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*Apocalyptic Imagery  
in Michel Tournier's Le Roi des Aulnes*

*L'Imaginaire apocalyptique dans le roman Le Roi des Aulnes de Michel Tournier*

**Mots clés** : Apocalypse, guerre (Deuxième Guerre), Histoire, intertextualité, irrationnel, métaphysique, nazisme, roman, mythe, initiatique

**Résumé** : L'article se propose d'analyser l'ancrage allusif biblique à travers les images de guerre à l'intérieur de l'espace narratif du roman *Le Roi des Aulnes*. Publié par Michel Tournier en 1970. À cet égard, après avoir passé en revue les signes/symboles bibliques les plus importants qui s'insèrent dans les segments narratifs clé du roman, on en analyse les fonctions dans le destin initiatique du personnage central Abel Tiffauges qui vacille entre les forces du mal et celles du bien, entre les forces du rationnel et celles de l'irrationnel.

Published in 1970, *Le Roi des Aulnes* is a historical parable of the Third Reich's ending. It is also a hermeneutic quest for self of Abel Tiffauges, a giant French garage owner whose life, in the aftermath of the Second World War is suddenly confronted with a semiotic system belonging mainly to myths. Most of them biblical, these symbols come equally from the past, from the present or – as strange predictions – from the future. Interviewed by Marianne Pavoy from *Lire*, soon after Gallimard published *Éléazar ou La Source et le Buisson*, in 1996, and asked to point out which myths he prefers most, Michel Tournier did not hesitate to answer: the Bible. Indeed, from *Vendredi ou Les Limbes du Pacifique* to *Éléazar*, biblical symbols have constantly nourished the fiction of his novels, and the Bible remains the main intertext beyond his entire oeuvre. Rewriting myths, Tournier anchors them in a metaphysical background. He notes in *Le Vent Paraquet* (I quote using my translation): “On its upper level, the myth is always metaphysics and still remains the same old story” (221). In order to anchor my argument in the deep waters of the complex problem of rational vs. irrational, I will try to follow in my short analysis of Tournier's novel *Le Roi des Aulnes* the balance between the biblical imagery and a *sense of an ending*, to put it in Frank Kermode's words.

The structure of Tournier's novel is apparently simple yet based on some dialectics of good and evil, rational and irrational. The chain of narrative segments develops along the external division of six chapters a retrospective story – a left-hand written diary – where Abel writes his memories of an unhappy childhood and daily life events between January 1938 and September 1939 when he is drafted into the French army. Three years later, in 1942, while working for a German *Napola* (Abreviation for *Nationalpolitische Erziehungsanstalt*, well known elite schools during the Third Reich), Tiffauges writes the second part of his *Ecrits Sinistres* where he describes his experience as a recruiter for this Youth Nazi Elite School. The diary ends early spring of 1945 and a few days later, after he writes the last page, Tiffauges will die. But we also have a different, unknown narrator covering

laps of time in Tiffauges' story between September 1939 and 1942, as well as Tiffauges' last moments. After the French army is rapidly defeated, Tiffauges becomes a prisoner of war in Germany, and the omniscient narrator follows his actions in Prussia, as Tiffauges will start recruiting children for the youth Nazi camp of Kaltenborn Castle. Meanwhile, this segment describes Tiffauges' death – spring of 1945 – which obviously the diary could not describe. The end of what Genette called a *heterodiegetic* discourse is marked by Tiffauges' death in the marshes while trying to save a Jewish child after the destruction of the castle during the 1945 Soviet invasion of East Prussia, and, of course is the end of the novel.

There is no doubt that Tiffauges' circle of events is from the beginning subordinated to an initiatic direction. Therefore the reader follows the hero on his path along the six chapters, as the omniscient narrator has exactly the same vision of the world as Tiffauges has in his diary. Furthermore, the same narrator proves to have exactly the same cultural background, because he clones, in a way, the intertextual writing of the diary. As unique witness of Tiffauges' last moments, this narrator retells the anticipated death of the hero, predicted by a hermeneutics of irrational symbols coming especially from Tiffauges' past. Lightning up the shadows of *Les Ecrits Sinistres*, the last narrative segment closes in a perfect semiotic harmony the dialogic discourse of one of the most beautiful novels of post-war literature.

As I previously noted, shining down on almost every page, intertextual stars come from the night of the myths: names, places, and story splinters give a wink to Tournier's reader, inviting him to a hide and seek game, from the beginning to the end. Mainly biblical, the names of the most important characters are at the micro-structural level intertextual labels, while at the macro-structural one, they gain metaphysical functions. Tiffauges' first name recalls Abel the Nomad, suggesting exile and hardship as an allusion to Jews and Gypsies chased by Nazi. His Jewish mistress' name is Rachel. A representative ancestress of Israel, Rachel is mentioned by Jeremiah, in connection with the *Slaughter of the Innocent*. She is also known as the mother of Ephraim who became symbol of Israel. Yet the name of the child that Tiffauges will try to save at the end is Ephraim.

One of the most intriguing characters of the novel is Nestor. Initiatic agent during Tiffauges' school years at *St. Christophe*, his name recalls Nestorius who created the Nestorian heresy, well known for suggesting in his sermons Jesus' double nature. Last but not least, the left-hand writing of the diary is first dictated by Nestor's initiatic teaching.

The names of the places in *Le Roi des Aulnes* are also closely connected to the biblical onomastics. There is, I would say, an intertextual geography in the text. To begin with, the name of the School of Saint Christophe is a very important marker for the dialogical discourse of the novel. Abel's first initiatory experience takes place when he is at Saint-Christophe, "lieu sacré" by name and virtue, cut off from normal existence. Here, his main mentor – the huge and strange Nestor – will train him to read symbols and will first explain to him the meaning of "phoria" through the legend of Saint Christopher as mentioned in Voragine's *Golden Legend*. Or, the events that advance the action of Tiffauges' magic quest describe a parallel fate. After being a Nazi servant, Abel tries to save on his shoulders the Jewish child Ephraim. After serving the Evil, he serves Good.

The name of Kaltenborn could also be perceived as allusive punning. The German *kalten* means cold, which intertextually connects the place and the apocalyptic weather announced by Jesus at the Temple. Jesus' words are quoted by Tiffauges when he sees the exodus after the Red Army invades East Prussia in winter of 1944: "Priez pour que votre fuite ne tombe pas en hiver"<sup>1</sup>.

In order to achieve intelligibility, the text requires an integration that involves an appeal to various familiar models of coherence. As Jonathan Culler puts it, Tournier tries to "naturalize the text", to bring it into relation with a type of discourse or model which is already natural and legible. These models have been called "codes" by Roland Barthes or "intertextual frames" by Umberto Eco. That's why Tournier chose the Bible as the main hypotext for *Le Roi des Aulnes*.

Along the multitude of Biblical echoes in the novel, four of them seem to be the most important: the Massacre of the Innocent, the bondage of the Israelites, the Book of Job and the Book of Revelation. Both narrative segments are connected to Abel Tiffauges' destiny and the *topos* is death and anguish. Strangely mentioned by Abel in his diary four years before Sartre published *l'Être et le Néant*, the viscous self – "le moi visqueux" – is the main metaphor of this anguish (36-37). Tiffauges must learn through signs and symbols – as Job did – that his initiatic quest is a lesson of ending. Intertextually, Job's torments are quoted by Tiffauges inside a lyrical collage suggesting existential despair after his troubled soul receives the first semiotic message of tribulation and death. Therefore, Job's lamentation slips into a Heideggerian code of hermeneutics.

Death plays a subsidiary, yet necessary role in the work of Heidegger, determining and embracing the totality of human existence, which is expressed by the designation of Dasein as "being-unto-death" (Sein-zum-Tode). After war, death becomes more and more a central preoccupation in French literature, and not only. Death is, as Baudelaire said, emergence from time, a terminal point and possibly a goal. Our life among others is our life towards death, in heideggerian terms.

As *Le Roi des Aulnes* has a cyclical nature, Tiffauges mentions – recalling Chateaubriand's well known metaphor – his emergence from the beginnings of time and the significance that this has: "Je crois que je suis issu de la nuit des temps" (I believe that I come from the night of the times). His remarks suggest that his ending will be the same as his beginning, and that he will return to "la nuit des temps", primordial space, Alpha and Omega, as Nestor told him one day quoting from the Book of Revelation. Doesn't he return there, when he sinks into the marshes of Kaltenborn? Isn't the viscous land of the marshes a maternal womb and, at the same time a deep baptismal liquid? Meanwhile, primordial chaos to which the neophyte has to return in order to be reborn is akin to apocalypse and this supposes fire images. Fire is a purifying element, which will destroy the old in order to make way for the new. The destiny of Abel Tiffauges is a metaphysical marriage of fire and water.

Learning the road back, similar to Saint Christopher, the hero must discover himself the difference between malign and benign through Nestor's theory of

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<sup>1</sup> Pray ye that your flight be not in the winter.

inversion. Having become Nestor's double, and having escaped prison after being drafted, Tiffauges finds himself in a different sort of confinement. He learns how to hunt down pigeons, deer and children. He learns how to be an ogre in an empire of ogres. As the deer give way to children, Tiffauges gradually discovers that Goering is just a small ogre of fairy tales while Hitler – "ogre de Rastenburg" – symbolically eats, each year, 15000 children forced into conscription in Napolas. Another initiatic agent, the Count von Kaltenborn – who is also much interested in signs and to whom Abel confides his nestorian theories – teaches the hero on apocalypse which will necessary result from a "malign inversion" of *phoria* and from the proliferation and saturation of symbols. Emerging as a new being after the explosion of Arnim le Souabe, he finds a final mentor and guide in Ephraim and the first lesson is about Auschwitz – "la cité infernale". In the last chapter, Kaltenborn appears as a mirror of Auschwitz, as Tiffauges calls it "cité infernale", infernal city, quoting Dante's words at the gates of Dis. The Red Army invades East Prussia and the last space of Tiffauges' initiation will burn in apocalyptic fire. Symbolically, between fire and water, Tiffauges' *being-unto-death* is led into marshes with Ephraim on his shoulders, as the last phase of the "phoric" accomplishment. From an ogre chasing children for the Nazi camp, the last inversion changes Tiffauges into a good double of Saint-Christopher the child bearer. Moreover, it is not a German child he tries to rescue, but a Jewish one. In other words, lead by his viscous self, Abel sinks into the swamp in order that he might be reborn. The end of the novel is therefore a beginning as it takes the reader back to the start: Abel Tiffauges has just returned to "la nuit des temps" from where he issued.

Furthermore, the death of the hero will come symbolically at the same time with the ending of the Third Reich. As the reader is supposed to connect the apocalyptic destruction of Kaltenborn castle to the end of the Third Reich, another important hypotext sending biblical echoes is the Book of Revelation.

The Book of Revelation is invoked as part of a complex pattern of sin and revenge. Individually, the reader may find the cruel, terrible execution of Raufeisen by Soviet soldiers during the assault as associated with this pattern. Tiffauges has uttered a curse against him for trampling on the bodies of the Jungemanen whom Raufeisen has ordered to lie down on parade. The image is an allusion to the Massacre of the Innocent as imagined by Nicholas Poussin, and a *mise en abime* of the slaughter of German youth: taken away from their parents, they have been delivered to evil and finally to death. And – associated to the irrational Holocaust – this draws the frame of a collective guilt and punishment. In St Matthew's Gospel, the original Massacre is seen as the fulfilment of a prophecy. Just as the smiting of the first-born of Egypt is indivisibly linked with the liberation of the chosen people, the biblical Massacre of the Innocent is centred on the rescue from peril of the Christ-Child, in the ensuing flight into Egypt. This intertext thereby provides a second reading of the final pages, in which Ephraim is cast as the Christ-Child being borne to safety out of the place of the slaughter. The tribulation evoked in the text is the Apocalypse itself. Tiffauges refers to "la Grande Tribulation", ("Abel Tiffauges, tu sais maintenant que la Grande Tribulation se prépare et que ton modeste destin est pris en charge par le Destin!"<sup>2</sup>) and, in the immediate context,

<sup>2</sup> Abel Tiffauges, you know that the Great Tribulation is on its way and that your modest destiny is from now on guided by the Destiny (my translation).

Abel's premonition refers to the war, which will overtake individual destinies and allow Tiffauges' deepest and most secret impulses to find expression. In the Bible, however, these words are used in Christ's prophecy of the Apocalypse and the Second Coming. "Car en ce temps-là, la tribulation sera plus terrible que toutes celles qu'il y a eu depuis le commencement du monde et jusqu'à maintenant, et il n'y aura plus jamais de pareille"<sup>3</sup>.

The whole final section, leading up to the description of the attack on the Napola by invading Soviet forces, is increasingly charged with the constituents of apocalyptic vision: fire mingled with blood, lightning, thundering, earthquake and great hail. Tiffauges' final journey is through a landscape of fire and bloodshed. The last words of Tiffauges reported in the narrative, are an explicit quotation from Revelation: "Ephraïm, est-ce qu'il n'est pas dit dans les livres saints que sa tête et ses cheveux étaient blancs comme la neige, ses yeux comme une flamme de feu, ses pieds semblables à de l'airain rougi dans une fournaise, et qu'une épée à double tranchant sortait de sa bouche?" (494). The quotation is associated with the white-haired Lothar, impaled along with Haio and Haro, probably after an explosion of a Russian "katiusha". As the huge sword of Kaltenborn's coat of arms sticks out of his mouth, the biblical metaphor of supernatural power is transferred to Lothar and trades its meaning for the symbol of a sacrificial agent. Joining the opposites – the suffering of the victim ("le cri, la plus intolérable douleur") and the apotheosis of power, the Crucified and the Glorified – the terrible death was predicted by another *mise en abîme*, the Barron of Adrets' story, told by Nestor one day at the school of St. Christophe. Many elements of Apocalypse have been redistributed. The Biblical code has been scrambled, and opened to new meanings. Ultimately, Tournier's intertextual games follow the path described by Auerbach in *Mimesis* when he explained the relationship between the Old and New Testament. The New Testament, wrote Auerbach, required that the Old Testament be reinterpreted in terms of expectations to be fulfilled, and I quote here Auerbach's words: "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfils the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time but both are within temporality".

Most interestingly, the biblical insertion in the novel follows a sort of chronological path, from Genesis to Revelation. In other words, the intertextual construction may also offer a metaphysical interpretation of the Alfa-Omega axis of writing itself. As Frank Kermode shows in his *Sense of an Ending*, because PLOTS move through time from beginning to end, ends have a teleological function, "the beginning implies the end".

If we consider the whole structure of the novel a reading conventionality, we may also consider that the omniscient narrator – whom I personally believe is Ephraïm himself – is the unique generator of the text: unique possessor of the diary, long time after the events (after the death of his saviour) he has the absolute power to reconstruct a new narrative structure. The novel's ending (which is also the end of Tiffauges' initiation) is the genesis of the writing, the intratextual game

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<sup>3</sup> For then shall be great Tribulation, such was not since the beginning of the world to this time, nor ever shall be.

reorganising the main segments of the initiation. As a possible historical witness after Kalteborn's destruction by the Red Army, the heterodiegetic narrator tells the story of the French dying in the marshes while trying to save a Jewish child. This death must be prepared in order to gain metaphysical power, so the novel must start with the diary of the hero who is going to die. That's why a homodiegetic narrator – to make use one more time of Genette's terminology – must replace the witness: the hero must act as a sartrean *être-en-soi* or *être-dans-le-monde* and advance as a heideggerian *Sein-zum-Tode*, the being-unto-death. Furthermore, as the diary is a narrative tool to contextualize the concept of *angoisse*, the hero is seen as a serial repetition of doubles, which is an eternal game of reflection in the mirror, as Sartre used to say. As a pure expression of Dasein, Tiffauges' self has to be defined as "hors de soi, dans le monde", "un être des lointains", "issu de la nuit des temps". He is a sartrean *être-là*, existing "il y a mille ans, il y a cent mille ans". While the war and the Nazi agony must unveil Tiffauges' *être-dans-le-monde*, the omniscient narrator has to start the story of the French POW and define him as a character anchored in History. New dimensions will add to this hero's definition, helping him to understand and accomplish the initiation. Re-organising the symbols in a hide and seek intertextual game deconstructing the first segment, the second part of the diary is nothing else than a postmodern questioning of HISTORY. Therefore the novel must start with "Les Ecrits Sinistres", in order to open the discourse: the neophyte Tiffauges must learn how to meet his destiny, how to choose between evil and good, and ultimately how to die. Because is not important *when* we die but *why* we die and *how* we die. Isn't death another irrational yet beautiful and absolute hide and seek game?

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