

THE DE-CENTERED HUMANISM AND  
COSMIC ENGAGEMENT OF  
J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO

Posing Questions in an Age of Suspicion

By Keith Moser (Mississippi State University)

Obwohl sich Le Clézio in zahlreichen öffentlichen Stellungnahmen von durchdringender Skepsis von der ‚engagierten‘ Literatur seiner Vorgänger, wie z. B. Sartre und Camus, distanziert, will diese Studie Le Clézio seinerseits als engagierten Schriftsteller konturieren, dessen Prosa sich auf entrechtete Individuen in der globalen Lebenswelt richtet. Im Gegensatz zur *Littérature engagée* der älteren Generation tendiert er dazu, das Rampenlicht und jegliche Art von polarisierender Polemik zu vermeiden. Diese Untersuchung will verdeutlichen, wie seine Romane und Erzählungen, öffentlichen Vorträge und jüngsten publizistischen Interventionen zu sozialen Fragen den Leser involvieren; dabei sollen charakteristische Aspekte dieses künstlerischen Engagements und seines Potentials umrissen werden.

Bearing in mind the author's numerous public dismissals and pervasive scepticism concerning the 'engaged' literature of his predecessors, such as Sartre and Camus, the purpose of this study is to explore J. M. G. Le Clézio's committed prose which extends to all disenfranchised individuals across the globe and the entire biotic community. In contrast to an earlier generation of engaged writers, Le Clézio tends to avoid the limelight and any direct association with divisive, polemical subjects that might polarize a given society. This study will elucidate how the writer's fiction, public discourses, and his recent interventions in support of social causes address themselves to the literary community; it will delve further into his engagement in an effort to delineate the nature of this artistic commitment and what it might encompass.

It might at first seem unconventional to investigate the 'committed prose' of a reclusive author who is distrustful of politicians and the ideologies that they represent. However, as this study will establish, the concept of literary engagement is indeed a subject that needs to be further explored in the diverse literary repertoire of J. M. G. Le Clézio. In addition to the humanistic aspects of his fiction, the public interventions of the Franco-Mauritian author in support of social and environmental causes are becoming more frequent. Given the private nature of the author and his predilection to avoid definitive affirmations, critics have neglected to probe the relationship between Le Clézio and engaged writers, such as Sartre, Camus, and Malraux.

These comparisons are further rendered problematic given the current tendency of modern critics to emphasize the 'failure' of the *littérature engagée* movement.

Although many contemporary artists themselves deeply respect the intentions and sacrifices of the great French writers from this turbulent and uncertain time period, they assert that committed literature has outlived its utility. In his essay entitled ›Commitment or the Crisis of Language‹ in which he proposes a more fluid distinction between engagement and aestheticism, Georges Perec affirms, “it seems to us more logical to think that, within the context of Liberation, committed literature was a necessary ill”<sup>1)</sup>. Given the frustration associated with an ideology that forces artists to be social activists who enact change through their aesthetic creations and concrete actions, it is no surprise that this school of thought was vehemently attacked by those who refused to accept the notion that it is the duty of the artist to propose solutions for all of the problems that plague their society. Moreover, literary engagement is often predicated upon a naïve vision of the author as a privileged individual who is somehow capable of providing answers that will improve the plight of humanity.

In perhaps the only study solely devoted to the question of commitment in Le Clézio’s narratives, Claude Cavallero exposes both the inherent paradoxes of engagement as it was conceived by seminal French thinkers of the twentieth century and the powerful connotations associated with this school of thought<sup>2)</sup>. The fact that the term engagement conjures a litany of automatic associations, both positive and negative, is another reason why other scholars have been reticent to explore certain commonalities that exist between Le Clézio and the generation of committed writers. It should be noted that critics like Jennifer Waelti-Walters<sup>3)</sup> have affirmed that the existential suffering of early Le Clézian protagonists, such as Adam Pollo, Roch, and Beaumont, is similar to the cerebral anguish experienced by characters like Sartre’s Roquentin and Camus’s Meursault. However, these intertextual comparisons have been quite superficial in nature, and the concept of committed literature is generally absent.

Furthermore, although engaged writing reigned supreme over the French literary landscape for a brief period, identifying precisely what constitutes committed prose is often problematic. As Suzanne Guerlac elucidates, “A number of questions remain unclear. What, for example, is an engaged writer supposed to write? Is there a significant difference between literary engagement and engagement tout court?”<sup>4)</sup>. In spite of works like ›L’Existentialisme est un humanisme‹<sup>5)</sup> in which Sartre defends his humanistic endeavors and attempts to articulate crucial concepts

---

1) GEORGES PEREC, *Commitment or the Crisis of Language*, Trans. ROB HALPERN, in: *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 29, 1 (2009), pp. 112–123, here: p. 121.

2) CLAUDE CAVALLERO, J. M. G. *Le Clézio et la question de l’engagement*, in: *Horizons Le Cléziens: Actes du colloque de Grenade*, Ed. MARIA LUISA BERNABÉ-GIL, Toulouse, France: Inter-Lignes, April 2009, pp. 195–216, here: p. 199.

3) JENNIFER WAELTI-WALTERS, J. M. G. *Le Clézio*, Boston: Twayne Publishers 1977.

4) Suzanne Guerlac, *Sartre and the Powers of Literature: The Myth of Prose and the Practice of Reading*, in: *Modern Language Notes* 108 (1993), pp. 805–824, here: p. 806.

5) JEAN-PAUL SARTRE, *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme*, Paris: Editions Nagel 1964.

more clearly, the nature of socially responsible prose unfortunately has remained quite nebulous. In addition to concerns related to this disconcerting ambivalence, Sartre's proverbial fall from grace in many literary and philosophical circles further compounds the reluctance of the scholarly community to make intertextual connections between him and the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature.

Although Sartre was admired by many for his unwavering desire to liberate subjugated peoples and to challenge the status quo so vehemently and blindly defended by the bourgeoisie, the author's humanistic project has been met with increasing skepticism and cynicism in recent years. Moreover, Sartre has also been accused of dogmatism because of his usage of expressions like "Salaud"<sup>6)</sup> to refer to other people who dared to question his moral and philosophical authority or to propose another point of view. The re-appropriation of the term "salaud" by Sartre to insult those who represent and support the established order also highlights a salient feature of the writer's personality. Furthermore, works such as ›Les Mains Sales‹ and ›Le Diable et le Bon Dieu‹ unequivocally imply the necessity of revolutionary violence, and they also suggest that the end justifies the means.<sup>7)</sup> Given that Le Clézio deplors violence regardless of the supposed justification by either side, this is yet another probable reason why critics have failed to explore a concept that is undeniably linked to Sartre in a systematic fashion.

Given the problematic nature of the concept of committed literature itself and all of the aforementioned quandaries, it is hardly surprising that a comprehensive exploration of Le Clézian engagement has yet to be attempted. In spite of these obstacles, two recent public discourses by the author, in addition to the Nobel Prize acceptance speech, beckon the literary community to delve deeper into this complex and ambivalent phenomenon. During his visit to Mississippi State University, the Franco-Mauritian author lectured on March 30, 2009 in front of a capacity crowd of approximately 1,000 people.<sup>8)</sup> In his discussion of ›What is Literature?‹<sup>9)</sup> Le Clézio identified the notion of commitment as one of the essential questions that must continue to be posed. As the author muses,

For me, one of the first questions because it is often the question that is directed to me would be the question of commitment in literature. In France, this question has a name [...] The writers who wrote during this time period of the *littérature engagée* are well known. (Ibd.)

In a clear affirmation concerning the necessity of revisiting the notion of commitment, Le Clézio explains the basic premise of socially responsible writing as

<sup>6)</sup> Specifically, the term "Salaud," as appropriated by Sartre, designates members of the bourgeoisie class who vigorously defend the values of the social elite. See ANDREW LEAK, *Jean-Paul Sartre*, New York: Reaktion Books 2006, p. 38.

<sup>7)</sup> For a direct admission of the author concerning this debate, see RONALD ARONSON, *Camus & Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and The Quarrel that Ended it*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2004, p. 202.

<sup>8)</sup> The citations in this essay are taken from the video provided by the Mississippi State University Television Center which filmed the entire event.

<sup>9)</sup> J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO, *What is Literature?* Lee Hall Auditorium, Mississippi State University, 30 Mar. 2009. Mississippi State University Television Center, DVD.

follows: “For a brief moment in France, writers believed that literature could solve the social questions, that the writer was not a prophet but he was a kind of seer who could foresee the solutions for the problems of humanity” (ibd.). In reference to Sartre, Le Clézio reiterates, “He was persuaded that literature and especially theater was a way to promote a new society” (ibd.). However, after briefly outlining the major tenants of Sartrian engagement for the general public, Le Clézio passionately revealed the paradoxes of this literary and humanistic project. As the Franco-Mauritian writer affirms,

But during this very short time period, terrible things happened. Stalin was reigning in the Soviet Union, and he killed millions of people and deported thousands of people. During this same time, where these engaged writers were trying to identify themselves to socialism [...] This socialism was destroying society [...] It was denying humanism. (Ibd.)

This portion of the speech was reminiscent of comments made by critics, such as Tony Smith, who assert that Sartre’s project was indeed a failure in part because of his willful blindness to the crimes against humanity committed by communist regimes.

Moreover, perhaps it was the Algerian war that served as the final coup de grâce for this movement in addition to the aforementioned complicity with sadistic despotic socialist governments. In reference to the Algerian conflict that divided France, Tony Smith declares, “Despite Sartre’s important role in the movement to end this terrible conflict, he proved unable in the heart of political engagement to meet the standards he had set himself for excellence in the historian’s craft”.<sup>10)</sup> Drawing a similar conclusion, Le Clézio contends, “In many questions, the littérature engagée was failing if it had to bear the values of the authors [...] there was a contradiction between their ideas and their behavior” (What is Literature?)<sup>11)</sup>. Yet, in spite of the perceived ‘failure’ of the humanistic endeavors of a generation of venerated French writers, Le Clézio states that “commitment in literature is not finished, it is impossible to write without being concerned by what is happening in the world [...] Writers have to deal with day to day life and day to day politics” (ibd.). During the rest of this portion of the speech at Mississippi State University, the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature unequivocally implies that all literature could be considered to be ‘committed’ at some basic level. For this reason, the question of aesthetic engagement is both timeless and universal.

Although Le Clézio validates the present day relevance of engagé writing, he suggests that the notion of commitment, as conceived by Sartre and his contemporaries, needs to be reconceptualized. In place of the Sartrian ‘wager’ and the imperative to act, Le Clézio proposes a different vision of the artist. In stark contrast to being an agent of social change, an artist should be less pretentious avoiding all-encompassing ideologies and definitive answers. As the Franco-Mauritian

<sup>10)</sup> TONY SMITH, *Idealism and People’s War: Sartre on Algeria*, in: *Political Theory* 1, 4 (1973), pp. 426–449, here: p. 446.

<sup>11)</sup> LE CLÉZIO, *What is Literature?* (cit. fn. 9).

writer articulates at Mississippi State, “They (writers) cannot now assert, affirm, that they are going to solve the problems. They have to be more humble and say that they are just witnesses” (ibd.). For Le Clézio, the author is merely another concerned citizen who does not possess any special gift of vision or knowledge that places him in a superior position to anyone else. This point of view is also clearly expressed in Le Clézio’s writing as well. Reflecting upon the importance of the literary profession, the author speculates in *L’Extase Matérielle*, “Écrire, si ça sert à quelque chose, ce doit être à ça: à témoigner”.<sup>12)</sup> It should be noted as well that critics have even analyzed Le Clézio’s literary project from the standpoint of an artist as a mere witness, as evidenced by Claude Cavallero’s recent monograph *Le Clézio, Témoin du Monde*.<sup>13)</sup>

Underscoring the contention that literature is a profession like any other, Le Clézio elucidates in an interview with Jean-Louis Ezine, “L’art est une forme d’artisanat [...] Je crois que l’écrivain est une sorte de bricoleur”.<sup>14)</sup> The complete demystification of the role of an artist, as proposed by Le Clézio, implores the reader to wonder exactly how or what this humble linguistic handyman should write. In a public conversation between the author and the journalist Adam Gopnik in New York as part of the PEN World Voices Festival that transpired on April 28, 2009, Le Clézio states, “Literature is the contrary of knowledge. It is asking questions not giving lessons”<sup>15)</sup> During this discussion of literary engagement with his interlocutor, Le Clézio once again reiterates that the writer is not a privileged purveyor of knowledge who possesses universal answers to humanity’s most pressing issues. In the absence of infallible truths, it is perhaps the duty of the artist to ask disconcerting questions related to what they are able to witness in the world around them without having the audacity to propose a ready-made, idealistic solution for complex problems. In this context, perhaps a writer can alleviate apathy and encourage people to live otherwise by creating a dialog with questions for which no simplistic answer is evident.

Le Clézio’s answer to Gopnik’s inquiry “In a way your first fifteen or twenty years of your work is a kind of negation of the sort of tradition of the littérature engagée” is revealing (ibd.). Without any hesitation, the author affirms that an aspect of his literary project was indeed a rejection of these committed virtues. Moreover, the writer identifies the Algerian War as the ultimate failure of the socially responsible writing championed by the renowned French intellectuals from this time period. He even confesses, “I wanted to leave France” (ibd.). Rendering

<sup>12)</sup> LE CLÉZIO, *L’Extase Matérielle*, Paris: Gallimard, 1967, p. 103.

<sup>13)</sup> CLAUDE CAVALLERO, *Le Clézio, Témoin du Monde*, Clamart: Éditions Calliopées 2009.

<sup>14)</sup> J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO, *Ailleurs: Entretiens sur France-Culture avec JEAN-LOUIS ÉZINE*, Paris: Arléa (Diffusion Le Seuil) 1995, p. 30.

<sup>15)</sup> JEAN-MARIE GUSTAVE LE CLÉZIO in Conversation with ADAM GOPNIK. Interview. PEN World Voices Festival. 28 April 2009: <http://www.pen.org/event/2009/04/24/jean-marie-gustave-le-cl%C3%A9zio-conversation-adam-gopnik> – The entire interview is also available for download at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W8armorEjLQ> (30.11.2012)

homage to Nathalie Sarraute, Le Clézio reveals that he shares the same misgivings about literature always being in the service of a higher purpose. In his discussion of the *nouveau roman*, the author declares, “I felt a strong suspicion towards the previous French literature, to deliver a message to the world and to say those are the solutions” (ibid.) In the same vein as his speech at Mississippi State, Le Clézio also discusses the incompatibility of committed values with literary complicity related to authoritarian regimes.

Although the Franco-Mauritian author undeniably expresses that the *engagé* movement ended in failure, he does not deny Gopnik’s perception of a “clandestine dialog” between him and Albert Camus. Exposing his appreciation for the writer, Le Clézio explains,

I really liked Camus because he [...] was not giving affirmations and even [...] during his Nobel Prize speech [...] he said that he could not choose between Algerian independence and the love he had for his native land and his mother and so he was showing some kind of weakness. And, for this I loved him, and I thought that this was a good writer who was able to show his weakness [...] so this apparent contradiction with Camus I really enjoyed. (Ibid.)

Similar to Le Clézio, Camus is distrustful of comprehensive ideologies that claim to possess definitive answers to questions that cannot be fully appropriated. Both writers directly address the limitations of rationality, as they laud the grandeur of nature and the pursuit of epicurean pleasures.<sup>16)</sup> Perhaps the ‘weakness’ to which Le Clézio refers would be better described as an epistemological crisis. Although Camus is indeed torn by the conflict that has scarred his native soil, it should be noted that he rarely if ever maintains to have access to infallible answers. Both Le Clézio and Camus tend to avoid affirmations, because it is difficult to promote specific solutions to philosophical or social problems if one sincerely believes in the ambivalent nature of his or her own knowledge.

However, in spite of Le Clézio’s insistence that French committed literature was an unmitigated failure, critics have also recognized the author’s deep admiration for Sartre. Both Marina Salles<sup>17)</sup> and Vèle Putschay<sup>18)</sup> remind the reader that Le Clézio once referred to Sartre as an ‘*homme exemplaire*.’ Although Sartre may have been blind to certain crimes against humanity or simply turned away, Le Clézio respects the tireless efforts of a fellow writer who dedicated his life to humanistic goals. Even if the notion of engagement now seems outdated and perhaps even idealistic, Sartre and other committed authors should be venerated for their unwavering passion to promote basic principles of equality and human rights during

<sup>16)</sup> For a more detailed comparison of the potential link between Le Clézio and Camus, see KEITH MOSER, *Rending Moments of Material Ecstasy in the Meditative Essays of Two Nobel Laureates: Le Clézio and Camus*, in: *Romance Notes* 49, 1 (2009), pp. 13–21.

<sup>17)</sup> MARINA SALLES, *Le Clézio: Notre Contemporain*, Rennes, France: PUR 2006.

<sup>18)</sup> VÈLE PUTCHAY, *Le Clézio, Sartre, en parallèle*, in: J. M. G. *Le Clézio Prix Nobel de littérature: hommages, témoignages, analyses*, sous la dir. d’ISSA ASGARALLY, *Quatre Bornes* (Maurice): Italiques 2009, pp. 60–62.

a tumultuous time period. As Putchay affirms, “Ce que Le Clézio loue chez cet ‘homme exemplaire’, c’est sa capacité à rendre à l’acte de l’écrire sa fonction d’être toujours au service de l’humanité”.<sup>19)</sup> In spite of the many differences that exist between the two writers, Le Clézio encourages the literary community to avoid judging Sartre or his contemporaries too harshly. Regardless of his suspicions concerning committed writing, Le Clézio evokes his respect for those who use the pen as a social sword.

The humanistic tone and ethical summons at the end of Le Clézio’s Nobel acceptance speech ‘Dans la forêt des paradoxes’ also warrants further investigation in the context of engagement. Echoing the concerns that Stig Dagerman coined ‘the forest of paradoxes,’ the laureate examines the frustrations, limitations, and contradictions of the literary profession. Refuting the Sartrian notion that “Ecrire c’est agir,” Le Clézio asserts,

Agir, c’est ce que l’écrivain voudrait par-dessus tout. Agir, plutôt que témoigner. Ecrire, imaginer, rêver, pour que ses mots, ses inventions et ses rêves interviennent dans la réalité, changent les esprits et les cœurs, ouvre un monde meilleur. Et cependant, à cet instant même, une voix lui souffle que cela ne se pourra pas, que les mots sont des dots que le vent de la société emporte, que les rêves ne sont que des chimères.<sup>20)</sup>

The 2008 Nobel Laureate admits that is an appealing notion to think that literature can change the world, but one that is divorced from reality. Regardless of the purity of the artist’s intentions, too many barriers exist which prevent this dream from ever blossoming into fruition.

Although much of Le Clézio’s Nobel speech appears to be yet another dismissal of committed literature, the writer attacks the sensibilities of the artistic community urging them to no longer be complacent. Specifically, the Franco-Mauritian author states that illiteracy and hunger “exigent aujourd’hui notre action. Que dans ce troisième millénaire qui vient de commencer, sur notre terre commune, aucun enfant, quel que soit son sexe, sa langue, ou sa religion, ne soit abandonné à la faim ou à l’ignorance, laissé à l’écart du festin”.<sup>21)</sup> Le Clézio does not claim to have all of the answers to solve these interrelated issues, but he does offer a few practical solutions, such as the distribution and co-edition of texts to help developing countries gain equal access to vital information. It should be noted that all of these suggestions are outside of the literary domain. If those who are identified by Le Clézio as the Happy Few want to help those in need, perhaps they must take advantage of their privileged position in life, momentarily drop their pen, and dirty their hands in Sartrian terms by means of concrete action.

Since the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature is clearly cognizant of the inherent limitations of literature as a social panacea in the modern world, his summons to

<sup>19)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>20)</sup> J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO, *Dans la Forêt des paradoxes* (texte intégral), in: J. M. G. Le Clézio Prix Nobel de Littérature: Hommages, témoignages, analyses (cit. fn. 18) pp. 74–85, here: p. 78.

<sup>21)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

action in Stockholm might resemble a less idealistic version of the Sartrean project that entirely removes the artist from the pedestal. In ›L'Existentialisme est un humanisme‹, Sartre states in his discussion of engagement, “je serai sans illusion et que je ferai ce que je peux”.<sup>22)</sup> This humble view of the artist, clearly articulated by Sartre in this specific passage, simply encourages a writer to do what is in his or her power to enact social change. It is evident from Le Clézio's profound skepticism and perhaps even cynicism related to literary commitment, as expressed in ›Dans la forêt des paradoxes‹, that he is fully aware of the paradoxes that bind the writer. Moreover, in ›Le Livre des Fuites‹, published almost forty years before his Nobel address, the author directly questions the validity of the novel that he is writing in the ‘autocritique’ sections. After asking himself “Est-ce que cela valait vraiment la peine d'écrire tout ça [...] Je veux dire, où était la nécessité, l'urgence de ce livre [...],” the writer grumbles in disgust, “Est-ce que j'écris pour les hommes, ou bien pour les mouches?”<sup>23)</sup> In ›Le Livre des Fuites‹, Le Clézio exposes the blatant contradictions of littérature engagée, as noted by Adam Gopnik. In this novel from the early part of Le Clézio's career, the writer desperately wants to make a difference, but frustration continues to mount because he realizes the chimerical nature of this pipe dream.

Ironically, it is yet another dismissal of committed literature by the writer that necessitates a more profound exploration of this complex subject. In ›Dans la forêt des paradoxes‹, as Le Clézio undermines the engagement of the past, he urges the artistic community to dedicate itself to eradicating illiteracy and poverty around the globe. Although the author once again underlines the failure of the pen to create a more egalitarian and just society, he reaffirms the necessity of engagement in the modern era. However, Le Clézian commitment is a reconceptualized and more nuanced notion that rejects the universal values of the system created by its predecessors. The rest of this study will attempt to explore this ambivalent phenomenon by probing the author's fiction, public discourses, media interventions, and recent initiatives in a desire to more clearly delineate Le Clézian engagement.

Perhaps the article entitled ›Every Word Contains the World, A Conversation Between Adam Gopnik and Nobel Prize Winner J.M.G. Le Clézio‹, offers the best explanation of Le Clézio's engaged project.<sup>24)</sup> In reference to the omnipresence of vivid details that paint lyrical portraits of natural landscapes in Le Clézio's fiction, an unidentified author of an essay in *La New-Yorkaise* about the writer's public conversation with Gopnik remarks,

Gopnik brought up the fact that one of Le Clézio's students or follower of his work once said his ambition was to obtain “a humanism without human beings at the center,” asking if this was true.

<sup>22)</sup> SARTRE, L'Existentialisme est un humanisme (cit. fn. 5), p. 54.

<sup>23)</sup> J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO, *Le Livre des fuites*, Paris: Gallimard 1969, pp. 54–57.

<sup>24)</sup> Every Word Contains the World. A Conversation Between Adam Gopnik and Nobel Prize Winner J. M. G. Le Clézio, April 26, 2009, in: *La New-Yorkaise*, 7 Jul. 2009. – The article can be accessed in its entirety at: <http://lanew-yorkaise.com/?p=452> (30.11.2012)



"I wish I could do that but I am a human being, everything I write is from a human being's point of view," Le Clézio lamented. He said that he feels the closest to this state of "humanism without humans" when he reads ancient Indian spiritual texts or the poems of Rimbaud: "When I read this, it makes me shiver," he said.<sup>25)</sup>

Although Le Clézio denies that he is capable of creating a de-centered form of humanism that valorizes not just humanity but the entire material universe, many people might wonder if he is being too modest in this regard. Throughout his entire career, the writer has decried exploitation of both humanity and the cosmos. Given his profound ecological sensibilities, the author implies in his narratives, public discourses, and press articles that every living being possesses the same right to inhabit the earth.

A careful reading of *›L'Extase Matérielle*, an essay which could be labeled as Le Clézio's most philosophical work, seems to vindicate Gopnik's definition of Le Clézian humanism. Attempting to eliminate the arbitrary division that separates human beings from the rest of the material universe, the writer emphatically declares, "Alors, il faut s'humilier [...] il faut se faire tout petit devant ce qui existe".<sup>26)</sup> The destructive egotistical tendency of humanity to define itself as the very core of existence has led to the alarming depletion of the earth's natural resources since the beginning of the industrial age. If human beings are the only important life forms, then the remainder of the planet is at our complete disposition for the gratification of all of our wants and desires.

In his speech at Mississippi State University, Le Clézio refers to this self-destructive ideology as the "Genesis myth." The Franco-Mauritian author combats the genesis myth by reminding the reader that he or she is part of a larger cosmic force which represents the origin of all life. In the incessant quest for material wealth, the western world has already eradicated many other 'disposable' organisms. The 'petitesse' of humanity, articulated by Le Clézio in *›L'Extase Matérielle*, might represent the only ideological alternative that cautions human beings to respect a sacred and undecipherable cosmic whole that must be protected to sustain the existence of abundant life on this planet. For Le Clézio, every life, human and otherwise, has great intrinsic worth and should be equally valorized. Unlike the engagement of its predecessors, Le Clézio's humanistic commitment is more holistic in nature, as it defends the entire universe and chain of existence.

In his fiction, *›Le Chercheur d'or*<sup>27)</sup>, *›Onitsha*<sup>28)</sup>, and *›Pawana*<sup>29)</sup> concretize the nexus of Le Clézio's cosmic engagement. Although the Franco-Mauritian writer is not a didactic thinker, he does pose serious questions about issues that plague modern society including the depletion of the earth's natural resources. Similar to

<sup>25)</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26)</sup> LE CLÉZIO, *L'Extase Matérielle* (cit. fn. 12), p. 69.

<sup>27)</sup> LE CLÉZIO, *Le Chercheur d'Or*, Paris: Gallimard 1985.

<sup>28)</sup> LE CLÉZIO, *Onitsha*, Paris: Gallimard 1991.

<sup>29)</sup> LE CLÉZIO, *Pawana* (1992), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Paris: La Bibliothèque Gallimard 2003.

Michel Tournier's readaptation of Defoe's ›Robinson Crusoe‹, Le Clézio reverses the materialistic, occidental paradigm that pervades Herman Melville's ›Moby Dick‹ in ›Pawana‹. Whereas Melville's narrative paints a vivid tableau of a soulless adversary in the form of a white whale that is pitted against a mortal human being, Le Clézio's short story underlines the moral transgressions of a crew that is solely motivated by avarice. In their incessant quest for the accumulation of material wealth at all costs, Charles Melville Scammon's team does indeed discover the site of the secret lagoon for which they had been searching. However, after the carnage and pillage of the earth are complete, both Scammon and John, de Nantucket<sup>30)</sup> continue to lament the utter annihilation of the sacred and serene space that they completely destroyed for more than fifty years. When the material ecstasy of the moment dissipates, the crew belatedly realizes that they have forever tarnished a natural treasure whose timeless value far outweighed the ephemeral riches that they were able to obtain.

In Le Clézio's narrative, which could be considered a response to ›Moby Dick‹ and a questioning of Western values, the author cautions the reader to protect the sanctity of the cosmos to which all human beings are inextricably linked. As Bruno Thibault elucidates in his analysis of the short text, "Pawana is an apocalyptic tale. It does not evoke the age of great discoveries but rather the closure of the 'western frontier' and the systematic destruction of America's natural resources".<sup>31)</sup> ›Pawana‹ is a powerful, cautionary narrative that issues a stern reminder that human life cannot be sustained if too many links in the chain of existence are broken. Le Clézio employs the metaphor of sterility to illustrate this grim reality. In reference to the eradication of the legendary lagoon where female whales once gave birth to their young, the narrator Charles Melville Scammon explains, "Le ventre de la terre s'est desséché et flétri, il est devenu stérile".<sup>32)</sup> Le Clézio utilizes this poignant literary device to appeal to humanity's desire for self-preservation. As the French critic and poet Bruno Doucey affirms in his interpretation of the text, "Au-delà du préjudice causé à la nature, cet acte de barbarie révèle la fragilité de l'homme et des civilisations les plus développées : en souillant la pureté du monde, les êtres humains portent atteinte à leur propre vie et préfigurent leur propre disparition".<sup>33)</sup>

In reference to the significance of hunting customs and their rituals, Bruno Thibault notes the parallels between the carnage evoked in ›Pawana‹ and a memorable scene in ›Le Chercheur d'or‹ for the protagonist Alexis. As Thibault asserts,

<sup>30)</sup> It should be noted that the narrator is identified as "John, de Nantucket" with a comma in this short story.

<sup>31)</sup> BRUNO THIBAUT, 'Awaité Pawana': J. M. G. Le Clézio's Vision of the Sacred (The Questing Fictions of J. M. G. Le Clézio), in: *World Literature Today* (March 1997), pp. 723–729, here: p. 723.

<sup>32)</sup> CLÉZIO, *Pawana* (cit. fn. 29), p. 93.

<sup>33)</sup> Cf. the detailed explanation of ›Pawana‹: BRUNO DOUCEY, *In Pawana*, 2nd ed., Paris: Gallimard 2003, here: p. 115.

The sailors rushing in pursuit of the whale embody at the outset all the brutality and ferocity of men without gods. But thereafter they appear to be seized by a mystical horror: they are shown silent and immobile in the lagoon reddened by the blood of their victim [...] A similar scene is presented in *Le Chercheur d'or*, where Commander Bradmer orders the massacre of giant turtles on the island of Saint-Brandon.<sup>34)</sup>

Furthermore, it should be noted that Le Clézio utilizes the same analogy of sterility to denounce the mentality of the genesis myth which attests that human beings are the center of creation and the rest of the world has been erected for their propagation and pleasure. After all of the turtles have been exterminated by the crew, the narrator states, "Ici la terre est stérile, un lieu où viennent mourir les créatures de la mer".<sup>35)</sup> Although this specific lagoon is not identified as a breeding ground where infants are assassinated in their mother's womb, as in ›Pawana‹, the utter destruction of a natural wonder that is teeming with life is the same in both texts.

Moreover, it should be noted that many of the dead animals are wasted as they fall prey to sharks, birds, and other predators in Saint-Brandon. The narrator Charles Melville Scammon at the end of the second chapter of ›Pawana‹ also admits that the murdered whales are so abundant that they are not all able to be harvested. Explaining this predicament, the narrator states, "une dizaine de baleines avaient déjà été tuées. C'était plus que ne pouvait emmener le Léonore. Nous abandonnâmes les moins grosses prises".<sup>36)</sup> Given his deep respect for Amerindian thought and way of life, it is no surprise that the author casts this useless taking of the life of another animate organism in a negative light. In many Amerindian societies, it is considered a sacrilege to kill another material being without utilizing every part of its carcass for a specific purpose. The senseless nature of these crimes against existence is emblematic of the lack of respect for the sacredness of life itself in Western culture.

As Thibault indicates, Alexis is indeed mortified by the destruction that he witnesses at Saint-Brandon. A clearly destabilized Alexis describes the terror as follows: "Quand la boucherie est terminée, tout le monde embarque dans la pirogue, les mains ruisselantes de sang [...] j'ai hâte de fuir cette île, ce lagon souillé de sang [...] je ne peux oublier ce qui s'est passé, et ce soir-là, je refuse de manger".<sup>37)</sup> Whereas the traumatized young boy who posed the question "Comment peut-on tuer ce qu'on aime?" is paralyzed by incomprehension and stupefaction in ›Pawana‹, Alexis refuses to partake in the sinister feast.<sup>38)</sup> By means of a progressive initiation that begins in Denis's pirogue, the narrator of ›Le Chercheur d'or‹ realizes that the natural world represents one of the richest treasures of all. After a myriad of divergent maritime experiences, Alexis will discover the sacred grandeur of the elements which cannot be possessed or appropriated.

<sup>34)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 725.

<sup>35)</sup> CLÉZIO, *Pawana* (cit. fn. 29), p. 180.

<sup>36)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>37)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>38)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

However, it is perhaps the novel ›Onitsha‹ that best illustrates the juxtaposition between the cosmic valorization of many indigenous societies and the Western expendable view of nature. Although Fintan is learning how to embrace the universe and understand his place in it because of his guide Bony, his transformation is not yet complete when he senselessly exterminates a nest of termites. Describing Fintan's rage in which he is compelled to inflict harm upon someone or something, the narrator affirms,

Fintan avait attaqué les termitières l'une après l'autre, avec sauvagerie [...] Il ne savait plus trop ce qu'il faisait. C'était pour oublier, peut-être, pour détruire. Pour réduire en poudre sa propre image. Pour effacer le visage de Geoffroy [...] Bony était arrivé [...] 'You ravin mad, you crazy!' Il avait pris la terre et les larves de termites dans ses mains. 'C'est dieu [...] Les termites étaient les gardiens des sauterelles, sans eux le monde serait ravagé.'<sup>39)</sup>

In the context of the entire narrative, this passage is quite revealing on many different levels. This act of aggression is a rebellion against a newly-imposed paternal authority that had been absent the first seven years of Fintan's life. Since Geoffroy was unable to rejoin his family during the chaotic period of the 1940's due to his military service, Fintan's mother Maou had been the only parent that the young boy had ever known. Consequently, when Geoffroy attempts to assert his influence in an effort to play an active role in his son's upbringing, a frustrated Fintan revolts. It should also be noted that Geoffroy is a new father, and he also must learn to adjust to this family paradigm.

Although Fintan's savage outburst is indeed the result of the displacement of a child thousands of miles from the familiar confines where he was raised, his impulse to wreak havoc and destruction needs to be further analyzed. Even if the source of Fintan's anger is transparent, why does he choose this particular outlet to release his inner turmoil? The protagonist's choice of what to reduce to oblivion, whether conscious or not, is important. Instead of breaking one of his father's prized possessions or another object of value in the house, Fintan attacks innocent victims that are incapable of defending themselves. Hence, the protagonist will be able to unleash his fury without fear of bodily harm or other repercussions. Moreover, in Western culture that generally perceives termites as unwelcome pests, Fintan instinctively devalorizes their intrinsic right to exist. Whereas many children are allowed to play cruel games with insects that include water, magnifying glasses, or mirrors, because of this mentality, this type of behavior is considered both sacrilegious and self-destructive in Bony's society. Fintan's indigenous friend's visceral reaction to this carnage is not simply the reflection of a pantheistic world view, but it is also emblematic of a type of pragmatic knowledge that is derived from an intimate relationship with the natural world. Bony expresses that it defies logic to take the life of another organism without just cause because this disappearance will affect other species creating a ripple effect that could eventually lead to humanity's demise.

<sup>39)</sup> LE CLÉZIO, *Onitsha* (cit. fn. 28), pp. 71f.

J. M. G. Le Clézio's public discourses and his newspaper articles reinforce the cosmic engagement that the reader uncovers in his fiction. Although it has always been a source of debate whether a writer's life should be considered in relation to his work, it is nearly impossible to make a clear distinction when exploring the concept of committed literature. For this reason, Claude Cavallero offers the following definition of philosophical engagement: "Pour la philosophie, l'engagement se pose comme une exigence entre pensée et pratique, entre la subjectivité du sujet qui pense et le monde dans lequel s'inscrit cette pensée"<sup>40</sup>). In perhaps the only existing study of Le Clézian engagement, Cavallero reiterates, "Lorsqu'on invoque l'engagement littéraire d'un auteur, on ne peut donc effectivement se limiter à l'œuvre textuelle elle-même [...] Il convient d'appréhender l'ensemble des épitextes qui, quels qu'en soient la forme, contribuent au jour le jour au travail de dévoilement de l'œuvre"<sup>41</sup>).

Moreover, for Sartre, an author, like any other individual, should be judged based on the totality of all of the essential actions that defined his or her existence. As Sartre asserts in ›L'Existentialisme est un humanisme‹, "l'homme n'est rien d'autre que son projet [...] il n'est donc rien d'autre que l'ensemble de ses actes, rien d'autre que sa vie"<sup>42</sup>). For this reason, a writer's entire life is relevant when probing the question of committed literature. Cavallero is correct in his assertion that the concept of aesthetic engagement extends beyond traditional textual boundaries.

Although he does not distribute political propaganda in the street or promote revolutionary ideals like Sartre, Le Clézio has publically intervened to defend important environmental and humanitarian causes on several different occasions. Before writing ›Pawana‹, Bruno Doucey reveals Le Clézio's sensitivity to the plight of gray whales in California at the end of the 1980's<sup>43</sup>). As the Franco-Mauritian writer himself freely admits, an artist is always concerned about what is transpiring around him or her. Given his profound distress related to the aforementioned issue, it is hardly surprising that "Le Clézio exprima son inquiétude dans des articles de presse"<sup>44</sup>). In his analysis of both the short narrative ›Pawana‹ and the epitexts that preceded its creation, Bruno Doucey declares, "Vous aurez compris en lisant ces lignes que *Pawana* est l'œuvre d'un écrivain engagé dans une lutte pour la défense des grands mammifères marins. Le Clézio sait que d'absurdes massacres menacent aujourd'hui l'équilibre écologique des océans [...] Le combat de cet écrivain bien informé rejoint celui que mènent, sur le terrain, l'association Greenpeace ou le WWF"<sup>45</sup>). In spite of his numerous dismissals of *littérature engagée* in both his narratives and public speeches, it is hard to deny that Le Clézio's stance in support of California whales was indeed a committed one.

<sup>40</sup>) CAVALLERO, Le Clézio (cit. fn. 13), p. 196.

<sup>41</sup>) Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>42</sup>) SARTRE, L'Existentialisme est un humanisme (cit. fn. 5), p. 55.

<sup>43</sup>) Cf. DOUCEY, In Pawana, p. 110.

<sup>44</sup>) Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>) Ibid., pp. 110f.

In stark contrast to Sartre, Le Clézio is a more private individual who prefers to stay away from the limelight. As the contemporary author Tahar Ben Jelloun explains in his Nobel homage, “C’est Jémia qui se charge de le rendre accessible à ses amis et proches”.<sup>46)</sup> Ben Jelloun reiterates that it is often difficult to track down the elusive writer. However, despite the major philosophical and personal differences between Sartre and Le Clézio, it seems as if certain issues do indeed compel the Franco-Mauritian author to take action. He may be reclusive at times, but some ecological crimes force him out of his isolation.

In addition to lamenting the treatment of whales off the shores of California, the Mauritian writer Carl de Souza recalls another social cause that beckoned Le Clézio to take a stand in his homage to the 2008 Nobel Laureate in Literature. According to de Souza, the two authors first became acquainted with each other as the Mauritian artistic community collectively united to save the picturesque *jardin de la compagnie (des Indes)* in Port-Louis. This site was being threatened by entrepreneurs who wished to transform the garden into a parking lot. In reference to Le Clézio’s passionate plea to protect this serene place, de Souza explains, “Au cours de son intervention pour la défense de cette oasis dans une ville qui se bétonnait, il avait argué en faveur d’un droit à l’existence d’arbres, intrinsèque à toute chose vivante, de son propre chef en non nécessairement pour être au service de l’homme”.<sup>47)</sup> It should be noted that the efforts of Le Clézio, Ananda Devi, Carl de Souza, and their fellow supporters were successful. Moreover, Le Clézio’s line of defense in favor of this public refuge is indicative of the de-centered humanism to which Gopnik refers in their recorded conversation. By reminding human beings of their smallness in the larger context of life, the laureate urges the Mauritian community to not infringe upon the inalienable rights of other organisms in the name of progress.

In his Nobel acceptance speech, Le Clézio also alludes to the struggles of the Inuit writer Rita Mestokosho to defend the integrity and vitality of her homeland. From the greatest literary stage, Le Clézio’s echoes Mestokosho’s concerns about *Hydro-Québec’s* project to harness the energy from the romaine river to provide electricity. Although the large corporation maintains that its initiative is not harmful to the environment as it promotes a form of renewable energy, Mestokosho and her supporters are not convinced. Furthermore, many members of Inuit society feel as if the Canadian government is undermining their right to govern themselves without the omnipresent influence of a federal authority and the conglomerates that sustain its economy.

After briefly expressing his support for those who oppose *Hydro-Québec’s* intentions in Stockholm, Le Clézio once again feels compelled to commit himself to a social cause. For this reason, he publishes a short essay about the subject entitled

---

<sup>46)</sup> TAHAR BEN JELLOUN, *L’Homme du partage*, in: J. M. G. Le Clézio Prix Nobel de Littérature: Hommages, témoignages, analyses (cit. fn. 18), pp. 7–9, here: p. 8.

<sup>47)</sup> CARL DE SOUZA, *Le Clézio in vivo*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 18–20, here: p. 18.

›Quel avenir pour la Romaine?‹ in ›Le Monde. The tone of this rather succinct epitext is similar to that of ›Pawana‹. Directly addressing the reader in the cautionary first lines of this public intervention, Le Clézio writes, “Regardez bien la photo qui accompagne cette tribune, car dans quelque temps, elle ne sera peut-être plus qu’un souvenir. La rivière Romaine est un de ces lieux merveilleux qui ont survécu sur notre planète très maltraitée par la civilisation industrielle.”<sup>48</sup>) Le Clézio appeals to the reader’s sensibilities by implying that very few privileged spaces which have not been significantly altered by global industrialization still exist. Therefore, the romaine river represents a rare and somehow intact natural treasure that must be preserved. Once its delicate beauty and ecosystem have been compromised by this electrical project, it will become the *punta bunda* of the Innuït people. Like Charles Melville Scammon and John, de Nantucket, Mestokosho’s society might one day lament the passing of a sacred space and a heritage that cannot be restored.

Although Le Clézio’s cosmic engagement does not place humanity upon a pedestal, as privileged members of a superior species, the author often defends the sanctity of human life as well. ›Etoile Errante<sup>49</sup>) is perhaps the work that best concretizes the author’s commitment to humanity. In opposition to Sartre’s nuanced view of revolutionary values, war is always an evil that punishes innocent civilians on both sides and perpetuates an incessant cycle of violence in Le Clézio’s narratives.<sup>50</sup>) For Le Clézio, it is also the civilians who suffer the most during armed conflicts. In most cases, the political and social elite are shielded from the harsh quotidian realities of the carnage.

›Etoile Errante‹ equally exposes the extreme suffering that has ravaged both Israeli and Palestinian society during thousands of years of turmoil. As Walter Putnam correctly affirms in his analysis of this rending text, “There is no utopia here, whether on the Israeli or Palestinian side.”<sup>51</sup>) Unlike Sartre and other engagé writers, Le Clézio is not interested in politics. ›Etoile Errante‹ is a novel that decries the crimes against humanity from which both societies have immensely suffered by posing heartrending questions, such as Nas’s repeated interrogation “Le soleil ne brille-t-il pas pour tous?”<sup>52</sup>) Although a careful reading of the text confirms the purity of the author’s intentions, Tahir Ben Jelloun reminisces about the scandal provoked the appearance of excerpts from the novel in ›La Revue des Etudes Palestiniennes‹. In his passionate defense of a narrative that he deeply appreciates, Ben Jelloun asserts, “Je me souviens aussi du procès stupide et très malhonnête que certains journalistes engagés aux côtés de l’État d’Israël lui ont fait. Jean-Marie accusé

<sup>48</sup>) J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO, Quel avenir pour la Romaine. Jan. 7, 2009, in: Le Monde, 7 July 2009.

<sup>49</sup>) J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO, Étoile Errante, Paris: Gallimard 1992.

<sup>50</sup>) For a more comprehensive discussion of Sartrian engagement for and against armed conflicts, see SMITH, Idealism and People’s War (cit. fn. 10).

<sup>51</sup>) WALTER PUTNAM, The Poetics and Politics of Space in J. M. G. Le Clézio’s ›Étoile Errante‹, in: Borders, Exiles, Diasporas. Eds. ELAZAR BARKAN and MARIE-DENISE SHELTON (Cultural Sitings Series), Stanford: Stanford University Press 1998, p. 323.

<sup>52</sup>) LE CLÉZIO, Étoile Errante (cit. fn. 49), pp. 223, 224, 226.

d'antisémitisme! C'était lâche et intolérable".<sup>53</sup>) Time has indeed vindicated Le Clézio's veritable motivations for writing this compelling masterpiece. However, this embarrassing incident, albeit one that was dismissed shortly after its inception, gives testament to the perils of committed prose in any form. An author must possess a great deal of courage to take any kind of stand on controversial issues. This is yet another reason why artists are reticent to identify themselves as engaged.

In addition to decrying violence in all of its forms, another aspect of Le Clézio's commitment to humanity entails fostering an intercultural dialog. By exploring the inherent paradoxes of Western culture and valorizing indigenous thought and way of life, the author attacks destructive, ethnocentric attitudes that have created a superiority complex which asserts that more traditional civilizations have nothing to offer the modern world. One manner in which the author erodes the foundation of this self-centered mentality is by exposing the inhumane crimes that ultimately created the industrialized world. Le Clézio reminds the reader that the so-called developed world does not find itself in a privileged situation because of its moral or intellectual superiority, but rather because of the uncanny ability of their forefathers to exploit the earth and its inhabitants. It was not manifest destiny that created this situation of current inequality and economic domination, but Amerindian genocide, slavery, colonialism, sweatshops in the developing world, and the extraction of nonrenewable planetary resources.

In reference to this unpleasant reality, Le Clézio admits in a recent interview, "Being European, I'm not sure of the value of my culture, because I know what it's done". In this same exchange with the journalist Maya Jaggi, the author reveals that the paradox of Western society is in part the subject of his current literary project *Alma Mater*. As Le Clézio explains, "(I am a) product of western civilization, which invented extraordinarily beautiful things, and at the same time behaved terribly. Maybe I'm blinded by those obsessions [...] on the one hand, slave-buyers, and on the other, highly cultivated and good people [...] It's a contradiction I haven't solved".<sup>54</sup>) Although the author gives credit to the occidental world for its erudition and monumental cultural achievements, he underscores the heinous nature of the inhumane acts that made many of these accomplishments possible.

Moreover, as his narratives illustrate, Le Clézio also criticizes western dogmatism that refutes other possibilities or ways of knowing. For this reason, many of the author's works depict a Westerner who experiences a sort of initiation in a more primordial society. In her discussion of nomadism and contemporary Francophone literature, Katharine Harrington elucidates, "By diverting the cultural and ideological center of his writing away from a Western model, Le Clézio offers fresh perspectives for the Western reader. Throughout his novels and essays he

<sup>53</sup>) JELLOUN, *L'Homme du partage* (cit. fn. 46), p. 8.

<sup>54</sup>) MAYA JAGGI, J.M.G. Le Clézio: "Being European, I'm not sure of the value of my culture, because I know what it's done", April 10, 2010, in: *The Guardian*, July 7 2010: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/apr/10/le-clezio-nobel-prize-profile> (30.11.2012)



challenges us [...] by provoking confrontations with the Other".<sup>55</sup>) It should also be noted that this 'Other' to which Harrington refers often takes the form of a shamanic guide who reveals the mysteries of the universe to the protagonist.<sup>56</sup>) Alexis and Fintan learn to valorize a type of direct, cosmic knowledge that does not fit into the analytical mold because of Ouma and Bony. Similar to other Le Clézian protagonists, Alexis and Fintan reject the universality of their cultural heritage. They progressively realize through various epiphanies that the western world does not possess definitive answers to all of life's greatest questions. For this reason, they are now able to embrace other possible explanations and types of pragmatic erudition.

Accepting his own summons decreed in Stockholm to help fight illiteracy and poverty, the ›Fondation pour l'interculturel et la paix‹ (FIP) also concretizes Le Clézio's commitment to intercultural dialog. Wasting little time after his Nobel accolades, Le Clézio has recently joined forces with the renowned specialist of intercultural education, Issa Asgarally. It should be noted that Asgarally's seminal essay ›L'Interculturel ou la Guerre<sup>57</sup>) contains an introduction by Le Clézio. However, the FIP's engagement in the advancement of humanistic ideals takes the shape of concrete action designed to help those in need. For this reason, the foundation immediately began to distribute books to disenfranchised children all across the island nation of Mauritius. During the same week as the public launching of the organization, the FIP dispensed culturally diverse reading materials to disadvantaged children at the Social Welfare Center in the village of Bambous on May 16, 2010.<sup>58</sup>) Unlike much of Sartre's engagement, however, Le Clézio's new initiative is strictly apolitical.<sup>59</sup>) The organization welcomes the active participation of anyone who is willing to help, but politicians should refrain from using the FIP to glorify their ideology.

Returning to Le Clézio's fiction, the enigmatic, experimental text ›Les Géants<sup>60</sup>) also defends the intrinsic value of the human race. The author denounces the debasement of humanity by those in the modern world who reduce a person's worth in terms of their contributions to a capitalistic system. Noting this humanistic aspect of Le Clézio's repertoire, Sarojini Bissessur-Asgarally asserts, "On comprend alors qu'au-delà de la civilisation moderne et matérialiste, l'homme existe

<sup>55</sup>) KATHARINE HARRINGTON, *Writing Between Borders: Nomadism and its Implications for Contemporary French and Francophone Literature*, in: *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 10, 2 (2006), pp. 117–125, here: pp. 122f.

<sup>56</sup>) For another discussion of Le Clézian ethics related to the concept of the Other, see KAREN LEVY, *Elsewhere and Otherwise: Lévinasian Eros and Ethics in Le Clézio's ›La Quarantaine‹*, in: *Orbis Litterarum* 56, 4 (2001), pp. 255–275.

<sup>57</sup>) ISSA ASGARALLY, *L'Interculturel ou la Guerre*, Port Louis, Mauritius: MSM Limited 2005.

<sup>58</sup>) For a more detailed analysis of the inauguration of the FIP, see my article in: *Cahiers Le Clézio*, numéro double 3–4 (2001): *Migrations et métissages*, pp. 41–46.

<sup>59</sup>) A discussion concerning the overtly political nature of Sartrian engagement can be found in the aforementioned article by TONY SMITH, *Idealism and People's War* (cit. Fn. 10).

<sup>60</sup>) J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO, *Les Géants*, Paris: Gallimard 1973.

comme esprit, comme âme et non pas comme une simple et vulgaire machine”.<sup>61)</sup> In their endless pursuit of material wealth, many members of the social elite have ruthlessly exploited those at the bottom of the ladder in order to realize such tremendous heights. In ›Les Géants‹, Le Clézio reminds the reader that human beings are not mindless automates whose only purpose is to keep the well-oiled capitalistic machine running.

However, the “Maîtres” in ›Les Géants‹ intentionally attempt to strip individuals of everything that makes them human in a concerted effort to expand their economic and social domination. Hyperpolis is much more than a supermarket; this site is indicative of the materialistic obsessions that pervade Western society. The aggressive and often hostile tone of the narrative communicates directly with the reader encouraging him or her to remove the shackles that bind them before it is too late. As the first lines of the novel assert, “Je vais vous dire: libérez-vous! Il est temps, il est grand temps. Si vous attendez encore un peu, il va être trop tard”.<sup>62)</sup> Throughout the entire text, Le Clézio exposes the concerted effort of powerful corporations, some of which he later identifies by name, to create human robots that impulsively follow all of their suggestions. By promoting a protestant work ethic that urges individuals to avoid idleness at all costs and inundating the air waves with advertisements which stress the absolute necessity of the latest product for sale, those who derive benefit from this exploitative system seek to reinforce the existing paradigm.

Moreover, Le Clézio’s recent social intervention in favor of the Chagossians in ›Le Monde‹ solicits the assistance of President Obama in restoring the homeland of an indigenous group of people who are now literally exiled because of occidental, materialistic greed. In this letter directly addressed to Obama, Le Clézio offers the following historical explanation for the displacement of the Chagossian people:

les Britanniques s’empressèrent de louer cet archipel au gouvernement des Etats-Unis qui cherchait à établir une base militaire dans l’océan Indien. La seule exigence préalable des Etats-Unis était qu’il s’agit d’îles désertes, afin de ne pas contrevenir au droit d’éventuels habitants. Un mensonge des autorités britanniques apporta cette garantie : les Chagos, affirmèrent-elles, étaient peuplées seulement d’un groupe de pêcheurs qui n’y résidaient que le temps d’une saison. L’installation de la base eut lieu à Diego Garcia, l’île principale de l’archipel, après qu’une milice musclée eut expulsé de leurs îles les habitants, qui en réalité étaient là depuis des générations, pêcheurs et cultivateurs.<sup>63)</sup>

Although the author blames the British government for a crime that they perpetrated decades earlier for the current situation, he implores the latest American president to take action. Given the strategic nature of this site, British authorities

<sup>61)</sup> SAROJINI BISSESSUR-ASGARALLY, *Le Clézio: Mythologies et philosophies de l’Inde*, in: J. M. G. Le Clézio Prix Nobel de Littérature: Hommages, témoignages, analyses (cit. fn. 18), pp. 44–54, here: p. 47.

<sup>62)</sup> LE CLÉZIO, *Les Géants* (cit. fn. 60), p. 15.

<sup>63)</sup> J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO, *Lavez l’injustice faite aux Chagossiens*. Oct. 17, 2009, in: *Le Monde*, 7 July 2009.

at the time seized a lucrative opportunity to lease this inhabited land to the United States. Since the American government was interested in a deserted island, the British forcefully deported the small minority community that had called this territory home for generations.

This epitextual plea reinforces the humanistic nature of many of Le Clézio's narratives. It also reflects the author's engagement on behalf of disenfranchised civilizations, as noted by the scholarly community. Jean-Xavier Ridon explains, "Les livres de J. M. G. Le Clézio sont habités par de nombreuses voix marginales, par des êtres qui semblent exclus de notre modernité [...] Le Clézio investit cette part d'ombre de notre époque où les identités minoritaires sont amenées à se taire".<sup>64</sup>) As Ridon affirms, a crucial aspect of Le Clézio's literary project is that it gives a voice to those who have been silenced by the moral and political majority. Furthermore, the writer's public discourses and occasional press articles should be considered in the context of this engagement.

In conclusion, Le Clézio's vision of the committed artist closely corresponds to that of Sarraute's profound suspicion, and perhaps even to Dagerman's pervasive cynicism. However, in spite of the perceived failure of *littérature engagée*, Le Clézio's recent interventions in support of social causes implore the literary community to explore this nuanced and ambivalent phenomenon. Although the author might be wary of directly associating himself with engagement, he undeniably uses his pen to protect the defenseless. Moreover, as the writer himself realizes, it is impossible for an artist to avoid the question of social commitment altogether. Le Clézio's inquisitive cosmic engagement has been dismissed by certain critics as nothing more than 'political correctness' or naivety, but a careful examination of any of the Franco-Mauritian author's texts reveals a writer that possesses a keen awareness of the problems that inflict modern society and of the anguish from which ephemeral beings suffer.<sup>65</sup>) The stark realism of works such as ›La Ronde et Autres Faits Divers‹ and ›Cœur Brûlé‹ clearly negate these misinformed criticisms. Although Le Clézio is not as idealistic as many of his committed predecessors because he recognizes the limitations and frustrations of the literary profession, his recent activism in the media and in the public arena leave little doubt that he is dedicated to improving the plight of humanity and the cosmos. In an era filled with mistrust and pessimism related to the utility of intellectual values in the modern world, Le Clézio should be admired for some of the same reasons that thinkers like Sartre, Camus, and Malraux were once venerated.

<sup>64</sup>) JEAN-XAVIER RIDON, Dossier – 29/01/1998, in: Le Magazine Littéraire. Mensuel, mars 1998, n° 362, p. 39.

<sup>65</sup>) See LILA AZAM ZANGANEH, Une œuvre mal comprise aux Etats-Unis, in: Le Monde, 11 octobre 2008, p. 23.

