tend les roseaux à Lalla, et elle joue à son tour [...] Le Hartani prend la main de Lalla” (110). These sexually charged activities constitute a kind of prelude to the explicit erotic encounters they will ultimately share. But at this point in their relationship, they seem to be best friends who greatly enjoy each other’s company.

As previously noted, le Hartani cannot speak, so he and Lalla communicate by means of non-verbal discourse. It is this meaningful communication which will ultimately pave the way for their future sexual experiences. As the narrator affirms, “Les paroles circulent librement, vont vers le Hartani et reviennent vers elle chargées d’un autre sens, comme dans les rêves où l’on est deux à la fois ” (112-113). Although the notion of words circulating freely around a mute shepherd might seem odd, it is evident that le Hartani’s inability to articulate spoken language does nothing to impede their blossoming relationship, which soon progresses to a more overtly sexual level: “Lalla sent la chaleur au fond d’elle, comme si toute la lumière du ciel et des pierres venait jusqu’au centre de son corps, grandissait. Le Hartani prend la main de Lalla dans sa longue main brune aux doigts effilés, il la serre si fort qu’elle en a presque mal ”(113). Le Hartani’s embrace and the warmth that Lalla feels coming from inside her and from the shepherd’s body are clear manifestations of their growing desire. Yet it should also be noted that, although spending time with the enigmatic le Hartani fills Lalla with joy, he is prone to

mood swings and can change suddenly: “Mais Lalla ne reste jamais très longtemps avec le Hartani, parce qu’il y a toujours un moment où son visage semble se fermer ”(135). Yet, despite his volatility, Lalla trusts Le Hartani and continues to see him, regardless of what the rest of *la Cité* thinks.

During their first true sexual encounter in le Hartani’s grotto, euphoria is counterpointed by fear of the unknown and the inherent violence of the act of “défloration.” It is evident that Lalla is a virgin; hence her sexual awakening is mingled with pain. In addition, le Hartani also appears to have little to no sexual experience, so he literally trembles with fear. As Sophie Jollin-Bertocchi asserts in her book entitled *J.M. G. Le Clézio: L’Erotisme et Les Mots* : “ La peur constitue la première étape de l’expérience initiatique ”(29). And she also emphasizes that in Le Clézio’s works, sexual encounters often serve as an alternative form of communication in which no words are required: “L’événement sexuel apparaît ainsi comme une forme de communication qui se substitue à la parole dans la recherche d’un accord” (31). Not only can sexuality allow human beings to communicate in a different way, but it can also take the place of language itself.

Returning to the initial sexual experience in le Hartani’s cave, the force of the adolescents’ desire is evident from the outset. The first time Lalla touches le Hartani in an intimate fashion, she is completely destabilized: “Quand sa peau touche celle du Hartani, cela fait une onde de chaleur bizarre dans son corps, un vertige [...] Leurs souffles se touchent aussi, se mêlent, car il n’y a plus besoin de paroles, mais seulement de ce qu’ils sentent. C’est une ivresse [...] Le

vertige tourne de plus en plus vite dans le corps de Lalla [...] Comme si leurs corps ne faisaient qu'un avec l'intérieur de la grotte "(140). Lalla listens to her lover's beating heart, and they both appear to fuse with their very surroundings. As we have noted from the outset of our study, privileged moments are often mingled with, induced, or reinforced by contact with the elements. And as Jollin-Bertocchi asserts, this is also often the case with those related to sexuality: "Les éléments naturels que sont la mer, le vent et la lumière [...] Leur omniprésence [...] (symbolise) une communion entre l'homme et la nature, symbiose reposant sur un contact sensoriel, charnel [...] Le contact avec la nature subit alors une inflexion érotisée, une influence érotisante" (149). This is precisely what Lalla feels during their first sexual encounter: "C'est comme d'être dans un autre pays, dans un autre monde. C'est comme d'être au fond de la mer" (139). Similar to many of the other instants of euphoria that we have analyzed, the elements help contribute to the otherworldliness of what Lalla will share with her shepherd lover.

During their initial sexual experience, however, it appears that le Hartani momentarily allows his desire for Lalla to overcome him, and his aggression frightens her: "Tout d'un coup, Lalla ne comprend plus ce qui lui arrive. Elle a peur [...] et cherche à échapper à l'étreinte du berger qui maintient ses bras contre la pierre et noue ses longues jambes dures contre les siennes. Lalla voudrait crier, mais comme dans un rêve, pas un son ne peut sortir de sa gorge. L'ombre humide l'enserme et voile ses yeux, le poids du corps du berger l'empêche de respirer" (140). Lalla starts to feel as if le Hartani is forcefully coercing her to have sexual relations with him, but her terror initially prevents her

from uttering a sound. She attempts to escape, but the shepherd's physical force is too great. Finally, she is able to scream, and le Hartani stops his advances. After the protagonist cries out, it is clear that le Hartani is ashamed of his aggression: "Lalla ne voit pas son visage [...] mais elle devine l'angoisse qui est en lui. Une grande tristesse vient en elle, monte sans s'arrêter [...] C'est elle maintenant qui prend la main du Hartani, et elle sent qu'il tremble terriblement, qu'il est tout agité de soubresauts" (140-141). Realizing how dramatic this experience also is for le Hartani, Lalla forgives him for his earlier force. It is now she who reinitiates this erotic encounter and guides le Hartani throughout the remainder of their shared awakening. After this experience, they continue to meet each other in the desert where they interact with their natural surroundings, make shadow figures together, etc. She will continue to seek le Hartani's company and spend as much time with him as possible, thereby reinforcing what is now an explicitly sexual bond between them.

Lalla and le Hartani share one other notable intimate moment in the novel when she meets him in the desert after having definitively decided that she has no other recourse but to flee the marriage arranged by her Aunt Aamma: "Quand Lalla a décidé de partir, elle n'a rien dit à personne. Elle a décidé de partir parce que l'homme au complet veston gris-vert est revenu plusieurs fois dans la maison d'Aamma [...] Lalla n'a pas peur de lui, mais elle sait que [...] un jour il la conduira de force dans sa maison [...] parce qu'il est riche" (210). Lalla bids adieu to the only place that she has ever called home and begins her solitary walk. She appears to wander aimlessly with no clear destination in mind.

However, her mute shepherd lover finds her in the desert sands. During what will be their last encounter, Lalla and le Hartani play together jumping from one rock to another, laughing, and eating lunch. Although Lalla regains some of her strength after eating, she is still weary from her earlier experiences. But le Hartani appears to be completely reenergized and begins to run and play at an extremely rapid pace. Lalla attempts to follow, but she cannot keep step with him:

Ils recommencent à marcher. Le Hartani est en avant [...] Le soleil est dur maintenant, il pèse sur la tête et sur les épaules de Lalla, il fait mal à l'intérieur de son corps [...] Lui, le Hartani, continue à bondir de roche en roche, sans se retourner. Sa silhouette blanche et légère est de plus en plus loin, il est pareil à un animal qui fuit, sans s'arrêter, sans se retourner. Lalla voudrait le rejoindre, mais elle n'en a plus la force (214-215).

Le Hartani does not realize that Lalla is so far behind him or that she is so exhausted. While he continues to scamper and to navigate his way quickly through the desert, the harsh conditions overpower Lalla. The protagonist's inability to keep pace with the enigmatic shepherd appears to be symbolic of le Hartani's all-encompassing elusiveness. Le Hartani, much like the Sahara itself, belongs to no one and cannot be appropriated. They will, however, share yet another significant moment of sexual ecstasy when Lalla collapses from fatigue in the sand, and le Hartani returns to find her: "Alors elle se couche par terre, et elle pense qu'elle va mourir bientôt, parce qu'il n'y a plus de force dans son

corps, et que le feu de la lumière consume ses poumons et son cœur [...] Soudain, le Hartani est là, de nouveau” (216-217). The shepherd carries Lalla to safety, and he remains with her here until nightfall when she recovers her strength.

It is at this moment that the protagonist reveals the intensity of her love for le Hartani: “Maintenant que c’est toi que j’ai choisi pour mari, plus personne ne pourra m’enlever [...] ni m’emmener de force devant le juge pour me marier [...] Maintenant, nous allons vivre ensemble, et nous aurons un enfant, et plus personne d’autre ne voudra m’épouser ”(219). Despite the apprehension that she felt during their first sexual encounter, Lalla trusts le Hartani and chooses him to be her “husband” regardless of society’s interdictions. Moreover, she will indeed become pregnant with his baby during the intimate moments that follow her rescue. Although Jollin-Bertocchi contends that “les relations sentimentales sont rares dans l’oeuvre de Le Clézio,” Lalla’s relationship with le Hartani appears to be extremely sentimental (43). It is evident that le Hartani provides Lalla with a sense of protection, but she also clearly expresses a profound emotional attachment to this shepherd. Even after she leaves the desert, the protagonist feels a mystical connection to le Hartani, which transcends the geographical distance separating them. Although their intimate union is short-lived, its effects linger throughout the novel. Le Hartani might only be physically present in Lalla’s life for a brief period of time, but he will, in a sense, always be with her.

After Lalla confesses her feelings for le Hartani, the two experience inexplicable instants in which the limitations of time and space disappear: “La terre n’est plus très plate [...] elle va lentement au milieu des belles étoiles, tandis que les deux enfants, serrés l’un contre l’autre, le corps léger, font les gestes d’amour [...] Ils ne voient plus la terre, à présent. Les deux enfants serrés l’un contre l’autre voyagent en plein ciel ” (220-221). Similar to the ecstasy which transports Jon in “La Montagne du Dieu Vivant” and propels him in space, le Hartani and Lalla “fly” together during these moments of sexual euphoria. They travel such a great distance that they can no longer even see the earth below. As we have previously noted, all different types (nature, music, sexuality) of privileged moments in Le Clézio’s works challenge traditional conceptions of the time/space continuum. Most importantly, this experience is the last time that le Hartani and Lalla will be together. The arranged marriage, which we analyzed in chapter three, will force her to leave her beloved Sahara and le Hartani. But it is important to note that she will feel no trace of bitterness either before or after the moment of departure arrives.

Once in France, Lalla often thinks about le Hartani, whom she senses she might never see again: “Il y a beaucoup de lumières [...] Lalla pense un peu au ciel constellé, à la grande nuit du désert, quand elle était étendue sur le sable dur à côté du Hartani, et qu’ils respiraient doucement, comme s’ils n’avaient qu’un seul corps” (309). The effects of her experience with le Hartani as guide and lover sustain her and will continue to nourish her wherever she might go. Moreover, a living link to this enigmatic shepherd already grows within her and

will serve as a constant reminder of the instants they shared. While still living in Marseilles, Lalla once again reflects upon the significance and the force of what she discovered with le Hartani: “il ne reste plus que l’étendue du désert, où Lalla et le Hartani sont couchés ensemble. Tous deux sont enveloppés dans le grand manteau de bure, entoures par la nuit noire et les myriades d’étoiles, et ils se serrent très fort l’un contre l’autre pour ne pas sentir le froid qui envahit la terre ” (322). Lalla often contemplates le Hartani’s protection, and the depth of her feelings for this mysterious shepherd is clear. She will never forget his power, as all-encompassing as that of the desert itself.

A progressive sexual initiation, which began with “innocent” flirtation and later continued in the isolated shepherd’s grotto, drastically impacts the protagonist’s life and influences her future decisions. Similar to Laïla, Lalla eventually rejects both fame and fortune and returns to the desert. Upon her return, she searches for a place to give birth to le Hartani’s baby. In the same fashion as her ancestors, the protagonist finds shelter underneath a fig tree where her child is born. This new life will be the sign of le Hartani’s continued presence in Lalla’s journeys. Although the shepherd will always be a “loner,” he does transform Lalla and gives her the daughter she will cherish.

Similar to *Désert*, we have already discussed privileged moments related to both nature and music in *Le Chercheur d’or*. However, the narrator Alexis and Ouma also share instants of sexual ecstasy, which offer the possibility of inner transformation. The instants of euphoria related to sexuality that we will explore in the Mauritian sagas are open, as we will see, to complex ethical

considerations. Specifically, both Alexis and Léon in *La Quarantaine*, after initially being confronted by the face of an Other in the form of erotic encounters, will be forced to make a moral decision. Will they accept the summons which is extended to them, or will they refuse to live otherwise? Although the ecstasy of the moment is undeniable, the significance of these privileged moments goes far beyond the intoxication itself.

In the course of his illusory quest for the Corsaire's gold, Alexis meets a young "Manaf" named Ouma.⁵ It is this young girl who literally saves his life when he collapses from sun stroke : "C'est la jeune fille qui m'a secouru l'autre jour, quand je délirais de soif et de fatigue" (211). After Ouma rescues Alexis, their relationship develops so quickly that it seems almost "surreal" to him: "Tout cela s'est passé si vite que j'ai du mal à croire que je n'ai pas imaginé cette apparition, cette jeune fille sauvage et belle qui m'a sauvé la vie" (212-213). It is important to note that although the narrator refers to her as "wild," Ouma has spent many years in France in a convent school and speaks French fluently. The fact that Alexis uses this term to describe Ouma foreshadows his ultimate inability to appreciate all she has to offer. Describing her thus somehow will, as we will see, allow him to relinquish his responsibility towards her.

Nevertheless, it is likewise evident that their encounter destabilizes the narrator: "La jeune fille a disparu, elle s'est confondue avec les murailles de pierre noire. Où vit-elle, dans quel village de manafs? Je pense à son nom

⁵ The Manafs are marginalized peoples, without legal status, who live in mountain villages separated from the White population. They are descendants of runaway slaves who are still being subjugated by the ruling majority.

étrange, un nom indien, dont elle a fait résonner les deux syllabes, un nom qui me trouble” (213). Alexis has never met anyone like Ouma. He is irresistibly drawn to her and immediately recognizes that his life will forever be altered. Yet although he senses the potential for inner change that Ouma brings in the form of an Other, he is also frightened because he is unsure if he is willing to embrace this possibility. It is Alexis’s future decisions and his continued quest for the Corsaire’s gold that will eventually reveal what he holds most sacred.

Although it is debatable from the start whether Alexis would ever be capable of accepting Ouma, he does experience moments of ecstasy with her: “C’est une force qui naît en moi, qui se répand dans tout mon corps, un désir, une brûlure” (222). Sexual fervor floods the protagonist, and dictates his actions. And a little further on Alexis affirms: “Le désir monte en moi avec violence, brûle comme le soleil sur ma peau [...] Mon corps tremble maintenant [...] Je ne sais plus très bien ce qui m’arrive. Je grelotte nerveusement, ma respiration est oppressée ” (230-231). From this passage, it appears to be a combination of inexperience and desire that causes Alexis to tremble as he and Ouma make love on the deserted beaches of Rodrigues.

Similar to many other privileged moments that we have analyzed, the external world seems to disappear, for as Alexis affirms: “La lumière brille sur ses cheveux emmêlés, je vois son profil pur, son front droit, l’arête de son nez, ses lèvres. Ses habits flottent dans le vent. Il me semble que maintenant plus rien d’autre n’a d’importance” (223). And he describes the paradoxical feeling of inhabiting a planet with billions of other individuals but still feeling as if he is

completely alone with another: “Maintenant, il fait tout à fait nuit. Le froid vient sur la vallée. Nous sommes couchés l’un contre l’autre, je sens la chaleur du corps d’Ouma contre mon corps, nos jambes sont emmêlées. Oui, c’est tout à fait comme si nous étions les seuls êtres humains vivants sur la terre ” (233-234). As they protect each other from the chill of the night, the rest of the universe fades away.

And it is equally important to note that the euphoria shared with Ouma is even stronger than that which he experienced when communing with nature’s elements:

j’entends son souffle, je sens les battements de son cœur, et sa chaleur est en moi, immense plus forte que tous ces jours brûlants sur la mer et dans la vallée. Comme nous glissons, comme nous nous envolons dans le ciel nocturne, au milieu des étoiles, sans pensées, silencieux et écoutant le bruit de nos souffles unis comme la respiration des dormeurs (234).

This admission is particularly significant because of the narrator’s earlier confession (discussed in chapter three) that he considers the sea to be a person and that he needs no one else in his life. Is Alexis guilty of “mauvaise foi” in his utterances? Is he trying to reassure himself about the purity of his intentions with Ouma? These admissions are all spoken when he is still in the moment and the ecstasy remains. It is plausible that if describing these instants later, Alexis might not make such a bold assertion, given his unyielding passion for the sea.

But it is also possible that these sensations have truly induced such a powerful reaction.

Although he readily admits, albeit a problematic contention, that the sexual moments he shares with Ouma are more intense than those he feels when he communes with nature's elements as we have just mentioned, a few of these erotic encounters also directly involve contact with the natural world. For example, as Alexis describes the feeling of his body next to Ouma's:

Je sens contre moi le mouvement lent de sa poitrine qui respire, et cela se mêle au fracas rythmé de la mer. Après cette journée si longue pleine de lumière, nous sommes dans une nuit profonde et lente qui nous pénètre et nous transforme. C'est pour cela que nous sommes ici, pour vivre ce jour et cette nuit, loin des autres hommes, à l'entrée de la haute mer, parmi les oiseaux (244).

It is important to note that Alexis himself identifies the nights he spends with Ouma as transforming. It also appears as if the sea further intensifies the experience he shares with her. The narrator also appears to have an epiphany about human existence itself when he states "C'est pour cela que nous sommes ici." Alexis realizes that perhaps the reason why human beings exist is to taste all that life has to offer, including both direct contact with an Other and with nature itself. They need and desire nothing and no one else: "Maintenant, nous ne parlons plus. Nous restons allongés l'un contre l'autre, serrés très fort pour ne pas sentir le froid de la nuit. Nous écoutons la mer, et le vent dans les aiguilles des filaos, car rien d'autre n'existe au monde "(353). Similar to le

Hartani et Lalla, Alexis and Ouma do not need words to communicate with each other. They do so through their entire bodies as they listen to the sea, and the rest of the world disappears. As Alexis will reassert on the last page of the narrative, “Nous sommes seuls sur la mer, les seuls êtres vivants ”(375).

Now that we have probed the ecstasy of these sexual encounters, we must delve into the ethical issues which this narrative ultimately poses. Although the end of the novel provides some hope that Alexis has finally matured enough as an individual to accept the notion of obligation for others, if we examine Alexis’s actions throughout the narrative we should be skeptical of this alleged transformation. The situation of the Manafs on Rodrigues is dire throughout the tale, yet Alexis’s inaction is as notable as his later decisions, as we will see. This marginalized community lives hidden in the mountains in order to escape the racial humiliation of the colonialists governing the island. Although it might be difficult for Alexis to ameliorate the plight of the Manafs as a whole, he does nothing to help Ouma individually. At one point, he does ask her to leave the island with him: “Veux-tu partir avec moi? [...] Il faut que tu partes maintenant. Tu ne dois pas rester ici” (257). However, Ouma clearly understands the bad faith of this question and expresses her apprehension, knowing that her situation would be far worse elsewhere: “Moi, où pourrais-je aller? En France, dans un couvent? Ou bien à Port Louis, pour servir ceux qui ont fait mourir mon grand-père, ceux qui nous ont achetés et vendus comme des esclaves? ” (257). Ouma does not know if there is a place where she would be free and accepted. Although she has been educated in a French convent, she is still an outsider

because of her skin color, and she is profoundly conscious of this fact. As Gérard Abensour states in his article entitled “L’Épopée de la fin de l’insularité,” “elle est noire et le monde des Blancs lui est donc fermé. Mais par son éducation elle s’est rapprochée des Blancs et elle a donc une conscience aigüe de sa marginalité” (1108). Ouma possesses no delusions that her French education or her language skills will inspire others to treat her as an authentic human being rather than as a mere domestic or field worker.

After Ouma explains her hesitation to leave Rodrigues, Alexis simply drops the subject. He does not try to convince her that her life could possibly be better with him. Instead of reassuring her about his own intentions, he makes a hasty decision to join the army during the general mobilization for World War I in August 1914, without even telling her of his choice. In addition to his motivations for volunteering being unclear at best, Alexis reflects little if any about what the fate of Ouma’s people could be during his absence. Their situation is already tenuous, and additional political unrest across the globe could easily make their lives even more miserable. Moreover, although Alexis often claims that Mam and Laure occupy his thoughts and form the basis for his chimerical quest, he does not even attempt to see them during the four-month period before he leaves for active duty. In addition, Mam’s health is deteriorating and Laure could definitely use his help. Without Alexis’s assistance, his sister has been forced to relinquish her own aspirations and dedicate herself completely to the care of their mother. It is evident that both Alexis’s family and his lover need him, but he leaves to fight in a war for which he seems to attribute little significance. Alexis

does not even attempt to justify his decision by reflecting upon the necessity of this political conflict for French society and impulsively disregards the critical life-threatening needs of those who are supposedly dear to him.

It is only five years later after the war when Alexis returns to Rodrigues and ponders the fate of Ouma and her people: "Alors, en regardant la mer si belle, le sillage éblouissant qui trace une route sur l'eau impénétrable, je ressens à nouveau l'inquiétude. J'ai peur d'arriver à Rodrigues, j'ai peur de ce que je vais y trouver. Où est Ouma ? " (321). His concern for the well-being of his lover is extremely belated, and he soon discovers how much her people suffered during the war because of the resources that were required to finance military operations: "Pendant les années de guerre, il y a eu la famine, parce que les bateaux n'apportaient plus rien, ni riz, ni huile, ni conserves, à cause du blocus. Les maladies ont décimé la population, le typhus surtout, qui a fait mourir les gens dans les montagnes" (324). Despite the undeniable devastation that he observes all over Rodrigues and in the remnants of Ouma's village itself, Alexis continues to place more importance on the Corsaire's illusory treasure than on these human struggles. In fact, he "vows" to continue his search for Ouma not because of genuine concern for her health and whereabouts, but rather for purely egotistical reasons: "Si Ouma est ici quelque part, je la retrouverai. J'ai besoin d'elle, c'est elle qui détient les clefs du secret du chercheur d'or" (327). With Alexis, we clearly see the limitations of privileged moments related to sexuality. Although he experiences poignant transforming instants with Ouma, he still allows his own delusions and narcissism to dictate his actions. Alexis reduces

this other human being's worth to the notion that she is somehow crucial to unlock the mystery of his obsession. It is doubtful that Alexis will ever truly appreciate the human treasure that Ouma represents as a lover and companion, and it is profoundly disturbing that the narrator is still able to objectify someone who once saved his life and with whom he had experienced so much joy.

It is true that Alexis appears to make some progress morally during his second stay on Rodrigues from 1919-1922, but this development is also suspect. After his return from the war in 1919, he goes back to Rodrigues to continue his pursuit of the Corsaire's treasure. In 1922, the narrator returns to Mauritius, and it is here that Ouma, who is now a refugee plantation worker, lets herself be seen: "Aujourd'hui, j'ai vu Ouma [...] Sur le chemin de la sucrerie, une femme en gunny est à l'écart. Elle se tourne à demi vers moi, elle me regarde. Malgré son visage caché par le grand voile blanc, je la reconnais. Mais déjà elle a disparu dans la foule " (347). After Ouma initially reveals her presence, Alexis watches for her in the fields. He desperately hopes that he will soon have the opportunity to communicate directly with Ouma. The fact that she allows herself to be seen indicates that she might be willing to give Alexis one last chance. Realizing this possibility, Alexis vows to change: "C'est ainsi que je prends la décision de tout abandonner, de tout jeter hors de moi. Ouma m'a montré ce que je dois faire, elle me l'a dit à sa façon, sans parole, simplement en apparaissant devant moi comme un mirage, parmi tous ces gens qui viennent travailler sur ces terres qui ne seront jamais à eux" (348). Alexis resigns from his position as plantation foreman and dedicates his time to reaching out to Ouma, who appears before

him once again: “Alors je vois Ouma, assise non loin de moi dans le sable qui luit...Mon cœur bat très fort, je tremble, de froid peut-être? J’ai peur que ce ne soit qu’une illusion, qu’elle disparaisse [...] Alors Ouma s’approche de moi, elle me prend par la main [...] elle enlève sa robe [...] Ensemble nous plongeons dans l’eau fraîche” (352). Once again Alexis and Ouma share instants of euphoria together as they did in the years before his departure. And it is evident that Ouma is the catalyst for this rapprochement. After their swim, she tells him of the death of her mother in the boat transporting the Manaf refugees to Port Louis and confesses that she sought him out all over Mauritius while he was once again searching for gold on Rodrigues from 1919-1922: “Chaque jour, chaque instant, je t’ai attendu, à Forest Side, ou j’allais à Port Louis, à Rempart Street. Quand tu es revenu de la guerre, j’avais tellement attendu que je pouvais attendre encore, et je t’ai suivi partout, jusqu’à Yemen. J’ai même travaillé dans les champs, jusqu’à ce que tu me voies” (353). Whereas Alexis selfishly pursued his own agenda after he deserted Ouma, her efforts to ensure his safety as well as their eventual reunion reveal the depth of her own commitment and hope.

At the end of the narrative, Alexis and Ouma spend considerable time together in the Mananava forest, a site at once sacred and taboo. The narrator describes this period as one of immense happiness and simplicity: “Nous avons rêvé des jours de Bonheur, à Mananava, sans rien savoir des hommes. Nous avons vécu une vie sauvage, occupés seulement des arbres, des baies, des herbes [...] nous pêchons des écrevisses [...] Ici, tout est simple” (364). In this tranquil site alone with Ouma and nature, Alexis candidly discusses his inner

transformation when he claims: “je ne pense guère à l’or, je n’en ai plus envie” (365). However, Alexis definitively dispels any hope for a lasting inner transformation when the Manaf uprising begins. When the violence erupts, Ouma is visibly and understandably frightened: “Elle parle du malheur et de la guerre qui doivent revenir, encore une fois, de la mort de sa mère, des manafs que l’on chasse de partout, qui doivent repartir maintenant. J’essaie de la calmer ” (367). Although Alexis attempts to console Ouma with words, he does nothing else to protect her. For her part, Ouma understands Alexis’s self-absorption and decides to join her brother and the other refugees in the internment camp managed by the British. Even though Alexis claims “J’ai le cœur serré en pensant à Ouma dans la prison du camp, où elle a choisi de rejoindre son frère, ” he does nothing to prevent her eventual deportation (370).

Near the very end of the novel, Alexis does burn all of the documents related to the Corsaire’s treasure in a very dramatic fashion: “J’ai sorti de mon sac les papiers du trésor qui me restent encore, les cartes, les croquis, les cahiers de notes que j’ai écrits ici et à Rodrigues, et je les ai brûlés sur la plage..Maintenant, je sais que c’est ainsi qu’a fait le Corsaire après avoir retiré son trésor des cachettes [...] Il a tout détruit, tout jeté à la mer [...] pour être enfin libre” (373). Is the narrator at last courageous enough to change his willful blindness? Although Alexis’s destruction of these papers could be an important step in his moral development, it is debatable whether this crucial episode at the end of the narrative represents anything but a continuation of the same. The symbolism of this act is undeniable, but the reader is left to ponder if Alexis truly

accepts Ouma as a human treasure. In the final paragraph, Alexis sits overlooking the sea and speculates about where he and his lover will travel together on the *Argo*: “Alors Ouma est avec moi de nouveau, je sens la chaleur de son corps, son souffle, j’entends battre son cœur [...] Jusqu’où irons-nous ensemble [...] De l’autre côté du monde, dans un lieu où l’on ne craint plus les signes du ciel, ni la guerre des hommes” (375). Unfortunately, however, she has already been deported-sent back to the devastation of Rodrigues while he gazes impotently at the sea, his first and only love.

In his study of the Mauritian sagas, Bruno Thibault analyzes the ambivalence concerning Alexis’s supposed epiphanies at the end of the novel, compared to his questionable actions during this same time frame:

Le Chercheur d’or annonce ce nouveau cycle, mais il n’y pénètre pas. Au contraire, la conclusion du roman apparaît confuse et bloquée. Alexis a atteint un point-limite de son développement: il est incapable d’aller au-delà [...] il retrouve Ouma parmi les coupeurs de canne [...] Mais Ouma est bientôt déportée avec d’autres travailleurs immigrés [...] La conclusion du *Chercheur d’Or* débouche par conséquent sur la solitude et sur l’incertitude du héros (853).

As Thibault appropriately indicates, uncertainty characterizes the end of the novel. Although the narrator claims that he has finally reached certain important realizations, the reader should take these confessions with a proverbial grain of salt. Similar to his statements earlier in the novel about how much he misses

Mam and Laure after he begins his unrealistic quest totally ignoring their immediate and future needs, Alexis once again uses flowery words, but his actions belie these eloquent utterances.

In addition to Bruno Thibault, other literary researchers have investigated ethical issues in the Mauritian sagas. In her article entitled “Elsewhere and Otherwise: Lévinasian Eros and Ethics in Le Clézio’s *La Quarantaine*,” Karen Levy uses Lévinasian philosophy to underscore Alexis’s ethical shortcomings. Specifically, she summarizes fundamental Levinisian concepts related to responsibility towards the Other and applies them to both of the Mauritian sagas that we are investigating in this chapter. In particular, she asserts that “The originality of Le Clézio’s work stems from the double inscription of the alterity of both eros and ethics in an Other who is gendered female [...] And he exposes the crisis of subjectivity that develops when the appeal of an Other invades an individual’s sovereignty and puts her/him in positions where ethical choices must be made” (257). As we have outlined, it is evident that the ethical summons which Ouma extends compels Alexis to come out of his ontological shell and to recognize that his actions affect others. In *Le Chercheur d’or*, the face of the Other as discourse resonates loudly and beckons Alexis to live otherwise. However, as Thibault and Levy clearly emphasize in their respective articles and, as the text implies, Alexis never leaves the carapace of his own being. He never breaks the shell of his own enjoyment or solitude.

Similar to the situation in *Le Chercheur d’or*, Léon’s Archambeau’s face to face encounter with an absolute Other will also open the door to transformation.

However, as we will soon discover, his moral development and his subsequent decision are both radically different from that of Alexis. *La Quarantaine*, published by Gallimard in 1995, recounts the adventures of two brothers, Jacques and Léon Archambeau who board a ship destined for Mauritius in 1890. They hope to return to what they imagine is an idyllic domain, from which their parents had been exiled. It was their father Antoine's decision to marry Amalia, a woman of Eurasian descent that ultimately led to their exclusion from the patriarchal domain. As Jean-Xavier Ridon explains in his study, "In fact, their parents had to leave Mauritius in large part because of their mother's Eurasian origin. In the colonial world, founded as it is upon the idea of white supremacy, 'half-castes' are set apart" (722). Those who associate with the indigenous population have no place in colonial society. Therefore, they must be ostracized.

Although it is illusory for the mixed-race Jacques to think he, his wife Suzanne, and his brother Léon could be accepted by the patriarch and the society he represents, they nevertheless dream of reconciliation and set sail for Mauritius nourished by this hope. During their voyage, however, smallpox is discovered aboard, and the Mauritian authorities force the ship to dock before it reaches its intended destination. All of the passengers are placed under quarantine on nearby Flat Island. In the beginning, everyone is convinced that the illness will soon be brought under control and they will be allowed to dock in the capital city of Port Louis. But, it is soon clear that the infection is spreading and that the Mauritius elite will do nothing to ameliorate the situation. Consequently, death becomes an omnipresent force that wreaks havoc on the

abandoned passengers. When individuals become ill, they are further isolated on the tiny neighboring Gabriel Island. Moreover, a deplorable passenger named Véran de Véreux with help from another equally distasteful European, implements martial law, enforcing a curfew and setting up geographical restrictions, which further diminish the quality of life for those who are simply waiting there to die.

Yet it is in this stifling atmosphere of frustration and death that Léon meets the aforementioned Surya, who will drastically alter his life. By Léon's own admission, it is her gaze that initially captivates him: "Dans la nuit, les yeux de Suryavati brillaient, jaunes comme des iris de chat" (94). When Véran de Véreux sets up restrictions in the European compound insisting that "il faut prendre des mesures," the quest for Surya offers a means of escape from the stifling atmosphere of the compound and the fear which Véran and his associates feed so manipulatively (96). Much like Alexis with Ouma, sexual desire overwhelms Léon: "Je crois que je n'ai jamais vu personne comme elle, elle ressemble à une déesse. Mon cœur bat très fort, les yeux me brûlent [...] Quand la jeune fille arrive sur la plage, elle me regarde brièvement sans rien dire" (112). Although Surya does not even speak to him at first, this does nothing to diminish his growing fascination: "Je sentais mon coeur battre plus fort, l'enthousiasme remplir mon corps, une ivresse" (114). Similar to many of the other privileged moments we have explored, the force of this "ivresse" already destabilizes Léon. In this very early stage, the protagonist clearly recognizes that Surya is no

ordinary woman. The stark beauty of her eyes mesmerizes him, and he already seeks an intimate union with her.

Yet even before their relationship develops to the physical level, Léon appears to recognize that a relation with Surya might one day force him to make a wrenching decision: “Je croyais que l’instant de la délivrance approchait, et maintenant c’était l’image de Suryavati qui dansait devant mes yeux, pareille à une flamme [...] et que j’allais perdre pour toujours” (115). Like the other quarantined passengers, Léon too initially assumes that they will soon be allowed to continue their journey to Mauritius. However, hope begins to fade as days pass with no sign of liberation. Yet before this hope for rescue turns completely to despair, Léon ponders if he could leave Surya, if he could allow himself to lose this “flame” forever. Although he continues to listen to his older brother Jacques who tells him: “La première chose, c’est de sortir d’ici. Après, à Maurice, tout s’arrangera,” Léon is filled with doubt and uncertainty (117). He cares deeply for his brother and Suzanne, but he is anticipating an arduous choice.

Despite the rising death toll and no foreseeable relief in sight, Léon is happier than he has ever been because of Surya, for as he admits: “je suis amoureux” (136). His relationship with Surya is no longer that of an infatuation, and she gradually recognizes his good faith. However, before she completely lets down her guard, Surya questions Léon and makes him earn her trust as well as that of her dying mother. She asks him directly on multiple occasions: “Pourquoi es-tu venu ici? Quelles sont tes intentions? [...] C’est la même

question qu'elle m'a posée, la première fois qu'elle m'a parlé" (149). From the beginning, Surya decides that nothing is going to transpire between her and Léon unless she is certain that he is not a European colonialist pretending to be something different. Similar to le Hartani and Lalla, what begins as a friendship will evolve into something much more intimate. During the courtship stage, they discuss a variety of divergent topics and often laugh together: "Je ne peux pas m'empêcher de rire...Finalement nous ne savons plus pourquoi nous rions. C'est la première fois depuis des jours, c'est un bonheur" (136). These moments revitalize Léon and make him forget about the cloud of impending doom that hangs over the island: "Il me semble que j'ai en moi une électricité, une force nouvelle" (138). And this newly-discovered energy effaces Léon's fear of death. Whereas most of the passengers are in a constant state of trepidation because of the epidemic, Léon is in love. And once Surya and her mother recognize the authenticity of Léon's intentions, they accept him and invite him into their home.

Although he will soon experience transforming moments of euphoria with Surya, the first episode of this nature in the novel is a solitary one. Before his and Surya's first true sexual encounter, Léon pleasures himself while thinking about Surya, a clear indication of his mounting desire. As Jollin-Bertocchi notes in her study of sexuality in Le Clézio's works, "l'ébranlement est majeur dans son intensité, et affecte globalement le participant" (113). Affirming the intoxicating effects of this experience, Léon insists:

Je ressens toujours le même vertige, je suis ivre des coups des
vagues [...] Je sens dans la pierre le corps de Surya [...] Je sens

contre ma poitrine ses seins si jeunes, légers [...] Mon sexe est durci, tendu à faire mal [...] cette force qui est en moi ne peut plus rester prisonnière, elle doit jaillir [...] mon cœur brille de la flamme du soleil [...] Ici dévore le corps des défunts sur la plage, mon cœur brille de désir [...] et je sens ma semence contre la pierre noire [...] j'écoute les coups de mon cœur et les coups de la mer sur le socle de l'île [...] C'est étrange, je ne ressens en cet instant aucune honte. Seulement la plénitude, après l'ivresse, une espèce d'extraordinaire lucidité (167-168).

Similar to other privileged moments that we have investigated, nature can combine with other catalysts of ecstasy capable of inducing strong states of euphoria, thus producing even more intense sensations. During this particular moment which the protagonist experiences alone, nature plays a crucial role. He hears the accelerated rhythms of his heart as he listens to the sea's inherent cosmic flow. However, it is Léon's desire for Surya that catches the reader's attention. It should also be noted that he feels no shame; the intoxication permeates him and makes him see the world more clearly.

As Léon's initial solitary experience clearly establishes, Surya is a destabilizing force. Even the odor of her skin has a profound impact on the protagonist: "A présent, elle a posé sa tête contre mon épaule comme si elle était très fatiguée. L'odeur de sa peau m'envahit, me fait frissonner" (182). Although they are simply talking at this particular moment, it is clear that his desire continues to grow with each passing day, and as his relationship reaches an

explicitly sexual level, Léon realizes that his future aspirations are antithetical to those of his older brother Jacques. He has experienced a deep inner transformation, and has crossed the point of no return because of his encounter with the face of the Other. Describing his distance from Jacques, Léon affirms: “nous sommes devenus peu à peu des étrangers l’un pour l’autre...Maintenant je n’appartiens plus à son monde, je suis du monde de Surya” (212). And further in the text he again reiterates this epiphany: “Desormais nous sommes très loin l’un de l’autre, comme si nous n’avions jamais grandi ensemble” (281). Although the two brothers were extremely close before their arrival on Flat Island, they now represent two different worlds. Jacques still seeks to be accepted by his colonialist family, whereas Léon chooses to embrace the spirit of those marginalized and exploited by what the Archambeau clan represents. As Léon clearly recognizes: “Je n’étais plus le même. J’étais un autre, j’étais elle” (322). When he first arrived, Léon accepted his older brother’s hopes and illusions. But that is no longer possible because of Surya’s influence and the transformation she has brought about in him.

As their rapport becomes more explicitly physical, the ecstasy which Léon experiences with Surya makes his decision even more certain. However, similar to le Hartani and Lalla, although their first true sexual encounter induces poignant privileged moments, a certain amount of fear and apprehension is also present:

Surya a posé ses mains sur mes épaules [...] elle m’a fait allonger sur la terre, à l’intérieur de la grotte [...] L’odeur du santal, la fumée de l’encens nous enveloppaient [...] Le désir me faisait trembler si

fort que je n'arrivais plus à respirer [...] Je ne comprenais pas ce qui m'arrivait. Je la désirais, je voulais la toucher, me plonger dans son odeur, goûter à ses lèvres, à sa peau, n'être qu'un avec elle [...] Je n'avais plus besoin de parler, plus besoin qu'elle me parle. Je comprenais tout d'elle, cela allait directement de son cœur au mien [...] J'étais ivre [...] Je savais que le moment était venu. C'était le moment le plus important de ma vie (318-320).

Similar to le Hartani, Léon literally trembles in the beginning stages of his sexual initiation with Surya. However, Léon's desire does not frighten Surya as it did Lalla. But like Lalla, Surya takes Léon's hand and guides him in an attempt to alleviate his fear. In this euphoric state, words are no longer necessary. Much like the communication between Lalla and the mute shepherd, this intoxication does not merely take the place of verbal communication; it transcends the limitations of linguistic discourse. Similar to Lalla, Surya's first sexual experience proves to be painful: "Je l'ai pénétrée et elle a tourne un peu de côté son visage, parce que je lui faisais mal. Mais le désir m'emportait, si vite que je ne pouvais m'arrêter, maintenant j'entendais son souffle, mêlé à mon souffle [...] j'étais devenu le feu, la fièvre, le sang, et Surya me serrait entre ses cuisses d'une étreinte puissante" (321). But despite the pain, Surya embraces the ecstasy of the moment with her lover. And after this initial experience, they lie together and commune with the elements: "Nous sommes couchés l'un contre l'autre [...] Nous n'avions qu'une seule peau, qu'un seul visage [...] je respirais aussi par sa bouche. Il n'y aurait plus de peur, ni de douleur, ni de solitude. Le bruit de la

mer et du vent nous portait, nous grandissait, la musique des moustiques ” (323). Not only does their ecstasy transport them elsewhere, the sounds of the sea and the wind likewise open another dimension. Léon and Surya fly together in this other realm similar to Jon, Le Hartani, and Lalla: “Ensemble nous glissions, en volant, ou plutôt en planant, contre l’aile noire du ciel. Nous étions des oiseaux, tout à fait des oiseaux” (324). And in this instance also, the contingencies of time and space lose all their restrictiveness.

Throughout the rest of the novel, Léon and Surya continue to share intense, intimate moments, as when Léon details: “Je suis entré à mon tour dans l’eau très douce et tiède, je cherchais Surya. Puis j’ai senti son corps contre moi, ses habits collés à sa peau [...] Jamais je n’avais ressenti un tel désir, un tel bonheur. Il n’y avait plus de peur en moi. J’étais quelqu’un d’autre, quelqu’un de nouveau” (325). The sensation of his lover’s body against him fills Léon with joy and calms all his fears. And he ever more clearly realizes that he will have to make a fateful decision and is not afraid to confront his brother.

After more than three months on the island, it becomes clear that a rescue ship will indeed arrive. Jacques presses his brother to go to Mauritius: “Demain ou après-demain, le bateau sera là. Il faut que tu prennes une décision” (412). Thinking that he can influence his choice, Léon’s older brother reminds him: “Tu appartiens à une famille, les Archambau sont des gens puissants [...] Tu appartiens à cette caste, que tu le veuilles ou non [...] Ici, ça n’avait pas d’importance. Ici c’est une terre neutre [...] Il faut que tu sois franc avec elle, il faut que tu lui dises la vérité” (413). This comment reveals his older brother’s

indifference to Surya's needs and desires. It is clear that Jacques expects his younger brother to abandon Surya and to embrace his pipe dream of returning to Mauritius. As Léon notices, Jacques does not even express any sense of gratitude for what Surya had done to save Suzanne's life when she was so desperately ill: "Est-ce qu'il a oublié que Surya a sauvé sa femme?" (413). He still clings to his illusory hope that they will be accepted by the rest of the Archambau hierarchy. But in reality, their mixed ancestry effectively isolates them from the very domain they seek to embrace.

Although it is not easy to confront his brother Jacques, Léon is honest and directly expresses his feelings:

Nous sommes devenus étrangers l'un pour l'autre, nous
n'appartenons plus au même monde [...] Mais regarde-moi.
Regarde-toi. Nous n'avons plus rien en commun. Nous ne serons
plus jamais comme avant. Toi et Suzanne, vous irez d'un côté, moi
de l'autre [...] Moi je reste avec Surya, je serai toujours avec elle,
elle est ma famille maintenant (414-415).

Léon recognizes that his transformation on Flat Island is both profound and lasting. Moreover, he proves that he has the necessary courage to break ties definitively with his family. Once Léon confesses his sentiments, Jacques rebukes him for rejecting his family: "Tu dis vraiment des choses insensées, absurdes. Comment pourras-tu renier ta famille, ce que tu es, moi, Suzanne, tout ce qu'on a fait pour toi" (415). After his brother's reproach, Léon explodes and reminds Jacques of the obvious: "Mais ouvre les yeux! Ce sont eux qui ont

tout fait, les Patriarches, ce sont eux qui nous ont abandonnés [...] Tu ne comptes pas pour eux [...] Tu parles du nom des Archambau, mais tu es le fils d'un homme que les Archambau ont humilié, ont jeté dehors [...] il nous a mis tous à la porte, il a envoyé maman à la mort [...] parce qu'elle était eurasiennel" (415). Léon confronts his brother in an attempt to make him recognize the paradoxes of his belief system. Specifically, he asks him questions that the reader has been pondering throughout the entire narrative. The reader, like Léon, is intrigued why someone would want to return to a place from which both one's father and mother were so cruelly exiled in such a fashion.

Although Léon does not hate his brother himself, he does despise the evil that the colonial system represents: "La colère m'a pris, je suis prêt à empoigner Jacques, à le gifler. Jamais je n'aurais imaginé que je pouvais le haïr, non pas pour lui-même, mais pour ce qu'il représente, l'esprit des Patriarches" (415). Surya has morally awakened Léon, and he is thus repulsed by what he sees in his brother. Regardless of what else might transpire in his life, Léon can no longer accept his sibling's world vision. He does not want to abandon Jacques and Suzanne, but he cannot support the Archambau exploitation of humanity. Moreover, he recognizes how unrealistic their project truly is and knows that their chances of succeeding are minimal at best. Therefore, he says goodbye to his brother and Suzanne when the ship arrives, not knowing if he will ever see them again. Although Léon is equally unsure about what a future with Surya will entail, he eagerly embraces this possibility.

In conclusion, erotic encounters play a crucial role in Le Clézio's ever developing repertoire. As Jollin-Bertocchi asserts in her study, "*Seuls Voyages de L'Autre Côté et Mondo [...] ne comportent aucune scène de sexualité*" (69). In *Désert*, sensual privileged moments allow le Hartani and Lalla to transcend linguistic barriers and to communicate effectively. Whereas the relationships between the couples in *Le Chercheur d'or* and *La Quarantaine* have the potential to develop and deepen over time, le Hartani and Lalla's rapport is of a finite duration because of the social realities of their situation. However, despite the impossibility of a permanent union, le Hartani's presence is evident in France and wherever she might go in the future. Even when he is physically absent, his radiating presence protects and guides Lalla in times of distress. Moreover, she will always have a living reminder of the enigmatic shepherd. Thus their affective bond will never be broken. In the Mauritian sagas *Le Chercheur d'or* and *La Quarantaine*, a relationship that begins with sexual desire offers the possibility of long-lasting change. Alexis's development progresses to a certain level, but he proves to be incapable of moving beyond his own egoism. His actions as well as his inaction provide little future hope for a deep inner transformation. Conversely, Jacques recognizes early in the novel that he must one day make a painful decision. Even in this initial stage of moral awakening, the protagonist of *La Quarantaine* cannot envision his future without Surya in it. As the days pass on Flat Island, Léon can no longer ignore the depth of colonialist exploitation. For this reason, he refuses to be a participant in his older brother's irrational plans. Unlike Alexis, Léon's actions concretize his discourse, as he chooses to

create a new family with Surya. The Mauritian sagas, paradoxically, represent both the moral strengths and limitations of privileged moments related to sexuality. The erotic encounter in the form of the Other can drastically alter one's life and world view, or it can merely expose inherent moral weaknesses, which might never be overcome. As the latter two narratives explored in this chapter clearly establish, all hope of moral progression depends on whether the summons extended by the Other is ultimately accepted or rejected. Although shared moments of sexual ecstasy possess many of the same characteristics as the instants of nature and music that we also investigated, they have an undeniable ethical element. This aspect differentiates them from the other types of euphoria and further reveals the complexity of these moments in Le Clézio's vast repertoire.

Conclusions

In conclusion, throughout this study we have probed the complex ambivalence of privileged moments in J.M.G. Le Clézio's extensive and ever-developing repertoire. Moreover, as we have clearly established, these enigmatic moments of euphoria constitute a crucial element in his works. Not only do these instants build upon the fiction of earlier French writers from the twentieth century, but they also add another dimension to Le Clézian studies, enabling readers to appreciate the complex nuances of his narratives. Le Clézio continues to write prolifically, and although much literary criticism has already been written on his vast undertaking, this study represents the first systematic exploration of the phenomenon known in French literature as "privileged moments." Indeed, it is quite plausible that this specific investigation could be the very first comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon in general.

In the introduction, we presented an operational definition for a privileged moment out of necessity. Although the term has been used, most frequently with respect to Proust's work, the idea remained too nebulous for the purposes of our study. This ambiguity obligated us to reflect upon what usually constitutes these instants. Following the introduction, in chapter one, we explored concrete manifestations of privileged moments in the writings of earlier twentieth century French writers. After investigating these instants in *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, specifically with respect to the episodes *les petites madeleines* and *la petite phrase de Vinteuil*, we then discussed the ambivalence of Sartre's account

of privileged moments in *La Nausée*. Although Roquentin claims to experience sensations similar to those of the narrator of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, this contention is, as we saw, problematic. It is unclear whether Sartre is affirming a legitimate way to lighten the weight of existence, or whether he is in fact critiquing this particular Proustian notion. Finally, we analyzed the inexplicable sensations that Camusian protagonists experience when they commune directly with nature. In his collection of essays entitled *Noces* (1938), Camus reflects upon the necessity of removing the barriers between humanity and nature. However, he does not ignore nature's paradox, when like Le Clézio many years later, he emphasizes "la tendre indifférence du monde" (*Noces* 33).

In chapter two, we examined Le Clézio's literary transformation, which began with the publication of *Mondo et Autres Histoires*. But instead of neglecting the earlier texts as many researchers do when discussing Le Clézio's lyricism, we examined the existential anguish present in *Le Procès-Verbal*, "La Fiebre," "Le Jour ou Beaumont Fit Connaissance avec sa Douleur," and "Un Jour de Vieillesse." Then, we directed our attention to the texts *Haï*, "Le Génie Datura," and *Mydriase* which clearly describe his experiences in Panama. As clearly established, these early writings greatly increase our understanding of his later fiction, and any systematic analysis should take them into account. The enigmatic moments of ecstasy we explored do not in any way negate or replace the existential suffering of protagonists like Roch. Rather, they provide a means of aesthetic salvation from the human condition, displacing the shadow of

mortality itself. And it is the Mexican texts which concretize the very process itself of his personal and literary transformation.

In chapter three, we analyzed the instants of euphoria that occur when Le Clézio's characters commune with nature in the tales of *Mondo*, in the novels *Désert* and *Le Chercheur d'Or*, and in the novella *Pawana*. Contact with the elements often transports his protagonists elsewhere, to a privileged realm where the terrestrial laws of time and space no longer bind them. In our analysis, we clearly revealed the significance of these experiences and exposed their ambivalence as well. And in *Pawana*, we also discussed the stern ecological warning issued by Le Clézio concerning the exploitation of nature for monetary gain. According to the author, our willful blindness concerning environmental issues might very well one day lead to the eradication of earth's few remaining privileged spaces.

In chapter four, we explored privileged moments related to music in the short story "La Roue d'Eau," as well as in the novels *Etoile Errante*, *Désert*, *Le Chercheur d'Or*, and *Le Poisson d'Or*. In "La Roue d'Eau," the organic cosmic rhythms of the earth are endowed with an innate musicality. While performing his daily chores, the sounds of the water wheel transport Juba back into antiquity where he reclaims the title of King Juba II. In *Etoile Errante*, M. Ferne's piano possesses a mystical force, which enables the Jewish refugees of St. Martin-Vésubie to transcend the worst of their fears. Overcome with uncertainty and apprehension about when the Germans will replace the Italians and undoubtedly deport them Eastward, his piano playing both calms and inspires the displaced

inhabitants and provides a sense of solidarity in their ongoing struggle. In *Désert*, Ma El Aïnine's voice itself acts as a catalyst for intense moments of euphoria amongst the believers, and the single word "Méditerranée" fuels Lalla's reverie. In *Le Chercheur d'Or*, it is the music of Mam's voice that triggers poignant "moments de bonheur" for both Alexis and his sister Laure. In *Le Poisson d'Or*, an unlikely and progressive musical initiation which begins on a train with Albonico's ethnic melodies, will eventually enable Laïla to assume her own identity and commit herself to a future.

Lastly, in chapter five, we distinguished between solitary privileged moments and those shared with an Other which add an extremely important ethical dimension to our exploration. In *Désert*, le Hartani and Lalla's union is transforming, but it is limited and of short duration. Nevertheless, le Hartani's presence in Lalla's life continues through their daughter, whom Lalla will cherish and raise by herself. In *Le Chercheur d'Or* and *La Quarantaine*, an encounter with the face of the Other will obligate Alexis and Léon to make ethical decisions concerning the welfare of another human being. As we demonstrated in our analysis, they will respond differently to the summons extended to them by Ouma and Suryavati respectively. Whereas Alexis will forever remain in the ontological shell of being, Léon will completely alter the direction of his life, choosing to embrace the possibility of inner transformation that the Other represents, thereby becoming "un Autre" himself.

In conclusion, as our study has clearly established, exploring J.M.G. Le Clézio's works is a profoundly challenging, but rewarding endeavor. He has

already received two highly coveted literary recognitions, the prix Renaudot for *Le Procès-Verbal* (1963) and the Prix Paul Morand for *Désert* (1980). In addition to the respect and admiration he has inspired among the literary community, Le Clézio's later fiction has also mesmerized the general public. As proof of this undeniable popularity, the literary magazine *Lire* also honored Le Clézio as "le plus grand écrivain vivant de la langue française" based on data elicited from French readers themselves.⁶ Moreover, Le Clézio continues to add to his all-encompassing literary corpus, as evidenced by his most recent publications *Ourania* and *Raga*. The diversity of his repertoire, along with his impeccable literary talent, should eventually solidify his place in the French literary canon. It should also be noted that Le Clézio is often mentioned among the prospective recipients for the Nobel Prize in literature. This is quite an accomplishment considering the fact that he is distrustful of fashionable literary circles, preferring to allow his narratives to speak for themselves. Realizing the value of Le Clézio's contributions to literature and to society, many universities have already incorporated him firmly into their reading lists. Since many of his narratives take place all across the French-speaking world, they are invaluable to Francophone studies as well. Additionally, Le Clézio's works grapple with serious modern-day issues such as the conflict between traditional societies and the realities of modernity, the blind avarice of the oil industry, poverty, industrialization, war, ethnic discrimination, religious and sexual exploitation, etc. As our exploration of privileged moments in Le Clézio's writings has clearly revealed, perhaps Le

⁶ Onimus, Jean. *Pour lire Le Clézio*. Paris: PUF, 1994.

Clézio's greatest literary talent is reminding us of these atrocities, while by the same token encouraging us to live our lives to the fullest, appreciating every intoxicating moment that life affords.

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