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Karen D. Levy  
*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

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## The Perilous Journey from Melancholy to Love: A Kristevan Reading of *Le Médianoche amoureux*

### Abstract

Since the publication of Michel Tournier's first novel *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* in 1967, in which his protagonist Robinson makes fruitful the very earth of his desert island and eventually accedes to the cosmic transcendence embodied in his mentor and companion Vendredi, this contemporary French writer has boldly explored alternative forms of sexual expression that challenge traditional biological definitions of identity as well as norms of accepted behavior. The basis of his investigations is the anguish-ridden separation from the maternal, as experienced under diverse manifestations usually by male characters, and the irremediable solitude which then stretches over that empty space. In this study, we shall explore Tournier's latest and perhaps most unexpected treatment of the phenomenon of separation and loss as depicted in his latest anthology of short stories *Le Médianoche amoureux* from the point of view of two of Julia Kristeva's most recent theoretical analyses. Her works probe precisely the kind of psychological wounds from which Tournier's protagonists suffer and, as we shall see, suggest possibilities for healing that significantly enhance our understanding of his undertaking. Kristeva's discussion of melancholy in *Soleil noir, Dépression et mélancolie* and her demystifying analysis of the intricacies of amatory discourse in *Histoires d'amour* will enable us to discern the kind of movement that draws the disparate stories of *Le Médianoche amoureux* together and will reveal how this latest of Tournier's works greatly extends the scope of his preoccupations without closing any of the other doors he has so daringly opened.

### Keywords

Michel Tournier, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*, Robinson, fruitful, earth, desert island, cosmic transcendence, mentor, Vendredi, contemporary, French, sexual expression, alternative, identity, challenge, norms, behavior, maternal, separation, male characters, male, solitude, space, loss, *Le Médianoche amoureux*, anthology, short stories, Julia Kristeva, psychological wounds, "Soleil noir; Dépression et mélancolie", analysis, *Histoires d'amour*, *Le Médianoche amoureux*

## The Perilous Journey From Melancholy to Love: A Kristevan Reading of *Le Médiannoche amoureux*

Karen D. Levy  
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Since the publication of Michel Tournier's first novel *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* in 1967, in which his protagonist Robinson makes fruitful the very earth of his desert island and eventually accedes to the cosmic transcendence embodied in his mentor and companion Vendredi, this contemporary French writer has boldly explored alternative forms of sexual expression that challenge traditional biological definitions of identity as well as norms of accepted behavior. The basis of his investigations is the anguish-ridden separation from the maternal, as experienced under diverse manifestations usually by male characters, and the irremediable solitude that then stretches over that empty space. In each of his works, Tournier examines the problems that arise from what his protagonists perceive as abandonment or betrayal, and he explores the various ways in which these individuals seek to disavow, to mourn, or to sublimate the forlornness of their condition. His enchantment with the diffuse, polymorphous sexuality of the child (*Le Roi des aulnes*), his fascination with the exclusive intimacy between identical twins and their rapport with their mother (*Les Météores*), and his wistful admiration for the idyllic totality of an androgynal relationship (*Vendredi*, *Le Roi des aulnes*, *Le Coq de bruyère*, etc.), have become an inexhaustible subject of innovative inquiry as well as highly charged critical controversy.

In this three-part study, we shall explore Tournier's latest and perhaps most unexpected treatment of the phenomenon of separation and loss as depicted in his anthology of short stories *Le Médiannoche amoureux* from the point of view of two of Julia Kristeva's most recent theoretical analyses. The intensely polemical character of her work and her rejection of stereotyped classifications to describe her critical

positions reflect Tournier's own provocativeness at the thematic level. They both question the tangled process of sexualisation and, in particular, explore either marginal or openly perverse expressions of desire, one as literary critic and psychoanalyst and the other as fiction writer. Kristeva's texts probe precisely the kind of psychological wounds from which Tournier's protagonists suffer and, as we shall see, suggest possibilities for healing which significantly enhance our understanding of his fictional enterprise. Her discussion of melancholy in *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie* and her demystifying analysis of the intricacies of amatory discourse in *Histoires d'amour* will enable us to discern the kind of movement that draws the disparate stories of *Le Médianoche amoureux* together and will reveal how this latest of Tournier's works greatly extends the scope of his preoccupations without closing any of the other doors he has so daringly opened.

Before turning our attention to how the melancholy and love Kristeva analyzes are inscribed in *Le Médianoche amoureux*, we must briefly examine the attitudes toward sexuality that have prevailed up to this point in Tournier's repertoire, for only then will we be able to appreciate fully the innovativeness of his latest publication. Tournier's glorification of either marginal or openly perverse sexuality has been accompanied, as one might expect, by his aggressive criticism of traditional sexual orientation and of the institution of marriage, which he sees as imprisoning both participants in stereotyped positions. In the personal meditations of *Le Vol du vampire* and *Petites Proses*, as well as in various interviews, Tournier has repeatedly emphasized the link between procreation and death and the stifling restrictiveness of marital and, indeed, all heterosexual relationships: "Le mariage s'inscrit dans le temps. Il implique fécondité, les enfants, la fatigue, le vieillissement, d'éventuelles trahisons, et possible divorce" 'Marriage is inscribed in time. It implies fecundity, children, fatigue, aging, eventual betrayals, and possible divorce' (VV 37, see also 151-52).<sup>1</sup> And his fictional works present a distressingly unpleasant series of either openly hostile or, at least, negative heterosexual situations in which, for the most part, ineffectual males are overwhelmed by phallic females with varying degrees of castrating power.

The texts published before *Le Médianoche amoureux* reveal the all-pervasiveness of this situation. The sexually active adult females who appear even fleetingly in Tournier's writings, beginning with Abel Tiffauges' Jewish mistress Rachel in *Le Roi des aulnes*, are portrayed as independent individualists who simultaneously attract

and frighten their partners. On the one hand, Tiffauges is drawn to Rachel because of her overtly maternal appearance; she is what he calls “une femme paysage: un bassin méditerranéen. . . un corps ample, accueillant, maternel” ‘a woman landscape: a mediterranean basin . . . an ample body, welcoming, maternal’ (32). He is likewise fascinated by “son sens de la drôlerie, son adresse à déceler le côté profondément absurde des gens et des situations” ‘her sense of humor, her skill in discerning the profoundly absurd side of people and situations’ (19), and by her “gaieté tonique” ‘invigorating gaiety’ (19), which contrasts with his morbid pessimism. But, at the same time, Tiffauges finds her candid directness menacing, so much so that her statement concerning his premature ejaculation, although expressed “sans méchanceté aucune” ‘without any spitefulness’ (19), reduces him to the state of near impotence. It indicates what Tiffauges describes as “la grande mésentente du couple humain” ‘the great misunderstanding of the human couple’ (21), and this problem, presented as insoluble, triggers Rachel’s departure, which, in turn, initiates Tiffauges’ eventually fatal descent into the past.

A similar situation occurs in the opening sections of *Les Météores*. Edouard Surin, father of the identical twins Jean-Paul, has long since ceased to feel anything more than tenderness for his wife Maria-Barbara. He is attracted to his mistress Florence, also Jewish, largely because of her “lucidité drôle et amère, un trait qu’il avait attendu davantage d’un homme que d’une femme” ‘her droll and acerbic lucidity, a trait which he would have expected much more of a man than a woman’ (26). But, at the same time, her ability to judge and make fun of others, as well as herself, without rancor or condescension intimidates Edouard and makes him painfully aware of his own generalized weariness and overall inferiority (28-29). A more serious problem arises later in the text with the visit of Jean’s fiancée Sophie, whom his twin brother Paul perceives as an alien force seeking to destroy the already threatened unity of the brothers’ exclusive relationship. When he encounters Sophie for the first time on the cliff top path at the edge of the family property on the Brittany coast, Paul feels as if he has been raped: “ayant une connaissance intime de Jean, elle savait aussi tout de moi qui ne savais rien d’elle. . . . J’étais comme percé, inventorié” ‘having an intimate knowledge of Jean, she knew as much about me, who knew nothing of her. . . . I was as if pierced, inventoried’ (392). Hence, the invading Sophie must be made to leave, an act that Paul accomplishes with sadistic cunning as he confuses Sophie about which

twin she actually slept with (411). Yet, ironically, it is precisely Sophie's panic-stricken departure that completes the destruction of the psychological cell whose purity Paul so jealously sought to preserve.

A much more dramatically violent situation occurs with the female protagonist in the short story "Les Suaires de Véronique." She literally reduces the substance of her lover Hector's body to nothing but stretched skin, albeit transforming him into spectacular photographic masterpieces in the process. Gazing incredulously around the chapel in Arles where Véronique is exhibiting her latest endeavors, the narrator attempts to describe the all-encompassing scene of destruction for art's sake: "Partout . . . le regard s'écrasait sur le spectre noir et doré d'un corps aplati, élargi, roulé, déroulé, reproduit en frise funèbre et obsédante dans toutes les positions . . ." "Everywhere . . . one's gaze was overwhelmed by the black and golden specter of a body flattened, enlarged, rolled up, unfurled, reproduced as an obsessing funeral frieze in all positions . . ." (171). The psychological threat of a Rachel, a Florence, or a Sophie assumes its most grizzly form in this short story, which constitutes the apocalyptic stage in the war of the sexes that is constantly waged in Tournier's works.<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, it may seem that the nurturing and politically committed Maria-Barbara in *Les Météores* offers a more positive image. But although she does take an active role in the Resistance during the German occupation, eventually being deported to Buchenwald, she too dominates the appealing though indecisive Edouard and is firmly locked into the role of brood mare. Maria-Barbara produces so many offspring that, as the text notes, "les grossesses . . . se fondent en une seule . . . Peu importait l'époux, le semez, le donneur de cette pauvre chiquenaude qui déclenche le processus de procréation" 'her pregnancies . . . blended into one . . . the husband, the sower, the donor of this pathetic flick which unleashed the process of creation mattered little' (12). As archetype of the "mère innombrable," 'mother of countless children' (10) she neither remembers how many children she has nor, with the exception of the twins Jean-Paul, distinguishes any of them by name. Her children's sole function is to offer her homage as part of an ever-present entourage, thereby sanctifying her importance as source of life and nourishment. It is true that Maria-Barbara appears as an unruffled, stabilizing force and that, as Paul stresses, she reigns peacefully up to the moment when the Gestapo agents arrest her (351, 355). But her nurturing is concentrated almost exclusively in the milk that flows so readily from her breasts, with

Maria-Barbara dreaming of “un enfant qui viendrait à elle debout . . . et qui dégraferait de ses mains son corsage, sortirait la gourde de chair et boirait, comme un homme à la bouteille” ‘a child who would come walking to her . . . and who would unbutton her blouse with his hands, would take out the flesh gourd, and would drink, like a man from a bottle’ (10). Her attitude, therefore, ends up, in its own way, being as restrictive and confining as that of the other adult females depicted in Tournier’s works, and her power over her husband as destructive.

Given the radical devalorization of heterosexual relationships in Tournier’s writings, it is perhaps not surprising that a marital communication crisis forms the basis for the story-telling odyssey in *Le Médianoche amoureux*. But it is astonishing that the protagonists Yves and Nadège Oudalle decide to remain together after listening to their guests’ tales. Their night-long narrative adventure both further exposes and, at the same time, begins to heal the wound of silent hostility eating away at the host and hostess. It rebuilds the psychic space of narcissism that can be playfully entered, explored, and exploited. As we shall see, this work presents Tournier’s perhaps most banal and, at the same time, his most far-reaching exploration of the phenomenon of loss that haunts all of his writings. It stresses for the first time the importance of dialogue, albeit hesitant, between two differently sexed adults whose faces are turned toward one another across the mediating space of the dinner table in a gesture that indicates both attention to and recognition of the other’s autonomy. The implications of this situation extend, for example, far beyond the self-deluding “écrits sinistres” ‘left-handed writings’ of Tiffauges’ private journal in *Le Roi des aulnes*, beyond Paul’s triumphant but solitary narration encompassing the cosmos at the end of *Les Météores*, and also beyond Riad’s calligraphic deciphering of the image of the “Reine blonde” in *La Goutte d’or*.

Tournier’s most recent work charts the perilous journey Yves and Nadège undertake from the stagnant waters of a melancholy that cannot be named or symbolized to the point of the couple’s rebirth in signs. The stories the two protagonists absorb during the dinner party, ostensibly given to announce their separation, begin to renew their sorely diminished imaginary capacities and to produce a language that would act simultaneously both for and against the sadness that has sapped their psychic resources. Their relationship exemplifies the movement from morbid withdrawal to dynamic, though always tentative participation, that Julia Kristeva analyzes in *Soleil noir: Dépression et mélancolie* and *Histoires d’amour*. She describes melancholy as a

state in which one suffers “une mort vivante, chair coupée, saignante, cadavérisée, rythme ralenti ou suspendu, temps effacé ou boursoufflé, résorbé dans la peine . . .” ‘a living death, flesh cut, bleeding, cadaverized, rhythm slowed down or suspended, time erased or inflated, resorbed in pain . . .’ (14). Triggered by a loss that cannot be acknowledged, one sinks into a morose lethargy, unable to direct energy elsewhere or transfer desire to another object. As Kristeva maintains, both melancholy and its less severe form depression “s’étayaient cependant d’une *intolérance à la perte de l’objet* et de la *faillite du signifiant* à assurer une issue compensatoire” ‘are supported, however, by an *inability to tolerate the loss of the object* and of the *failure of the signifier* to insure a compensating outlet’ (20). The aggressivity a person might feel toward the lost object is absorbed and recycled as sadness, keeping the wound open and never allowing any healing words to form over the surface. The melancholic’s despairing pain becomes, as Kristeva notes, the sole focus of his attention (22). It suggests, as does the black sun in Nerval’s sonnet “El Desdichado,” which figures in the title of her work, “une insistance sans présence, une lumière sans représentation . . .” ‘an insistence without presence, a light without representation . . .’ (22).

At its most fundamental level, melancholy indicates what John Lechte describes in his sensitive analysis of Kristeva’s work as, “an unsuccessful separation from the mother, an unsuccessful emergence of primary narcissism and the concomitant Imaginary Father” (34). Without separation from the maternal, as painful as it is, and initial identification with a combination of both parents that constitutes the phenomenon of the Imaginary Father or, as Kristeva also calls it, the Father of individual pre-history, no individualized identity can develop. She goes on to stress in this same context that Narcissus dies, not because he adores himself, but rather because he remains blocked in the borderline position of not being able to transfer some of what he feels for his own image to another individual. Although he desires an Other, he is, at the same time, incapable of opening up to that possibility.<sup>3</sup>

In her analysis of primary narcissism, which she sees as the first stage in separation or individualisation, Kristeva puts special emphasis on the gap, the void that comes into being once the elemental fusion between mother and child is broken, and she stresses the specifically linguistic manifestations of this phenomenon as the bar that forever separates the signifier from the signified (*Histoires* 29-30). It is this **lack of coincidence** that the melancholic cannot deal with. Unable to



voice the signs to express his pain, he retreats into mournful silence. As Kristeva notes: “la parole du déprimé: répétitive et monotone. Dans l'impossibilité d'enchaîner, la phrase s'interrompt, s'épuise, s'arrête” ‘the word of the depressed person: repetitive and monotonous. In the impossibility of making connections, the sentence is interrupted, drained, arrested’ (*Soleil* 45). And as she further emphasizes at the end of this section of her study, “le dépressif . . . rivé à sa douleur, n'enchaîne plus et, en conséquence, n'agit ni ne parle” ‘the depressed person . . . riveted to his pain, no longer makes connections, and, in consequence, neither acts nor speaks’ (46). The pain Kristeva describes in this analysis corresponds greatly to that which haunts Yves Oudalle, and eventually also encompasses Nadège, in “Les Amants taciturnes,” the initial springboard narrative of *Le Médianoche amoureux*. Yves’s defiant departure as cabin boy aboard a trawler bound for the waters around Newfoundland at the psychologically transitional age of thirteen indicates his jealous determination to outshine his elder brother, who merely fishes with his father for local varieties along the Normandy coast. It likewise signals a jubilant return to the archaic mother, under the double form of ship and sea. Despite the physical suffering and humiliation he is forced to endure at the hands of his superiors, Yves rises to the exalted rank of ship’s captain and returns to shore only for the brief reorganizing periods necessary at the end of many months’ long voyages.

As far as his relationship with Nadège is concerned, Yves actually sees her for the first time when he is sixteen and she and her brother, aged ten and eighteen respectively, spend two days observing life aboard the trawler at the request of their ship owner father. It is, however, nearly twenty years later, when he is recruiting sailors for his first voyage as captain, that they meet formally. For Nadège, Yves concretizes the image of the heroic deep sea fisherman whose legendary exploits she grew up with in the works of writers, such as Pierre Loti and Joseph Conrad. As she describes her initial reaction to Yves: “Massif, lent, le regard bleu sous les sourcils blonds, Oudalle paraissait aussi peu causant qu’un ours blanc du pôle nord. Je l’ai tout de suite aimé” ‘Massive, slow, blue gaze beneath blond eyebrows, Oudalle seemed as talkative as a polar bear. I loved him at first sight’ (16).

It is important to note that it is Yves’s reserved, taciturn quality that so attracts Nadège and that, to a certain extent, characterizes their relationship from its inception. As a student preparing a degree in classical letters, she had, for a short time, been married to a philosophy

student named Alexis, who had dazzled her with his rhetorical commentaries. But the events of “May 68” soon revealed the folly of Nadège’s decision and the emptiness of Alexis’s professionalism. His ardent speeches in favor of the revolution proved to be only reductive, self-deceptive tirades that fed greedily on the desire for control and the illusion of power they expressed: “tout se résolvait pour lui en discours, un flot verbal incoercible qui balayait tout, obstacles, contradictions, et simple bon sens” ‘everything became resolved for him in discourse, an uncontrollable verbal flow which swept away everything, obstacles, contradictions, and simple good sense’ (16). Words, for Alexis, were discursive monologues whose purpose was to dominate, not tales to engage the imagination or dialogues to be shared. As Nadège notes, “il confondait prendre le pouvoir et prendre la parole . . .” ‘he confused assuming power and speaking’ (16).

Yves appears as a most welcome counterpoint to Alexis’s power hungry verbiage and the most promising person to fulfill Nadège’s dream of “une sagesse laconique, de mots pesés, rares, mais lourds de sens” ‘a laconic wisdom, carefully weighed, sparse words, but heavy with meaning’ (30). During his shore visits, Nadège listens eagerly, as fiancée and then as wife, to the sea tales and anecdotes Yves has stored up from so many years experience, to what he himself refers to as his “capital mythologique” ‘mythological capital’ (20). But these resources are soon depleted, and, more importantly, there is nothing to take their place. As Yves himself notes: “Elle m’écoutait avec passion quand j’évoquais mes campagnes. Puis le capital s’est épuisé. Sa passion s’est muée en respect. Ensuite ce n’était plus que de la patience qu’elle m’offrait. Et la patience a ses limites . . .” ‘She listened to me with passion when I evoked my campaigns. Then the capital was depleted. Her passion changed to respect. Then it was nothing more than patience that she offered me. And patience has its limits . . .’ (20). Despite the fact that they understand the same frame of references and appreciate the same vocabulary, Yves’s words lose their evocative quality and eventually cease altogether, for neither he nor Nadège can envision any other kind of stories to share.

The event that precipitates his lapse into silence and immobilizes Nadège in respect, then patience, and finally bitter frustration, is the closing of the shipping company, which exiles Yves from the sea that had sustained him so long and makes him confront everyday married life on a full-time basis: “me voilà terrien intégral et mari à temps complet. Quel bouleversement!” ‘Here I am, living totally on land and

full-time husband. What an upset!’ (21). The text does not specify Nadège’s reaction to the situation, but Yves himself emphasizes how she tries to save both him and their marriage by moving from the shipping port of Fécamp down the Normandy coast to Grouin-du-Sud near Avranches and encouraging him to explore the lower Normandy coast line. Unfortunately this second move serves only to reinforce Yves’s sense of exile. At the same time, it reveals the double-sided limitations of his relationship with the ocean. Despite his years at sea, he had never learned to swim, and would have drowned if thrown overboard. Nor does he in any way enjoy the water. He scorns the weekend bathers who crowd the shores near Avranches and considers their seaside amusements to be an affront to the seriousness of what had been his way of life. As Yves puts it, speaking of the men with whom he had for so long sailed, “Nous, nous ne savons pas jouer avec l’océan” ‘We don’t know how to play with the ocean’ (22).

Eventually, Yves does learn to explore the shore at low tide, but despite his initial good faith efforts to encourage Nadège to join him, he prefers to spend his days alone. The gratification he experiences is, as Nadège stresses, that of “plaisirs solitaires . . . joies égoïstes qu’on détruit en voulant les partager” ‘solitary pleasures . . . egotistical joys which one destroys in wishing to share them’ (23-24). The stories and anecdotes of the past disintegrate into the discourse of a pedagogical lesson. In the negatively charged language of “conseils” ‘advice’ and “objurgations” ‘sharp reprimands,’ that recall Alexis’ philosophical rhetoric, Yves vainly tries to instruct the at this point alienated Nadège how to search out the creatures buried in the exposed sea bed, and eventually even these words cease.

The verbal reserve Nadège had admired disintegrates into grumbling minimalism, evident in the change from “taciturne” ‘taciturn’ to “taiseux” ‘grudgingly silent’ (29), and in the caricatured confrontational scenes that occur, which only further immobilize both individuals in the stereotyped marital positions Tournier has depicted in so many of his other works. Separated from the life at sea that had for so long fulfilled him, Yves, like the melancholics Kristeva describes, sinks deeper into his loss. Unable to swim and play in the water, he cannot move beyond this pain and respond to other stimuli. In keeping with Kristeva’s analysis, Yves explains this dilemma in specifically linguistic terms. He believes that the words one uses should correspond to physical realities, which is why he finds the weather report so reassuring. The signifier and the signified should coincide to form a

unity that cannot be contested. “Les mots qu’on prononce doivent s’accorder au ciel et à la mer” ‘The words one uses must be in accord with the sky and the sea’ (29), and he cannot accept the fact that this sense of plenitude, as illusory as it may have been, no longer exists: “Les paroles de Fécamp ne répondent pas à l’air d’Avranches” ‘The words of Fécamp do not respond to the air of Avranches’ (29-30). The move from the familiar port to the south, which aggravates his feeling of exile, is in turn reflected in the gap that separates the two elements of the sign, with which the melancholic Yves cannot cope: “Il y a ici comme un appel doux et insidieux, une demande que je ne sais pas satisfaire” ‘There is here, like a gentle and insidious call, a request that I don’t know how to satisfy’ (30).

When he does speak, Yves can only monotonously repeat the words of the past, and Nadège cannot accept mere repetition as ever-enriching ritual: “aurais-je le coeur d’écouter la même histoire racontée indéfiniment dans les mêmes termes? Aurais-je l’imagination enfantine qu’il faut pour cela?” ‘would I have the heart to listen to the same story told indefinitely in the same terms? Would I have the childlike imagination needed for that?’ (34). Both protagonists lack the imaginary capacity necessary to be able to play. They are also unable to acknowledge the interdependence between the eternal and the temporary, the two poles of ritual, as evidenced by their encounter with the sculptor Patricio Lagos. Alienated and afraid, they can only react negatively to Lagos’ sand sculptures and the dance he executes as the incoming tide engulfs them. When Yves and Nadège first see the embracing earth-colored forms on the beach, they both immediately think that the bodies are corpses, and the expansive movements of Lagos’ dance complement a scene which to them is “une fantasmagorie mélancolique et irréelle” ‘a melancholy and unreal phantasmagoria’ (25). Tournier’s protagonists can neither appreciate the subtle meteorological variations Lagos discovered when he emigrated to Normandy from his native Chili, nor can they respond to the possibilities the changing tides offer for celebrating what Lagos terms “la pathétique fragilité de la vie” ‘the pathetic fragility of life’ (28). Yves is unable to accept the invitation offered by the weather conditions of Avranches where the “rumeur océane” ‘the oceanic rumor’ (29) is different from that in the familiar city of Fécamp. While, for her part, Nadège cannot recognize the music of the waves as they caress the shore and comprehend how they depict the trauma of separation Yves is experiencing. **She does not understand that, as the text indicates, the incoming tide is**

“volubile” ‘voluble’ in two different ways. Like the morning-glory vine, which engulfs even the sturdiest of plants with its wild profusion, the tide winds itself around all of the forms lying on the shore, including those of the sculptured couple. At the same time, the incoming waves struggle to verbalize the sense of loss created by the destruction and become a speaking subject. As Lagos explains, “Le flot enlace mes amants de limon. Et il les détruit. C’est le baiser de la mort. Mais volubile, le flot l’est encore par le babil enfantin qu’il chuchote. . . . Il voudrait parler. Il cherche ses mots” ‘The wave embraces my lovers made of sand. And it destroys them. It is the kiss of death. But the wave is also voluble in the infantile babble which it murmurs. . . . It would like to speak. It is searching for its words’ (28-29).

Immobilized as they both are, there is no point, Yves insists, in remaining together. But he also proposes separating in style with a dinner party for their friends, who, as Nadège adds, will also be both audience and participants in a discussion about love. The celebration that the couple organizes to announce their separation is especially significant because it is to be a communal feast and because of the dialogue to be exchanged. Even more important is the unexpected transformation that occurs in the nature of the words spoken and in the outcome of the evening. As Kristeva takes care to point out in the demystifying analysis of *Histoires d’amour*, the process which is the basis for any amatory relationship begins in a way that is characteristic of “la phase orale de l’organisation de la libido où ce que j’incorpore est ce que je deviens. . . . Je m’identifie non pas avec un objet, mais à ce qui se propose comme *modèle*” ‘the oral phase of the libido’s organization where what I incorporate is what I become. . . . I identify, not with an object, but with what offers itself to me as a *model*’ (30-31). And she further notes the relationship between oral assimilation, a shared meal, and speech, singling out the specific importance of assimilating the words of an other, “substrat essentiel à ce qui constitue l’être de l’homme, à savoir le *langage*” ‘the essential substratum of what constitutes man’s being, namely, *language*’ (31). What is particularly striking about Kristeva’s discussion is the shift or displacement that occurs from object to words. As she puts it, “Pour que je sois capable d’une telle opération, il aura fallu un frein à ma libido: ma soif de dévorer a dû être différée et déplacée. . . . De pouvoir recevoir les mots de l’autre, de les assimiler, répéter, reproduire, je deviens comme lui: Un. Un sujet de l’énonciation. Par identification-osmose psychique. Par amour” ‘For me to be capable of such an operation, my libido had

to be restrained: my thirst to devour had to be deferred and displaced. . . . In being able to receive the other's words, to assimilate, to repeat, to reproduce them, I become like him: One. A subject of enunciation. Through psychic osmosis/identification. Through love' (31-32).

A similar shift occurs during the night-long feast prepared to solemnize Yves and Nadège's separation. As the guests partake of the delicacies that Yves has so lovingly harvested from the ocean, the displacement process Kristeva describes in her analysis is set in motion. The panoply of spectacular sea food courses is soon accompanied by words, which the guests formulate as they sit on the deck that extends to the edge of the shore, or, in linguistic terms, as they sit perched on the bar that separates the signifier from the signified. The sentences they speak become much more nourishing than the dishes consumed. As they are shared, their words become patterns for future innovations. Nadège imagined that the discourse that would dramatically highlight the breakup of her marriage to Yves would be that of a discussion: "Nous leur parlerons, ils nous parleront, ce sera la grande palabre sur le couple et l'amour" 'We'll speak to them, they'll talk to us, it will be the great debate on the couple and on love' (38). Although we are not dealing with a specifically psychoanalytic situation, the interaction Nadège envisages nevertheless suggests the kind of dynamic verbal exchange that can occur between analyst and analysand. As Kristeva notes when describing her vision of the analytic process in *Histoires d'amour*, "Il valorisera le semblant, l'imaginaire. Pour un tel espace psychique ouvert, indécidable, la crise sera non pas une souffrance, mais un signe, à l'intérieur d'une trame dont la vérité est dans la possibilité d'absorber des semblants" 'It will actualize the seeming, the imagination. For such an open, undecidable psychic space, the crisis will not be a suffering, but a sign within a framework whose truth lies in its ability to absorb seemings' (354). Through the assimilation of shared words, the melancholic crisis of silence that is destroying the relationship between Yves and Nadège can begin to be transformed into a "work in progress," (354, the expression is in English in the French text) which has the potential to restore meaning, albeit ever tentative, to a language suffering from the disappearance of representation.

It should also be noted, however, that the nature of discourse itself is transformed from that of discussion to fiction, a change in register that greatly accentuates the role of the imagination and its displacing capacity. Yves and Nadège listen, not to a discussion but to stories, to

a “succession de fictions” ‘succession of fictions’ (40). As they do so, they learn, in a sense, how to become artists themselves and begin to rebuild the broken or collapsed space of their relationship with new “constructions imaginaires” ‘imaginary constructions’ (40). As John Lechte points out in his analysis of Kristeva’s attitude toward art, she views it “less as an object, and more as a practice that ‘creates’ the subject. In short: art is constitutive of both the subject and the object” (24). And he goes on to stress that, “Potentially, at least, aesthetic activity is within the reach of every one, even if producing an object readily and broadly admired is not” (25). The inventions the guests narrate and that Yves and Nadège eagerly assimilate serve the same double-sided function of all artistic creation, which, as Kristeva emphasizes, “*fait voir ou entendre la fureur mais, par ce mime précisément, nous purge d’elle en la déplaçant dans un style . . .*” ‘which makes us see or hear fury, but precisely on account of such miming, cleanses us of it by displacing it into a style . . .’ (301).

The narrations to which Yves and Nadège listen are divided in the familiar Tournierien way between “nouvelles” ‘short stories,’ described as “âprement réalistes, pessimistes, dissolvantes [qui] contribuait à les séparer, à ruiner leur couple” ‘bitterly realistic, pessimistic, dissolving [which] worked to separate, to ruin their couple relationship’ (40), and “contes” ‘tales,’ singled out as “savoureux, chaleureux, affables [qui] travaillaient au contraire à les rapprocher” ‘savory, warm, gracious, [which] worked, on the contrary, to bring them back together’ (40-41).<sup>4</sup> But despite the text’s statements about the value of the two different kinds of inventions, it should be stressed that the “nouvelles” are just as important, perhaps even more important, to Yves and Nadège than the “contes” precisely because they speak the pain of loss and betrayal that Tournier’s protagonists cannot themselves express. Listening to these narratives makes it possible for them to begin to emerge from the sadness paralyzing them, to respond to the tongue-in-cheek playfulness of the “contes,” and finally to participate in the banquet described in the concluding tale. It is perhaps simplistic and naïve to call literature the panacea that Nadège claims it to be (42). Nevertheless the imaginary constructions assimilated during the night-long narrative adventure can be used as models, “matériaux” for their own story-telling odyssey. What Yves describes as the stagnant, melancholic “vase de notre vie quotidienne” ‘mud of our daily life’ (42) gives way to the fast moving, ever-changing rhythm of “un torrent de montagne” ‘a mountain torrent’ (42) in a gesture that

acknowledges separation from the sea as well as from the anecdotes and stories associated with his maritime past. The monotonous repetition of the same will become the complex, multi-dimensional renewal that Tournier has so consistently admired.

The narration that most dramatically illustrates the melancholic crisis weighing upon Yves and Nadège is the “nouvelle” entitled “Lucie ou la femme sans ombre,” after “Les Amants taciturnes,” the longest text in the anthology and the one that occupies the very center of the collection. As most of the other pieces referred to as “nouvelles,” this one too is a first person account which describes a traumatic experience in the narrator’s youth. It relates an idyllic attachment at age ten to his exotic school mistress Lucie, ultimate embodiment of the maternal (132-33), and the destruction of both this relationship and the fragile construction of Lucie’s own being by the forces of paternal vengeance and social repression. The narrator, Ambroise, is the only child of a wealthy but totally unloving father, whose stinginess and puritanical coldness drive the boy’s mother away and make him seek refuge with Lucie. Ambroise arrives at her home on the evening of his mother’s flight, and he soon falls blissfully asleep in the warm disorder of Lucie’s bed, next to a mysterious doll named Olga. The comforting sensualness of his visit is soon transformed into pain and viciousness, however, as Ambroise’s father presses for a divorce settlement that will prevent the child’s mother from having any contact with the boy and packs him off to boarding school. He also makes formal charges against Lucie for sexually corrupting a minor, which provokes disastrous changes on both the professional and personal levels.

It is only many years later, when a radically transformed Lucie has become headmistress of a girls lycée, that the narrator meets her again and then learns in a letter from her estranged husband Nicolas what had transpired as a result of paternal vengefulness. Following Ambroise’s father’s brutal legal action, Lucie was dismissed from the academy where she was teaching and fell into deep depression, sitting mutely and clutching her doll Olga desperately. With psychiatric intervention, she did at first seem to improve, but the hope Nicolas began to feel soon changed to despair as he witnessed her transformation into the “femme de verre, transparente . . . froide et incolore” ‘woman made of glass, transparent, cold, colorless’ (152), whom the adult Ambroise had encountered. Although Lucie did learn to speak again, it was only in a fragmented and minimalistic way (155). Ironically, the therapy sessions triggered not a renewal or rebirth, but Lucie’s own death and the



destruction of those around her who drew their life from her as well. It was also only through repeated prodding that Nicolas was able to piece together the totally private story of Lucie's past- the "histoire secrète" 'secret story' (155), of which he had known nothing. He learned that she had had a sister, also named Lucie, who had died at age nine of spinal meningitis and whom his wife had replaced. He also began to understand the reason for her obsessive attachment to Olga, who had belonged to the dead sister and whom Lucie cherished since the day she had discovered her by chance in an abandoned attic trunk and learned, at the same time, of the existence of the first Lucie. As Nicolas explains in his letter to Ambroise, "l'ayant descendue dans sa chambre[Lucie] n'a plus cessé de la choyer" 'having taken her down into her room, [Lucie] did not cease pampering her' (156). When, after her therapy sessions, Lucie discards Olga by silently burying her at the sister's grave, she also, in a sense commits suicide. She accepts entombment in the clipped phrases and rigidity of a school disciplinarian, dressed in the grey and white dress of "une nonne de luxe" 'an expensively clad nun' (150). The doll which she treasured from the time she discovered the existence of her dead sister, plays the same role as the self-image Narcissus saw when he gazed into the pool. The fragile construction of Lucie's identity collapses because she can transfer to no Other the complex emotions she felt for Olga, at once her sister and herself, and thereby try to reconstruct that broken psychic space.

The colorful aura that had surrounded Lucie and inspired Nicolas' own artistic imagination disappears completely, reduced to the monotony of her proper clothes and to the black and white drawings Nicolas begins to execute in the draftsman job he takes after the breakup of their relationship. At the end of his letter to Ambroise, Nicolas counsels him derisively, "Il faut savoir tourner la page" 'One must know how to turn the page' (158). Ambroise blatantly rejects the words Nicolas writes out of despair, from his own position of definitive exile. Unable to recover from having lost the original source of his inspiration, Nicolas can respond to no other stimuli in order to replenish the psychic resources needed to be an artist. Like Lucie's estranged husband, Ambroise too has lost forever the presence of the one who had so generously comforted him, but unlike Nicolas, he has assimilated the force, the "ombre" 'aura' that was Lucie's. It is, as he says, "enfermée pour toujours dans mon coeur" 'locked forever in my heart' (158), not entombed like Olga. And its precisely symbolic presence or seeming now serves as model for his own inventions and for the new

relationship he is able to form with the woman he describes as “*la compagne de ma vie*” ‘my life companion’ (149, also 158).

In a similar way, Yves and Nadège are likewise able to move beyond the melancholy that destroyed Lucie and Nicolas and use the materials of Ambroise’s narrative to construct “*une maison de mots où habiter ensemble*” ‘a house of words in which to reside together’ (42). Although exiled from the sea, Yves can now begin to symbolize his loss, which, in turn, will help heal his wounds. Emerging from the borderline position of Narcissus, he is able to respond to different stimuli, and Nadège is able to recognize her husband’s dilemma in the tide that “*balbutiait à la recherche d’un langage*” ‘babbled in search of a language’ (41). Listening to Ambroise narrate the “*nouvelle*” of his trauma transforms the “*triste nouvelle*” ‘sad news’ (42) of the separation Yves and Nadège had planned to announce into a shared declaration which emphasizes the importance of constructing an imaginary space in that to play together, an activity which, until now, they could not envision.

At the end of the night-long narrative adventure, Yves and Nadège embrace the “*work in progress*” of aesthetic activity Kristeva analyzes and reaffirm their commitment to the ephemeral though essential rituals of everyday life. They are able to accept the invitation extended in the two celebratory tales that close the collection, which illustrate importance of exchange and celebrate continually renewed artistic activity. The final stories likewise concretize other versions of the subtle (inter)play between the ephemeral and the eternal that so fascinated the sculptor Lagos and that constitutes yet another expression of the interdependence between the nomad and the sedentary that runs through all of Tournier’s works. It should be noted that neither “*La Légende de la peinture*” nor “*Les deux Banquets*” valorize mere repetition. As the writer-narrator of the first tale emphasizes when speaking to the friend who wishes to use one of his works as part of a multi-lingual instant translation computer program, “*je lui contai une parabole du sage derviche Algazel . . . un peu arrangé à ma manière, comme il est loisible de faire dans la tradition orale*” ‘I told him a parable from the wise man Algazil . . . reorganized a little according to my own way, as it is allowable to do in the oral tradition’ (260-61). In contrast to Yves, who, in the past, could only tell his stories “*dans les mêmes termes*” ‘in the same terms’ (34), the narrator of “*La Légende de la peinture*” has assimilated the words of another and altered their configurations to correspond to the dictates of his own imagination.

His behavior exemplifies what Yves and Nadège learned in the course of *Le Médianoche amoureux*, for they too discovered how to adapt models to their own situation. The same dynamic relationship is likewise expressed in the text of the tale itself as the Greek painter unveils the mirror that reflects the idyllic garden painted by his Chinese rival and wins the artistic competition. What so impresses the calif and his court is the presence of the people who have gathered in the royal assembly hall for the unveiling of the two creations. As splendid as it is, “le jardin du chinois était désert et vide d’habitants, alors que dans le jardin du Grec, on voyait une foule magnifique avec des robes brodées, des panaches de plumes, des bijoux d’or et des armes ciselées. Tous ces gens bougeaient, gesticulaient et se reconnaissaient” ‘The garden of the Chinese painter was deserted and empty of inhabitants, whereas, in the Greek painter’s garden, one saw a magnificent crowd with embroidered gowns, a variegated assortment of feathers, golden jewels and embossed arms. All these people were moving about, gesturing, greeting one another’ (262-63). It is the ever-modulating brilliance of the crowd and the constantly changing position of the guests against the background of the garden that decide the victory.

The tale also points up in another way the difference between timeless, though forever fixed statues sculpted in marble, and the ephemeral, living sand statues Lagos created, which are subject to change and destruction; his “sculptures de sable vivent . . . et la preuve c’est qu’elles meurent” ‘sand sculptures live . . . and the proof is that they die’ (27). Yves and Nadège are now able to respond affirmatively to the fragile dynamism which they had previously perceived as melancholy and menacing. As the text clearly indicates, they can now appreciate the stories “qui s’effaçaient dès le dernier mot prononcé pour faire place à d’autres évocations tout aussi éphémères. Ils songeaient aux statues de sable de Lagos. Ils suivaient le lent travail que cette succession de fictions accomplissaient en eux” ‘which were erased as soon as the last word was pronounced to make room for other evocations just as ephemeral. They followed the slow work that this succession of fictions was accomplishing in them’ (40). As they listen attentively, the reciprocal pole of speaking, the precarious healing process begins.

The final tale of the two banquets reveals a similar, though more subtle, (inter)play. Although the second chef wins the contest by what the text indicates is “l’exacte répétition du premier (banquet)” ‘the exact repetition of the first (banquet)’ (267), his feast is not necessarily

precisely the same as first one. The very fact that he is using either live or perishable ingredients, which are subtly though constantly changing in composition, clearly leaves room for the unpredictable variations that can occur even when following a recipe *exactly*. Furthermore, although it is true that the tale emphasizes the heightened prestige of the second banquet, described as sacred and raised to “une dimension supérieure” ‘a superior dimension’ (267), it also acknowledges the importance of innovation and of being able to accept new ideas and respond to new stimuli. In contrast to Nadège, who listened for years to the same stories, told in the same words, the calif and his guests will not eat the same dishes Sunday after Sunday because he hires both of the chefs who had participated in the culinary competition. He tells the first one, “tu m’accompagneras dans mes chasses et dans mes guerres. Tu ouvriras ma table aux produits nouveaux, aux plats exotiques, aux inventions les plus surprenantes de la gastronomie” ‘You will accompany me on my hunting and military expeditions. You will introduce my table to new products, to exotic dishes, to the most surprising inventions of gastronomy’ (268). And he charges the second one to transform exotic feasts into sacred ritual by assimilating the models provided by the one who will travel with the calif: “Tu seras le grand prêtre de mes cuisines et le conservateur des rites culinaires et manducatoires qui confèrent au repas sa dimension spirituelle” ‘You will be the high priest of my kitchens and the one who preserves the culinary and dining rituals, which add a spiritual dimension to the meal’ (268). *Both* are necessary to initiate the sharing of dishes and the imaginative verbal exchange that can take place around a festive table, which Nadège herself acknowledges as she addresses these same words to Yves. She assimilates the last sentence of the final tale as the basis for the amatory discourse she and Yves will share.

As exemplified by the tale of the two banquets and further highlighted in one of the meditations in *Le Vol du vampire*, Tournier notes that the table “médiatise le contact du ciel et de la terre. . . . La table est membrane, goulot, diaphragme. Elle sépare l’inconscient du conscient, l’animalité de l’humanité, la nature de la culture, et aménage en même temps un passage entre ces niveaux” ‘mediates contact between the sky and the earth. . . . The table is membrane, mouth, diaphragm. It separates the unconscious from the conscious, animality from humanity, nature from culture, and, at the same time, constructs a passage between them’ (383). This is exactly what occurs around the continually replenished buffet table during Yves and Nadège’s night-

long feast. They listen to, or, more precisely, open themselves to receive the recipes their guests offer and begin to adapt them to fulfill their own desires. They will now attempt to rebuild the broken psychic space of their relationship. As Kristeva notes in the final pages of *Histoires d'amour*, "Parler, écrire? N'est-ce pas encore bâtir du 'propre,' fût-il polyvalent?" 'Speaking, writing? Is that not again building "one's own," even if it be polyvalent?' (354). Although fragile, this kind of construction has the potential both to shelter them from outside hostility and to mediate or diffuse their own aggressivity as well. The words Yves and Nadège that will try to exchange will be formulated as they gaze at one another across the intimate space of the dinner table, not looking in opposite directions like the self-contained androgynous models described at Plato's banquet, which so fascinated Tournier in the past and which he appropriated under other forms in a number of his own works.<sup>5</sup> As Kristeva indicates, the stories Yves and Nadège will attempt to share will perhaps be "désabusé[s] mais nom déprimé[s]" 'disenchanted but not depressed' (122). Like the fragile forms of Patricio Lagos' sand sculptures, the amatory discourse Kristeva describes can renew Tournier's couple "provisoirement et éternellement" 'provisionally and eternally' (355). And it is through the reciprocal process of speaking and listening, opening oneself to the words and needs of another, that the possibilities of love she analyzes can be realized.

The task facing Tournier's protagonists is by no means an easy one, nor is their success in any way assured. The stories that Yves and Nadège have assimilated and that will now serve as models for their own creations are of greatly uneven aesthetic quality, ranging from poignant to cruel, from enchanting to ironic, from suspenseful to, at times, boring. Furthermore those recounted in the first person seem to be narrated exclusively by males and reveal distinctly autobiographical overtones, which leaves open the question of females as speaking subjects. Nevertheless, the anthology clearly emphasizes the reciprocity of active listening/speaking and looks much more to the future rather than to the nostalgic past that has figured so importantly in Tournier's repertoire. It likewise depicts a willingness to accept rather than incorporate otherness, sexually or psychologically, and it reveals a much greater openness to the risk of tenuous, ever-evolving human relationships. In so doing, the stories of *Le Médianoche amoureux* suggest options heretofore neglected in discussion of Tournier's writ-

ings and will hopefully serve as imaginary models for ever more enriching expressions of ritualistic sharing in the future.

## Notes

1. Although this particular statement appears in Tournier's discussion of his reaction to the Tristan and Iseut myth, he nevertheless sees their situation as a specifically marital relationship because of their faithfulness to one another, and stresses that the fidelity that highlights their relationship is a characteristically female attitude (36-37). For another work treating this subject, see Tournier's comments on Lewis Carroll's passion for photographing little girls in the *Petites Proses* text entitled "L'Image érotique" (151-54). See also Tournier's comments in the short article entitled "En finir avec la femme et l'avortement," in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (39).

2. For an analysis of the way in which this text inverts sexual roles, of the hostility toward the female it reveals, and of the specific role of the narrator in the elaboration of the drama depicted, see Marie-Laure Girou-Swidorski's article entitled "Hector et Véronique ou la dialectique des sexes," in *Incidences* (29-39).

3. For a more detailed discussion of primary narcissism and the phenomenon of the Imaginary Father, see Kristeva's *Histoires* (22-40). See also John Lechte's analysis entitled "Art, Love, and Melancholy in the Work of Julia Kristeva" in the Collection *Abjection, Melancholia and Love* (24-41). See also Cynthia Chase's essay entitled "Primary Narcissism and the Giving of Figure: Kristeva with Hertz and de Man," in the same anthology (125-36).

4. See Tournier's discussion of Perrault in "*Barbe-Bleue* ou le secret du conte," in *Le Vol du vampire* (38-43). See also his interview with Jean-Jacques Brochier in *Le Magazine littéraire* (11-13). See also an unpublished interview with Serge Koster, undertaken soon after the publication of *Le Médiante amoureux*.

5. For an analysis of the particular significance of androgynous images in Tournier's works, see, for example Arlette Bouloumié's work entitled *Michel Tournier: le roman mythologique* and Françoise Merllié's study entitled *Michel Tournier*, both of which present very positive images of the phenomenon. For a less enthusiastic analysis that points out the underside of the androgynous totality, see Jean Libis's essay "L'androgynie et le Nocturne," in the collection entitled *L'Androgynie* (11-26). See also Kristeva's brief discussion in *Histoires* (70-72). See also Tournier's own statements questioning the whole phenomenon of the androgynie in his discussion with André Dumas entitled "L'Obsession de Dieu," in *Foi et Vie* (17-46). Finally, see two other

“contes” in *Le Médianoche amoureux*: first, “La Légende de la musique et de la danse” (249-52) and “La Légende des parfums” (253-58).

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