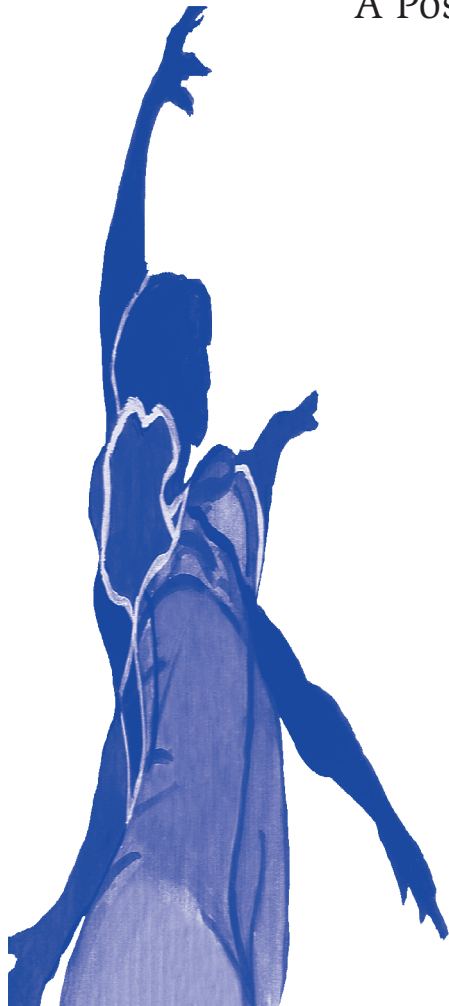


Modern French Identities

Bronwen Martin

The Fiction of J. M. G. Le Clézio

A Postcolonial Reading



Peter Lang

Modern French Identities

Since the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to J.M.G. Le Clézio in 2008, there has been a wave of new interest in his *œuvre*. This book traces the evolution of the writer's postcolonial thought from his early works to his groundbreaking autobiographical novel *Révolutions*, arguably his most subversive text to date. The author shows how Le Clézio's critique of colonialism is rooted in an early denunciation of capitalism and philosophical dualism, and sheds new light on the crucial roles played by Jean-Paul Sartre, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon in his development.

The author's close reading of *Révolutions* reveals a complex system of interconnections between the colonial conflicts from the 1700s to the 1900s, with recurrent patterns of violence, cultural repression and racism. The issue of neocolonialism is addressed and the persistence of the colonial mindset in contemporary Europe and Westernized countries is shown to echo the findings of Paul Gilroy, Max Silverman and Étienne Balibar. The book concludes with an examination of the utopian elements underpinning *Révolutions*, establishing close affinities with the work of Édouard Glissant and developing the notion of permanent revolution. Themes explored include those of storytelling, cultural memory, cultural identity, language, intertextuality and interculturality.

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**The Fiction of
J. M. G. Le Clézio**

Modern **F**rench **I**dentities

Edited by Peter Collier

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PETER LANG

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Introduction

The awarding of the Nobel Prize to Le Clézio in 2008 has produced a resurgence of interest in his work both in France and internationally. Questions of cultural identity and of interculturality have been addressed in recent studies¹ and important contributions to Le Clézio's postcolonial thought have earlier been made by, amongst others, Marina Salles, Madeleine Borgomano and Bruno Thibault.² The aim of this book is twofold: first, it seeks to present an overview of the development of Le Clézio's postcolonial thought, focusing on patterns of continuity especially in relationship to his first novel *Le Procès-verbal* (1963). Secondly, it endeavours to give a close reading of the novel *Révolutions* (2003) regarded by many as Le Clézio's masterpiece and as the richest and most powerfully subversive of his texts to date. The novel was conceived by the author as a conscious return to his beginnings: in an interview with Jean-Paul Enthoven shortly after its publication, Le Clézio states 'Vous savez, j'écris toujours le même livre, et je remets sans cesse mes pas dans mes pas. Mes ancêtres bretons, la guerre d'Algérie, Londres et Nice, le souvenir de Salinger, la violence qui s'impose à des jeunes gens qui, du jour au lendemain, deviennent chair à canon potentielle, c'est ça le matériau de *Révolutions*'.³

In my study the term postcolonial will be used to cover three core areas. The first relates to Le Clézio's critique of Western epistemology and Enlightenment universalism/humanism which, from the late 1960s onwards, is associated explicitly in his texts with colonialism and the civilizing mission.

- 1 See in particular Isabelle Roussel-Gillet and Bruno Thibault, eds, *Migrations et métissages*, Les Cahiers J. M. G. Le Clézio 3–4 (Paris: Éditions Complicités, 2011).
- 2 See, for example, Marina Salles, *Le Clézio, notre contemporain* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006), 73–118; Madeleine Borgomano, *Onitsba, J. M. G. Le Clézio* (Paris: Bernard-Lacoste, Parcours de Lecture, 1993); Bruno Thibault, *J. M. G. Le Clézio et la métaphore exotique* (Amsterdam: Rudopi, 2009).
- 3 See Jean-Paul Enthoven, 'L'île de Le Clézio', *Le Point*, 1585/1 (2003), 104.

This critique is further strengthened through the expression of what may be termed a new humanism, a worldview strongly influenced by non-European philosophies. The second area comprises Le Clézio's attack on European colonialism spanning the period from the Spanish invasion of Mexico and the beginnings of the African slave trade to the colonial conflicts of the twentieth century, with special attention accorded the Algerian War of Independence. The third area relates to a critique of neo-colonialism, to the persistence of colonial attitudes and practices both within present-day Europe and within decolonized states. It will include the position of the immigrant within the contemporary European city as well as a denunciation of global capitalism.

Who is Le Clézio?

Moi, je suis de nulle part. Ma seule solution est d'écrire des livres, qui sont ma seule patrie.⁴

Born of a French mother and English father, Le Clézio sees himself as Franco-Mauritian with roots in no single nation or country. He has travelled extensively with homes, for example, in Mexico as well as in France.⁵ Eschewing the notion of a fixed unitary identity, he is constantly on the move, planting roots in other cultures. A period spent amongst the Indian groups, the Emberas and Waunanas, in the early 1970s led to his proclamation, 'je suis un Indien',⁶ and his quest to understand his father described

4 See the interview with Jérôme Garcin, 'Les Révolutions de Le Clézio', *Le Nouvel Observateur* 30/1 (2003). See also <<http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20081009.BIB2166/les-revolutions-de-le-clezio>>

5 Since the late 1970s until quite recently Le Clézio has divided his time between New Mexico and France.

6 The opening sentence of Le Clézio's text about his encounter with Amerindian culture runs: 'Je ne sais pas trop comment cela est possible, mais c'est ainsi: je suis un Indien'. See J. M. G. Le Clézio, *Haï* (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), 5.

in his biographical text *L'Africain* (2004) led to the realization of his own African roots. He has also described himself as living 'entre deux mondes', as belonging to two continents.⁷

Indeed, Le Clézio's postcolonial critique is clearly sharpened through a direct and prolonged encounter with cultures or peoples who have suffered under or are still experiencing the effects of colonialism. The choice of Mauritius – an island that features in several of his novels – also has particular personal resonances: Le Clézio's own ancestors were amongst those who emigrated from Brittany to the Ile de France in the eighteenth century thus raising issues of responsibility and of a duty to remember.⁸ At the same time, Le Clézio's new humanist position, whose seeds can be detected as early as his first novel, is given an additional layering and historical anchoring through a direct experience of more magical visions of the world – that, for example, of the Emberas and Waunanas Indians – and also through a contact with the memorial sites, language and texts of virtually suppressed cultures such as that of the Aztecs.

The Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 will briefly trace patterns of continuity in Le Clézio's postcolonial thought from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. The first section will be a study of *Le Procès-verbal* viewed primarily as an introduction to the philosophical and political roots of Le Clézio's postcolonial critique, although the themes of colonial warfare and of racism are already lurking

7 See Jean-Louis Ezine, *Ailleurs, Entretiens avec J. M. G. Le Clézio* (Paris: Éditions Aréa, 1995), 92.

8 In a discussion with Jacqueline Dutton about Mauritius, Le Clézio, refuting the label of exotic travel writer, states: 'Je considère que je ne le suis pas du tout. Je ne parle de voyages ni d'exotisme. Je parle de la rédemption de mon passé colonial qui est très vivant, très présent.' See Jacqueline Dutton, *Le Chercheur d'or et d'ailleurs: L'Utopie de J. M. G. Le Clézio* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), 288.

in the background. It will include a denunciation of Enlightenment universalism and Cartesian reason, as well as an early engagement with non-European philosophies and with dissident movements within Europe. A revisiting of this text will throw invaluable light on *Révolutions*, which, like *Le Procès-verbal*, is set in the Nice of the late 1950s and 1960s.

The second section will be devoted to an examination of the three novels, *Le Livre des fuites*, *Désert* and *Poisson d'or*. From the seven or more potential candidates for study – excluding the short stories – these three have been selected for their particular relevance both to the development of Le Clézio's thought and to *Révolutions* itself. With *Le Livre des fuites* (1969) and *Désert* (1980), for example, the spatial boundaries are widened to include countries outside Europe. And in *Poisson d'or*, the primary focus is on the theme of migrancy and on the position of the immigrant within the Western city. Significantly, both *Désert* and *Poisson d'or* also address the theme of cultural identity presenting the seeds of what will emerge as Le Clézio's new humanism or – as I have also termed it in my third chapter – his utopian thought.

In the course of my study, I shall be situating these four novels within the context of the postcolonial writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. Interestingly, as it will emerge, Le Clézio's postcolonial position, like that of Sartre and Fanon, appears not entirely unrelated to an early commitment to existentialism and to a critique of capitalism.

Chapters 2 and 3 will be devoted to a study of *Révolutions*. The book is composed of two central superimposed narratives: first, there is the eighteenth-century account of Jean Eudes Marro – based on the life of Le Clézio's Breton ancestor – who, after fighting in the Revolutionary Wars, emigrated to the French colony of Mauritius. Secondly, there is the story of Jean Marro, a fictionalized rendering of Le Clézio's own experiences during the 1950s and 1960s in Nice, London and Mexico. Chapter 2 focuses on a critique of colonialism, violence and slavery and is divided into two sections. The first traces Jean Eudes' gradual disillusionment with the Revolutionary cause, with the universalizing abstractions of freedom, equality and fraternity as he comes up against the stark reality of warfare and of colonialism. His story represents a veiled attack on Jacobin ideology

and a denunciation of a mindset that – as it emerges in the narrative of Jean Marro – remains prevalent in twentieth-century France and Europe.⁹

Indeed, Jean Eudes' account only acquires its significance when read in parallel with the contemporary story of Jean Marro, the main focus of the second section. Here the text addresses, amongst others, the subjects of the Algerian War of Independence and the 1968 Mexican Revolution, as well as the themes of racism, domestic slavery and sexual trafficking. Here I shall show that meaning only emerges in the text through a process of analogy and that a complex system of interconnections is established between the colonial conflicts and colonial oppression of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and those of the twentieth. In the process, Le Clézio highlights the role played by attitudes to language and to literature in the prolonging of this cycle of repetition. In its portrayal of the colonial system, the text displays close affinities with the writings of Sartre, Albert Memmi and Fanon. And Le Clézio's focus on contemporary patterns of racism and exclusion clearly resonates with the thought of Paul Gilroy, Max Silverman and Étienne Balibar.

Chapter 3, entitled 'The Quest for Utopia in *Révolutions*', maps Jean Marro's resistance to the forces of exclusion and racism: his quest for interconnectedness will involve the dissolution of the spatial and temporal boundaries on which Western thought and ideologies are grounded. His narrative trajectory is a movement towards multidimensionality, an expansion of the frontiers of the self that is also a reconnecting with his own ancestral past, the narrative coming full circle as it were. The central thematic focus of the chapter is then on Le Clézio's concept of relationality, a notion that has close affinities with Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation and his concept of creolization. Glissant's texts, then, provide the core theoretical framework, although importance remains attached to the Marxist tradition of thought and to the need for a permanent revolution. The first

9 This theme is echoed later in an interview with Le Clézio in 2010. He states that 'en France, aujourd'hui, l'on vit beaucoup sur un passé à la fois Jacobin et colonial – ce qui est la double face d'un même vice'. See <http://www.hebdo.ch/larme_culturelle_jmg_le_clezio_65169_.html> accessed 30 July 2012.

section of Chapter 3 will examine the key role played by the storyteller Aunt Catherine and by the imagination and memory in triggering Jean Marro's quest for connectivity and for a better world. The second section will focus on his trajectory of initiation and on the role played in this quest not only by his different cultural encounters in Nice, Paris, Mexico and Mauritius but also by that of the poetic text itself. Indeed, intertextuality will emerge as playing a central role in Le Clézio's notion of relationality and in his understanding of the concept of interculturality. The chapter will stress the ethical and political dimension of Le Clézio's concept of the utopian and its relationship to historic reality and the concrete. The book can thus be viewed both as a return to and development, within a particularly rich postcolonial framework, of many of the core themes introduced in *Le Procès-verbal*.

PART I

The Earlier Texts, 1963–1997

Le Procès-verbal, Le Livre des fuites, Désert
and *Poisson d'Or*

This chapter will trace the evolution of Le Clézio's postcolonial thought from his first novel, *Le Procès-verbal*, published in 1963, to *Poisson d'or* which appeared in 1997. Special attention will be accorded *Le Procès-verbal* envisaged by the author as the introductory chapter to a single book. In an interview with Pierre Lhoste in 1970, Le Clézio affirms: 'Je préférerais vous dire qu'il n'y a pas plusieurs volumes séparés. C'est plutôt une continuité. Je n'ai pas voulu écrire des romans différents mais continuer la même histoire, à la fois la mienne et celle des autres en plusieurs chapitres. Donc *Le Procès-verbal*, c'est le premier chapitre: à la fois la découverte de la littérature et une sorte de présentation, la façon dont j'envisage la vie.'¹ Indeed, *Le Procès-verbal* will be seen to spread considerable light on the novel *Révolutions* published exactly forty years later and conceived both as a return to Le Clézio's philosophical and political beginnings and as 'le point d'orgue d'un cycle'.²

Set in Nice of the early 1960s, *Le Procès-verbal* is the story of the social rebel and outsider, Adam Pollo, who, suffering from amnesia and uncertain 's'il sortait de l'armée ou de l'asile psychiatrique' (12), embarks on a quest to discover who he is. In his rejection of social institutions and values, he has retreated to an unoccupied villa from where he pays occasional exploratory visits to the city. As a result of a revolutionary speech on the boulevard and an act of sexual indecency, he is arrested, diagnosed

- 1 Pierre Lhoste, *Conversations avec J. M. G. Le Clézio* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1971), 61–2.
- 2 See 'Hymne à l'enfance: l'autre monde de Le Clézio', in *L'Express*, 6/2 (2003) or <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/revolutions_818546.html> accessed 6 December 2011.

as mad and confined to a psychiatric hospital. My aim in this study will be to explore four central interconnected themes that will later come to underpin Le Clézio's postcolonial writings. The first two relate to a critique of Western philosophical dualism and of capitalism, the third and fourth are a discussion of the concept of identity and of the relationship of literature to historic reality, introducing at the same time the seeds of Le Clézio's new humanism. I shall begin by very briefly situating Le Clézio's repudiation of Western dualism within the broader intellectual framework of both post-war and early modern writings.

Western Philosophical Dualism

Intertextual Influences

Key influences on the development of Le Clézio's philosophical thought are undoubtedly the movements of existentialism and phenomenology in their privileging of lived experience and of the body and the senses. Amongst the myriad and diverse intertextual resonances in *Le Procès-verbal* ranging from Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault to Albert Camus,³ a central role will be accorded in my study to the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre to whom Le Clézio himself paid homage in an article published three years later, entitled 'Un Homme exemplaire'.⁴ Existentialism will remain an abiding influence in Le Clézio's work playing a central role in the novels *Poisson d'or* (1997) and *Révolutions* (2003).

Indeed, as Thierry Léger points out, strong intertextual links can be detected between *Le Procès-verbal* and Sartre's novel *La Nausée* published

3 There are intertextual links with Camus' *L'Étranger* but for purposes of this study I am focusing on Sartre. For example, both Adam and Meursault challenge fixed systems of thought and both are condemned for their failure to conform.

4 See 'J. M. G. Le Clézio, "Un Homme exemplaire"', in Bernard Pingaud et al., *Jean-Paul Sartre* (Paris: éditions inculte, 2006 [1966]), 27–33. The chapter opens: 'Je ne pense pas qu'il y ait, dans la littérature française, aventure spirituelle plus significative.'

in 1938.⁵ The two principal protagonists, Antoine Roquentin and Adam Pollo, embody an explicit rejection of purely abstract systems of knowledge and of the process of categorization, or fixing experience in language that underpins traditional philosophical thought as well the earlier eighteenth and nineteenth-century realist novel. Both writers challenge, for example, the duality of self and world and stress the materiality of the body. And, on at least two occasions (220, 223), Adam also employs the term 'salauds' to denote the urban population enslaved within social convention and habit. As I shall show later, Le Clézio's first novel introduces an existential notion of the subject as metamorphosis or endless self-invention that will come to underpin all of his future works.

Adopting a wider temporal perspective, a second important influence is the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. Adam's own departure from the villa on the slopes outside Nice and his descent 'en bas', where he makes a sermon-like speech worthy of a prophet, mirrors Zarathustra's own trajectory from mountain to city in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.⁶ Nietzsche himself mounts a ferocious attack on abstraction and on the separation of thought from everyday experience, attributing, like Le Clézio (and Camus), the highest value to life and to a metaphysical vitalism portrayed in *Le Procès-verbal* as pure energy.⁷ Significantly, later in both *Poisson d'or* and *Révolutions*, Nietzsche⁸ will be named along with the postcolonial philosophers, Fanon, Césaire and Sartre, as playing a key role in the quests of the protagonists.

5 See Thierry Léger, 'La Nausée en procès ou l'intertextualité sartrienne chez Le Clézio', in Sophie Jollin-Bertocchi and Bruno Thibault, eds, *Lectures d'une œuvre, J. M. G. Le Clézio* (Nantes: Éditions du temps, 2004), 95–103.

6 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1966). See also Ook Chung, *Le Clézio, une écriture prophétique* (Paris: Imago, 2001).

7 There are close affinities between Le Clézio's thought and that of Henri Bergson. Both men promote the notion of 'l'élan vital', the belief that all reality is alive. Le Clézio's views on memory and intuition also resonate with those of Henri Bergson.

8 Nietzsche also strongly condemned nationalism and xenophobia and was one of the first to elaborate a politics of difference. See Nathan Widder, 'Nietzsche', in David Boucher and Paul Kelly, eds, *Political Thinkers: From Socrates to The Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 436–55.

The novel itself

As I shall demonstrate, it is in his conversations with his girlfriend, Michelle, and later in his interrogation at the psychiatric hospital, that the protagonist Adam Pollo will mount an impassioned attack on Western philosophical dualism, on its privileging of an abstract conceptual language of reason that claims for itself the status of an absolute and universal truth. As Alain Mabanckou says, ‘Il [Le Clézio] nous a rappelé combien le monde a été longtemps corrompu par les mots et que l’abstraction est devenue la denrée la plus répandue dans le commerce des hommes.’⁹ And it is the destructive function of reason, its relationship to political and economic power that will constitute a central focus of Le Clézio’s attack and will emerge as an important feature of his later critique of the civilizing mission. Indeed, the impassioned nature of Adam’s discourse echoes Paul Nizan’s repudiation of the Platonic tradition and of liberal humanism in his seminal text *Les chiens de garde*.¹⁰

In Adam’s attempt in Chapter E,¹¹ then, to explain his worldview to his girlfriend, he denounces Cartesian logic with its resort to neat categorizations and promotion of abstract conceptual systems of thought that have little to do with concrete lived experience: ‘Mais heureusement on ne vit pas logiquement. La vie n’est pas logique, c’est peut-être comme une sorte d’irrégularité de la conscience’ (72). He has earlier called into question the belief in the mutual exclusivity of opposites positing instead Parmenides’ notion of existence as a totality, comprising both positive and negative, light and dark, life and death: ‘Ça veut dire, tu sais quoi? que dans un certain système de vie, qu’on met en application par le seul fait d’exister, tu laisses

9 See Alain Mabanckou, ‘Le Clézio, chantre de “la parole silencieuse”’, in T. Léger, I. Roussel-Gillet and Marina Salles, eds, *Le Clézio, passeur des arts et des cultures* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), 16.

10 Paul Nizan, *Les Chiens de garde* (Marseille: Agone, 1998 [1932]). He was a Marxist philosopher and friend of Sartre.

11 The use of letters rather than numbers to delineate chapters and their abrupt cessation at Chapter R, well before the end, would suggest a subversion of the linear and rational.

une part négative-qui ferme en quelque sorte parfaitement l'unité humaine. Ça me fait penser à Parménide' (70).¹² Interestingly, his quotation from Parmenides, 'Claire dans la nuit, autour de la terre errante, lumière d'ailleurs' (73), will resurface forty years later in *Révolutions*. In other words, Adam espouses a worldview which posits the ontological necessity of difference.

In the unfolding of the narrative, this Cartesian mindset becomes increasingly associated with the power of the same and with notations of absolute certainty. The exclusion of all other pathways to knowledge – in particular those of the senses and emotions – is conveyed symbolically in images of weight and physical oppression. Julienne R., the principal student interrogator at the psychiatric hospital, possesses eyes that are 'lourds de compréhension et de culture' (273), and whose spell Adam is unable to resist: 'Il n'avait plus rien qui pût encore revivre, ou résister fermement au regard lourd de la jeune fille blonde, à ces deux yeux bleus, profonds comme des bouteilles, pénibles, avides d'entourer tout le monde et lui-même dans la puissance de la connaissance' (282). Her face is 'une citadelle de conscience et de savoir, non pas vindicative, non pas violente, mais presque sénile dans sa douce sûreté' (274). In Le Clézio's novels of the 1960s and early 1970s, it is the Western urban landscape that becomes the objective correlative or the physical expression of the hegemony of reason. In *La Guerre* (1970), for example, the city, emerging originally from the head of the protagonist Bea B., is associated with images of imprisonment within a pre-defined and highly organized geometric space with no aperture onto the dimensions of the imagination and the unknown: 'Tout est clair, il n'y a absolument aucun mystère [...]. Et il n'y a rien d'autre que ce qu'elle voit [...]. Nulle part il n'y a de portes pour s'échapper. On ne voit pas de marécages glauques, ni de cieux troubles [...]. Non, il n'y a que ces plaques, rivées sur d'autres plaques, des cubes, des sphères, des lignes' (179). In other words, the Cartesian values of the clear and distinct are associated with confinement

12 We may recall the play between lightness and heaviness in Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera likewise denounces the certainties of Cartesian reason which he links with totalitarianism. Both writers draw attention to the role of paradox in human thought and behaviour.