The Fatal Temptation of the Image: Specular Fascination in Tournier's *Le Roi des aulnes*

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In the closing chapters of his latest novel *La Goutte d'or*, published in 1985, the contemporary French fiction writer and essayist Michel Tournier offers his most elaborate description of the image as seemingly natural representation and analyzes in detail the way it functions in relation to symbolic signs based on differences. The young Berber protagonist Idriss is besieged by a proliferation of images from the moment a blond tourist snaps his photo in his native North-African desert, triggering the odyssey which eventually leads him to the crowded streets of Paris's Arab quarter. Overwhelmed by encounters with individuals who seek to appropriate and exploit his likeness, Idriss eventually meets the master calligrapher Abd Al Ghafari, who helps him understand why images can be at once so alluring and so potentially dangerous. As part of the initiation process, Ghafari recounts the enigmatic tale of "La Reine blonde," whose portrait hypnotized all those who gazed upon it, explaining that "One of the secrets of the force of the face comes from its specular form. Because it seems to be composed of two identical halves."[1] He further stresses that an image, whether in the form of effigy, idol, or photograph, is always retrospective, "a mirror turned toward the past" (*G* 234), and concludes his commentary with the warning that "there is no purer image than the funeral profile, the death mask, the cover of a sarcophagus" (*G* 235). It immobilizes one's attention at the most infantile level of specular fascination and inspires one to seek refuge from the ongoing movement of life in nostalgia for an elemental union with a dead past (*G* 235).

Through his sessions with Ghafari, Idriss learns that the symmetry which appears to exist between the two sides of the face is a lure whose fascination must be resisted. He discovers, as does the young apprentice in the tale, that "for one who knows how to read, it is a question of two poems full of assonances and resonances" (*G* 245). By superimposing parchment sheets on which he has traced carefully executed letters, he learns to interpret the meaning of what he sees. The layers of calligraphied parchment act as a series of steps which guide the apprentice through the deciphering process. They reveal the importance of establishing a certain distance between the spectator and the image itself in the same way that the reed pen separates the calligrapher from the surface on which he draws. And the superimposed sheets also emphasize the divided layers of the psyche which cannot be synthesized into a unified whole, but which coexist in ever-varying degrees of tension.

In the course of his lessons with the master calligrapher, Idriss begins to acquire the skills which can exorcise the power of the image and enable him to un-

[1] Michel Tournier, *La Goutte d'or* (Paris: Gallimard. 1985) 244. All references are to the French text and will henceforth appear in the body of the text after the abbreviation *G*; all translations are mine.

derstand the complexity of the signifying process. Unfortunately the same cannot be said of Abel Tiffauges, the supposedly gentle ogre of Tournier's most haunting novel *Le Roi des aulnes*. None of Tournier's protagonists is as ill-prepared to resist the specular force of images or falls as irremediably into the past as this Paris garage mechanic who eventually takes over the running of one of the elite Nazi paramilitary schools, called "napolas," in East Prussia. As we shall see, the text graphically depicts the consequences of Tiffauges's fascination with nostalgic images of the past for all those who depend on him and trust in the power of his protection, and it reveals the urgency of our responsibility as readers and interpreters of Tiffauges's undertaking.

The majority of the critics who have discussed this novel have singled out what they see as the essentially redemptive quality of Tiffauges's experience. R.A. York has affirmed that the text ends with a conversion and a choice, and Roger Shattuck has stressed the specifically sacrificial nature of Tiffauges's final act of phoria—the jubilant act of lifting and carrying a child on one's shoulders—which redresses the wrong of his participation in the activities of the napola. Serge Koster and David Bevan have likewise underlined Tiffauges's apotheosis at the end of the novel, and most recently, Françoise Merllié and Arlette Bouloumié have added their commentaries to the series of those emphasizing the transcendent quality of Tiffauges's evolution.[2]

Many aspects of othese critics' discussions contribute significantly to our understanding of Tournier's overall literary project, but their discussion of Tiffauges's situation leaves much still to be explored, for they pass over in silence many of the crucial inconsistencies in the work. In this study I propose to probe much more deliberately the contradictions in Tiffauges's undertaking to reveal how the text undermines and eventually completely overturns the painstakingly orchestrated and self-contained coherence it purports to embody.[3] I would argue that Tournier's work depicts neither a victory nor a reconciliation, but rather an unfulfilled initiation and, more precisely, a betrayal. Tiffauges's overwhelming obsession with the distant past and his unquestioning identification with the funeral mask of the peat-preserved cadaver named Erlkönig (after the elfish king in Goethe's famous ballad of the same name) actually make it impossible for him to live up to the phoric ideal he sought to emulate. As I hope to demonstrate, his fixation with the image of a pure and frozen past paralyzes his will. It causes him to abandon the very responsibility he had so proudly assumed and, in the end, transforms him into the negative version of the glorious destiny he had claimed as his own.[4]

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[2] See R.A. York, "Thematic Construction in *Le Roi des aulnes*," *Orbis Litterarum* 36 (1981): 76-91; Roger Shattuck, "Why Not the Best?," *New York Review of Books* 28 April 1983: 8-15; Serge Koster, *Michel Tournier* (Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1986); David G. Bevan, *Michel Tournier* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986); Françoise Merllié, *Michel Tournier* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1988); Arlette Boulounié, *Michel Tournier: Le Roman mythologique* (Paris: José Corti, 1988).

[3] See Michel Tournier, *Le vent Paraclet* 128-30. In this section of his autobiographical meditations Tournier explains how the structure of *Le Roi des aulnes* is based on the monumentally elaborate though totally unified structure of Bach's *Art de la fugue*.

[4] In the early and mid 1980, certain critics, such as William Cloonan and Michael Worton began to question the gloriousness of Tiffauges's destiny, but they have examined the situation either from a general point of view or in another framework. Most recently Colin Davis has published an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Tournier the philosopher, who seeks to control his reader and impose order on a text, and Tournier the fiction writer, who acknowledges the creative role of the reader

In the opening pages of the novel, Tiffauges solemnly writes in the journal of his left-handed writings that "Everything is a sign."[5] Yet for all of his insistence on the omnipresence of signs and his lengthy descriptions throughout the work concerning the way in which his deciphering skills are developing, he never really learns to read and understand the signs he claims he sees proliferating all around him. Instead, he fixes his attention on images from the past, whose identity he unquestioningly assumes, and never progresses any further. It could be said then that Tiffauges functions in Lacan's realm of the imaginary. He is locked in the psychoanalytic position of the mirror stage, understood "as an identification in the full sense that analysis gives to this term: namely the transformation produced in the subject when he assumes an image."[6] When the infant fixes his gaze on his reflection in a mirror, he rejoices in the discovery of this other which, although alien, seems to be himself and offers a reassuring unified appearance. The child mistakes or more precisely misrecognizes this alienated other as himself and identifies with it, establishing a closed binary relationship which he will at once strive to safeguard and project onto the world as a form of self-justification. Tiffauges, who, as Tournier himself has stressed, always remains pre-Oedipal in his sexual development, reacts in the same way. He seeks to preserve the intimate though illusory harmony between him and what he misrecognizes as his mirror image at all costs while, at the same time, imposing what he believes to be the privilege associated with this fixed, totalizing identity on those around him. Tiffauges appropriates the image of his childhood school companion, the long-dead "giant baby" (*RA* 36) Nestor, and eventually that of the funeral mask of the Erl-King, enacting the apocalyptic dramas he associates with them.

Along similar lines, it could also be said that through his unquestioning appropriation of self-justifying images Tournier's protagonist becomes the very incarnation of the bourgeois consumers whose situation Barthes analyzes in *Mythologies*. The misunderstood identifications which Lacan analyzes as constituting the imaginary are, in many ways, equivalent to the neutralized or "naturalized" signs which Barthes describes as constituting mythic language.[7] As critic Terry Eagleton has so carefully pointed out, "in both cases an alienated personal identity is confirmed by a given inevitable world".[8] As may be recalled, Tournier himself has discussed in detail the role of myth in the waning years of the twentieth century, although in a much broader framework and from a much more positive point of view than Barthes. Tournier has repeatedly underlined the importance he attributes to the mythic quality of his works, and has taken great care to stress the necessity for writers to keep ancient myths alive by renewing their emotional charge and altering their orientation to respond to changing cultural situations. He is very careful to point out, however, that myths are multilayered constructs that we invent to help us understand the world and our relation to it. Myths form

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in assigning meaning. See William Cloonan, *Michel Tournier* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985); and Colin Davis, *Michel Tournier: Philosophy and Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

[5] Michel Tournier, *Le Roi des aulnes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970) 15. Other references to this work will be made in the body of the text using the abbreviation *RA* and the page number; all translations are mine.

[6] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966) 94. My translation.

[7] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957) 193-95. Other references to this work will be made in the body of the text using the abbreviation *M* and the page number; all translations are mine.

[8] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 187.

intricate structures whose dual purpose is to support and enrich our lives, but they must be treated as open-ended constructions produced by human beings, which quite ironically, is precisely what Tournier's protagonist in *Le Roi des aulnes* never understands.[9]

Tiffauges perceives myths as eternal givens which confirm and justify what he believes to be his preordained mission. In so doing, he joins Barthes's bourgeois consumers for whom the second language or meta-language he describes as myth is grafted onto an already existing sign system, transforming the whole into a unity which the undiscriminating viewer sees as natural, never stopping to think about the process at work or question the very arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relationship on which the whole system is based. Perceived this way, mythic language silences all historical discourse. It changes "the reality of the world into an image of the world" (*M* 229), and the image it produces is a closed "inverted image of an unchangeable humanity" (*M* 229). As Barthes explains on in his analysis, myth creates a reassuring world resembling "a harmonious picture of essences" (*M* 230). It likewise seems to make everything crystal clear, "it purifies things, makes them innocent, grounds them in nature and eternity, it gives them a clarity which is not that of explanation, but that of a certified report" (*M* 230). In the end it suppresses all conflict and cancels out all contradictions: ". . . a terminal equilbrium imobilizes values, life, destiny" (*M* 241).

The process of illusory identification and nostalgia for plenitude, which Lacan treated in specifically psychoanalytic terms, and which Barthes later developed in the more generalized sociopolitical framework of *Mythologies*, sheds much light on the intricacies of Tiffauges's development. He defiantly insists on the marginality of his social position, and frequently expresses his antipathy for middle-class institutions. But for all of the disgust he feels, he is as guilty as Barthes's bourgeois myth consumers in identifying with what he claims as the image of his heroic destiny, and in seeking to impose what he sees as his infallible authority on those around him.[10] Furthermore, the specific terms Barthes uses to refer to the process by which myth is experienced (images, clarity, essences, eternity) are all invariably linked to the multidimensional phenomenon of purity, and are the very ones used again and again to depict the stages of what could be described as Tiffauges's own mythic undertaking. By examining the different forms of purity in the text and the different crescendoing contexts in which they appear, we shall be able to discern more clearly the dangerous inconsistencies between his verbalized intentions and his actions, and grasp more fully the implications of his descent into the hell of the Nazi terror.

The contradictions in the work revolve around the complex phenomenon of "being-evil inversion" which Tournier defines in detail in *Le vent Paraclet* as "this mysterious operation which, without changing anything in the nature of a thing, a

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[9] For an incisive analysis of the complexity of Tournier's attitude toward and use of myth in his work, see Mieke Taat, "'Si le roi était nu?' Michel Tournier, romancier et mythologue," *Rapports* 52 (1982): 49-58. Using specific references from *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* and *Le Roi des aulnes*, this critique demonstrates how Tournier simultaneously exploits and, through his ironic attitude, questions our seeming dependence on mythic structures.

[10] For another discussion of the relationship between Tournier's works and bourgeois ideology, see Christa Bevernis, "Michel Tournier—l'oeuvre et son message," *Philologica Pragensis* 26 (1982): 197-204.

being, an act, puts more where there was less and less where there was more".[11] A quantitative change in emphasis—displacing energy from one pole to another—brings about a profound transformation of quality and effect. In *Le Roi des aulnes*, it refers to the equivocal relationship between the one who carries and the one who is carried—the fact that Saint Christopher, who ferries travelers across rushing waters on his shoulders, "is humiliated as a beast of burden under the weight of the voyagers" (*VP* 121-22). This physical or spatial ambiguity of position is further heightened by the more disturbing ambiguity of purpose, the fact that the one who carries to protect can also be said to carry off with intent to harm (*VP* 122). And since the interplay between the positive and the negative aspects of the phenomenon is, as Tournier stresses, so very subtle, perhaps the only factor which can tip the balance in the direction of either protective or destructive phoria is the state of the charge/victim at the end of the experience.

For Tournier's protagonist Abel Tiffauges, the phenomenon of double-sided inversions likewise figures significantly in the elaboration of his destiny. It is important to note, however, that, in his eyes, the division between the two opposing poles is very clearly defined, and his position is always on the side of the benign inversion. He encounters what he sees as a series of already existing evil inversions, certain that he represents the positive pole, and never confronts the true nature of his own dispositions. No situation reveals this more dramatically than his reaction to purity, which pervades every stage of his experience and represents one of the most fundamental and, at the same time, most insidious forms of the inversion phenomenon. It reveals itself on several different levels, such as the spatial or geographical, tonal or musical, political or racial, and philosophical or, more specifically, metaphysical. With each new manifestation, it acquires a broader and more disturbing range of connotations, which eventually penetrate every layer of the text and explode its unity.

When Tiffauges first defines purity early in the work, he insists that it is the evil inversion of innocence: "Innocence is love of being, smiling acceptance of heavenly and earthly food . . . Purity is horror of life, hatred of man, morbid passion for nothingness" (*RA* 125). All forms of purity—sexual, racial, or spiritual—end in fire, "symbol of purity and symbol of hell" (*RA* 125). Tiffauges enthusiastically aligns himself with those who are innocent and are passionately curious about what life has to offer. But as the text indicates with ever increasing force and clarity, his actions reveal something quite different. Despite Tiffauges's repeated condemnation of purity and the cult of evil associated with it, it is precisely this phenomenon which captivates him most profoundly, and the most longstanding expression of this attraction is his fascination with the pristine frigidity of the distant Canadian tundra. From even his earliest boyhood days at Saint Christopher's school, the nostalgic realm which both Tiffauges and his eerily all-powerful mentor Nestor long for is the snow-covered north of the author James Oliver Curwood's Canada, "a virgin and inhuman world, white and pure as nothingness" (*RA* 64), where the only sound that pierces the air is the wild call of Curwood's gigantic hero Bram. This earth-shattering cry, which Tiffauges discovered in Curwood's novel, is directly linked to another incident which he had ex-

[11] Michel Tournier, *Le vent Paraclet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) 122. Other references to this work will be made in the body of the text using the abbreviation *VP* and the page number; all translations are mine.

perienced a few months earlier when he was sentenced to the most sadistic punishment ritual of the school—the "colophus." Crossing the school courtyard in the damp December twilight to the cell where he was to kneel until slapped violently by the disciplinarian, Tiffauges felt completely abandoned. "The refusal to exist rose in me like a silent clamor . . . to be joined with the vibration of imobile things. An impetuous momentum was dragging us, pushing us toward death" (*RA* 47). Tiffauges believed that he had descended as far as possible into the well of his solitude and his powerlessness. Yet although he began to experience Nestor's protection that very evening, because he never actually received the punishment to which he had been sentenced, his fascination for nothingness continued to grow. We see from these early descriptions in the text that both the cry which haunts Tiffauges, and the geographical realm in which he wishes to seek refuge from the fetid atmosphere of the school, are directly associated with purity and with death.

The relation shifts to a more specifically metaphysical level, and becomes all the more explicit on the freezing night when Nestor leads Tiffauges on their expedition to the latrines. Gazing at the rows of cots in the dormitory, Nestor reflects on the concentration of energy in the room filled with sleeping bodies, "Condensation . . . is full of troubling mysteries because it is life" (*RA* 93). He goes on, however, to stress that "But for all of that, purity has its advantages. Purity equals nothingness. It has an irresistible seductiveness for us because we are all sons of nothingness" (*RA* 93). He then guides Tiffauges to the "néant" of the latrines, where he installs himself royally on the commode and philosophizes about the link between defecation and the term omega, which represents the absolute as ultimate retreat. He emphasizes the intimate relationship between feces and the earth, joined through the omega of the sphincter muscle. Witnessing Nestor's slow, deliberate movements as he drops his trousers, Tiffauges, for his part, is captivated by the image of Nestor's buttocks and begins at that moment to assume his schoolmate's identity (*RA* 94). Once again it is the lure of purity, the opposite of life and synonym of nothingness, which draws them both out of the dormitory that night and initiates the identification process.

As Tiffauges coincides more and more closely with Nestor's image, he begins to feel the weightiness of the legacy his former school companion has bequeathed to him, and at times senses the truly nihilistic force of his own powers. Like Nestor, Tiffauges too stresses that man is a creature of nothingness, and sees himself as half flesh and half stone—"with a heart, a right hand, and a welcoming smile, but also something hard, frozen and pitiless on which any human being who comes in contact with it will be inexorably broken" (*RA* 127). What is particularly important here is that he identifies his right hand with welcoming sociability which looks outward and implies that what is frozen and inhuman, what he will later call his "his taste for a more marmoreal flesh" (*RA* 540) is linked to the left, the specific orientation he values above all and which, as seen by his left-handed notebooks, he has appropriated as his own. Furthermore, he senses that it is this glacial inhumanity in his own being which will finally triumph: "My last cry, my last sight will come to rest on lips of stone" (*RA* 151).

The potentially menacing nature of Tiffauges's tendencies is revealed most strikingly in the first part of the book through his passion for photographing children and through the voluptuous ritual sessions he spends in his darkroom, which

further extend the role of purity's destructive influence. He willingly admits that he takes children's pictures in order to consume them, emphasizing "the pure, possessive, and definitive vision of my weapon" (*RA* 173). He likewise insists that photography raises objects to a new level of significance, "it transforms a real object into its own myth" (*RA* 169). As in Barthes's analysis, myth, image, and purity are united, allowing Tiffauges the consumer, to revel in his illusory sense of power. These scenes are counterpointed by those in which Tiffauges listens ecstatically to the tape he made of children's schoolyard cries, perceived as "a gutteral note of incomparable purity" (*RA* 155). Once again, the agonizing internal cry, which Tiffauges first heard in the deserted courtyard at Saint Christopher's and which was then reinforced by the howl of Curwood's trapper hero, beckons to him, this time as "the essence of the child under its sonorous form" (*RA* 157). And it particularly significant that the pure-toned children's cries gain even greater prestige in Tiffauges's eyes when they are directly associated with violence, as in the case of Martine, the young school girl whose attention Tiffauges courted, being raped, or with death, as in the case of the screams of the Holy Innocents massacred by Herod.

The occasional qualms Tiffauges might feel in the first part of the book about the truly destructive potential of his tendencies are quickly suppressed, however, once he has completely appropriated the image of the long-dead Nestor and World War II breaks out, releasing him from the unjust charge of rape. When he finally enters Germany as a prisoner of war, he is totally convinced that he is "the best, the strongest and the only innocent and chosen one" (*RA* 238). He equates his innocence as far as the rape is concerned with total innocence and believes that he will eventually triumph over all those who tried to persecute him. Yet despite his affirmations, it is not the life associated with innocence that attracts him, but rather the heightened and more distilled manifestations of purity he encounters, beginning with his discovery of the European incarnation of James Oliver Curwood's Canada. Tiffauges had previously stressed how much he detested winter, "I hate winter because winter hates flesh . . . it punishes it, it beats it like a puritain preacher" (*RA* 161). But just as it had at Saint Christopher's when he first read Curwood's novel, it is precisely this season that most attracts Tiffauges because winter best emphasizes the stark, virgin beauty of the East Prussian landscape in which he now feels so at home, and his experience culminates in the discovery of a deserted log cabin which seemed to await his arrival from all eternity. The solitary nights he spends in this secret refuge, along with his lengthy sessions on the latrine erected behind the hut, and his identification with the gigantic blind beast Unhold, who frequently comes begging for turnips, and whom Tiffauges imagines to be the purest incarnation of this hyperborean land, all confirm his exalted sense of mission (*RA* 288). Once again, expressions such as virgin spaces and pure, frost-covered plains are used to describe his preoccupations. It should also be noted, however, that the deserted Prussian landscape is raised to a new level of significance. It is not only clear and simplified but totally without nuance, a black and white countryside (*RA* 262). It is not only pure but "the country of pure essences" (*RA* 281). After a new snowfall, it stretches out immaculate in front of Tiffauges, presenting an image of the world which is as clear, as reassuring, and as eternal as that which Barthes's myth consumers gaze upon.

Once Tiffauges stares at the mummified face of the cadaver pulled from the peat bog, named for Goethe's fantomlike ogre, and becomes associated with the Nazi napola at Kaltenborn, the essences he feels he has discovered take on much more profoundly horrifying connotations. Although he insisted earlier that he had never prayed for an apocalypse, what he will now strive for, like a flaming torch, is to bring these essences to the point of incandescence, assuming that his own way of doing so, associated with the left, is unquestioningly legitimate (*RA* 207, 281, 392). Once again it is different forms of purity that captivate him. He blindly participates in the monstrous Nazi project to preserve and promote Aryan racial purity by assisting Dr. Blättchen, fictionalized version of the infamous Joseph Mengele, by eventually taking over the sadistic physician's lab, and also by scouring the countryside around Kaltenborn in search of ever-needed new recruits for the third Reich's war machine. He rejoices each time the older adolescent boys are called from the institution to active duty in the SS, luxuriating in what he terms "this bloodletting which restored to Kaltenborn its childlike purity" (*RA* 418). He likewise listens enraptured to the frenzied ceremonial speeches evoking the origins of the Nazi movement in the pure German forests (*RA* 418). When he finally takes full control of the day-to-day life in the napola, he basks in the glory of his power, which he sees as both gentle and deeply maternal (*RA* 503). As he had stood outside the schoolyard gates in Paris listening voluptuously to the children's cries, he now stands on the terraces overlooking Kaltenborn's courtyard and, as he puts it, "I let myself be rocked by this symphony of cries" (*RA* 505). And he believes these cries to be not merely the sonorous essence of the child, as he had earlier, but yet another manifestation of "this purity of essence which is what Germany reserved for me and my reason for being here" (*RA* 505), linking cry, purity, and essence together as the justification for his very presence in the country and his participation in the life of the napola. With his gaze fixed on the specular form of "le Roi des Aulnes," he never understands the old Kommander's desperate warnings about the void behind the signs on which the Nazi empire has been built, and what happens when the symbols themselves, such as that of the Nazi flag, take over as pure but empty essences. They circulate freely like the modern-day cultural myths which Barthes analyzed to be consumed by, and eventually to consume, all those who mistakenly identified with them and never questioned their validity (*RA* 472-78).

As the Nazi system begins to disintegrate under the force of the invading Russian troops, Tiffauges does wonder if the phenomena he has exalted might change into something infernal, but it is important to note that he does not really question his own innocence or that of the realm he has sought to create. Even after he rescues the abandoned Ephraïm, the Jewish child who had been imprisoned at Auschwitz, and learns about the unthinkable horror of what occurred there, he persists in seeing the concentration camp situation as the "countersemblance" (*RA* 558) of his own enterprise, whose legitimacy remains as certain as ever. "Tiffauges saw all his inventions, all his discoveries reflected in the horrible mirror, inverted, and raised to the incandescence of hell" (*RA* 560). At other moments, he also pauses to reflect on his fascination with the condensed dead weight of the children sleeping in the dormitory, or more disturbingly, on his attraction to the totally despiritualized mass of Helmut's decapitated body, recalling some of his comments earlier in the book: "Could it be that my vigil next to Helmut had given me for ever more the taste for a more marmoreal flesh?" (*RA* 540). But Tiffauges goes

no further in his attempt to understand himself. Instead he merely continues his task of preparing the fortress to defend itself against the approaching Russian forces, coordinating what he calls "the atrocious and magnificent way to use my children"(*RA* 541), and overseeing the boys who are to put the antitank mines into place. When he sees Arnim d'Ulm carrying one of the mines in a particularly dangerous way, he thinks vaguely about helping, but again he stops there and does nothing to prevent what he fears might happen. And when Tiffauges undergoes his baptism of blood, covered with remains of the child's exploded body, an experience totally different from the "phoric baptism" (*RA* 174) he had once claimed as his own, he feels not horror but pride. He is convinced that he has finally assumed the glorious new identity he felt would be his when he first arrived in Germany, at last wearing the regal robes of Goethe's Erl-King.

The only time Tiffauges ever actually admits anything about his blindness occurs during his brief stay in the infirmary after Arnim's death. Musing rapturously on the heightened prestige of flesh that is wounded, he recalls his other stay in the infirmary at Saint Christopher's after he had discovered the fascination of slavery and tasted human flesh and blood for the first time (*RA* 28). The scene very early in the narrative which depicts Tiffauges cleaning his classmate Pelsenaire's wounded leg with his tongue is described as if he were kissing someone's face: "Finally my lips touched the lips of the wound and remained there for a period of time I could not measure" (*RA* 31). Tiffauges knelt powerless under the force of the image before him, whose significance he chose to ignore. Only more than two decades later does he acknowledge that his long stay in the infirmary after the incident "should have opened my eyes, if the fear of learning too much about myself had not kept them obstinately closed" (*RA* 546). He relives every stage of the experience, stressing the intensity of his ecstasy when his lips touched the wound and admitting that it was precisely "the face of the wound" (*RA* 547) that haunted his feverish reveries. All these years Tiffauges refused to turn away from the images that held his gaze—Pelsenaire's wound, Nestor's buttocks, and the mummified cadaver in the peat bog. He never tried to understand himself because he would then have had to accept responsibility for his actions. It was always so much easier to invoke the inexorable workings of destiny.

At this point in the text, with the Kaltenborn fortress threatened by imminent destruction, it would perhaps still be possible for Tiffauges to redeem himself by saving Ephraïm, but his fascination with the image of "le Roi des Aulnes" and the pure essences he feels he has discovered in Germany is too strong. A crucially important incident early in the work prepares us for what actually happens in the final pages of the novel. Just as he is attracted to flesh, Tiffauges is also fascinated by shoes, which he spends hours lovingly fondling and polishing. When he comes across some particularly shabby boots abandoned on a trash can lid, he caresses them and revives them with the warmth of his touch, only then to toss them back: "They seemed to revive . . . and it wasn't without a lump in my throat that I put them back on the trash pile" (*RA* 79). In much the same way does he retrieve Ephraïm and nurse him back to life, only, as we shall see, to forsake him when the child needs him the most.

Phoria, the passionately triumphant act of lifting and carrying a child on one's shoulders, to which Tournier refers in his description of the benign-evil in-

version noted earlier in our study, had captivated his protagonist Tiffauges from the time Nestor had carried him during a jousting game in the school courtyard and from the day when his protective companion had explained the legend of Saint Christopher to him. The text is careful to point out the psychological ambiguity of the phenomenon by noting that "All of Saint Christopher's glory is to be beast of burden and monstrance. In the crossing of the river there is abduction and overwhelming effort" (*RA* 86). But the work also stresses that even though the child was in one sense carried off, he was also "held above the roaring waves" (*RA* 87). Although Saint Christopher may perhaps have experienced the ogrelike pleasure of kidnapping the divine child, and although he may have been nearly crushed by the weight of his charge, he nevertheless persisted in his effort and deposited the boy safely on the opposite shore. As recompense, his staff bloomed miraculously like a palm tree the following morning. Another example of the same phenomenon appears in the story of the Portuguese conquistador Alfonse d'Albuquerque in Montaigne's *Essais*, recited one day during Mass. In the midst of a violent storm at sea, the conquistador hoisted a young child onto his shoulders so that "his innocence served him as guarantee and commended him to divine favor to bring him to safety" (*RA* 88). Both Saint Christopher and the conquistador followed the same procedure, "put themselves under the protection of the child they were, at the same time, protecting, to save oneself by saving" (*RA* 89). Both were supported by the innocence of the children whom they in turn protected as part of a reciprocal relationship.

In two other instances cited in the text where children in serious danger are cared for, the same process holds true. Rasputin, whom Tiffauges sees as a "great phoric hero of our time" (*RA* 192), was able to alleviate the young tsar's pain and raise the calmed, sleeping boy "toward life and light" (*RA* 192). Similarly, Victor, the mad French prisoner of war, saves the German official's daughter from drowning, and much to Tiffauges's jealous consternation, he is magnificently rewarded by his captors (*RA* 397). Finally, although the circumstances are different, the same also holds true in the case of Atlas, Tiffauges's most grandiose phoric hero. Whether the colossus is depicted as carrying the earth, in what Tiffauges perceives as the evil inversion of his mythic hero's destiny, or, as he should be in Tiffauges's eyes, holding up the heavens as "astrophore," Atlas unflinchingly supports the weight balanced on his shoulders.

Unfortunately, Tiffauges does not live up to the example of the models he has chosen. As the text clearly indicates, on the day he discovers the raptures of phoria in his own life, he does take the wounded mechanic Jeannot to the hospital for treatment, but he must first be shocked out of the trance immobilizing him with the young man in his arms. As Tiffauges notes in his left-handed journal, "It was Mlle Toupie who broke the spell" (*RA* 131). In another incident, when he comes upon a young wounded skater on the esplanade in front of the Tokyo palace, he not only insists on using all the film in his camera to photograph the boy first, but also slaps him violently when he begins to stagger from the pain of his wound, subjecting the child to the very punishment he himself had been spared at Saint Christopher's on the evening when he began to experience Nestor's protective influence. Only when Tiffauges has satisfied his predatoriness and then reveled in the ecstasy of his phoric power does he take the boy for treatment, nonchalantly

depositing him and his companion at a local pharmacy, while he hurries home to consume his photos (*RA* 172-74).

With Ephraïm the situation is much graver because the stakes are so much higher. When the Russian troops arrive at Kaltenborn in 1945, on the first night of Pesach, commemorating the Exodus, Tiffauges knows that he must try to escape. That he has every intention of leaving, and as a Frenchman, not a German, is evidenced by the fact that he changes clothes. He puts on his old prisoner of war uniform, his "old French prisoner's castoffs" (*RA* 572), and hoists Ephraïm onto his shoulders for the journey. At this moment, however, all of the different forms of purity that have so fascinated him converge, and he receives the signal for which he had been waiting since his days at Saint Christopher's. "It was then that the cry arose . . . in its absolute purity . . . transcendent song which had just risen with unbearable clarity from the sword decorated terrace" (*RA* 574-75). He recognizes this pure wail, coming from his three favorite recruits being impaled from omega to alpha on Kaltenborn's heraldic lances, as what he calls "the fundamental sound of my destiny" (*RA* 575), and he immediately recalls the image of Goethe's Erl-King, "it was the peaceful and disincarnated face of the Erl-King, buried in his peat shroud, which appeared to him as the last resort, the ultimate retreat" (*RA* 575). The pull of the image in its purest form as funeral mask, described in *La Goutte d'or* as awakening "the temptation of a breathtaking descent into the darkness of an immemorial past" (*G* 235) draws him away from life toward the pure nothingness that had for so long obsessed him.

Tiffauges does not take advantage of the fact that he is a French prisoner of war, which Ephraïm tries to emphasize to the Russian soldiers (*RA* 579), but rather sets off without conviction across the land he had so long scoured in search of prey for the elite paramilitary institution of Kaltenborn. When he enters the swampy ground of the alder tree grove, feeling the incredible weight of Ephraïm's body pushing him down, he knows he must struggle to get out: ". . . he now had to make a superhuman effort to overcome the viscous resistance that was crushing his stomach" (*RA* 584), but he chooses not to try. As the text indicates, he perseveres, but only in closing the gap between himself and the corpse of the Erl-King. In contrast to Saint Christopher, the conquistador, Rasputin, Victor, and Moses, he does not support the child and carry him to safety. Instead of flying as he stated he hoped would (*RA* 58), Tiffauges sinks contentedly into the peat bog with Ephraïm on his shoulders, thinking that "everything is fine as it is" (*RA* 584). Through this retreat he fulfills the grim prophecy of the Kommander, who warned that "when an evil inversion upsets phoria, the end of time is near" (*RA* 473). Even more importantly, he betrays the glorious destiny of "portenfant/astrophore" for which he insisted he had been chosen. His death cannot really be called sacrifice and noble service as has so often been stressed. It is rather the final manifestation of his enslavement, to which he also subjects the innocent child, who trusted in his phoric powers as the "the steed of Israel" (*RA* 565). Unlike Saint Christopher, Tiffauges's staff will not bloom, and the star of David he thinks he sees against the black sky is as illusory as the dignity he feels he has acquired by identifying himself with the image of the Erl-King and embracing the glacial purity of nothingness. The only thing he does attain is the dreadful "terminal equilibrium" (*M* 241) in which Barthes's ogrelike myth consumers seek refuge.

Tournier deliberately leaves open the contradictions and the many dreadful wounds to both children and animals which the text exposes as it slowly moves toward its apocalyptic conclusion. He makes us confront them in all of their fascination and horror so that we may recognize more clearly the urgency of the threat they pose and the consequences of the gruesome abjection they represent for us as individuals as well as for society as a whole in this last precarious decade of the twentieth century. His work forces us to question the intricacies of the signifying process, the "mechanism of symbols" (*RA* 473), which the old Kommander at Kaltenborn so desperately tries to explain to Tiffauges, but which he never learns how to apply to his own situation. Tournier's protagonist remains hypnotized by the lifeless image of the Erl-King, just as the "illiterate individuals" in *La Goutte d'or* were before the portrait of the golden haired queen, and never understands that what he perceived as identification was actually misrecognition. Unlike Idriss and the apprentice in the tale, for whom the layers of calligraphied parchment serve a vital mediating function and reveal the ever-fragmented nature of the psyche, Tiffauges never learns to acknowledge and accept otherness. Only by doing so could the power of the fatal temptation into which he so willingly fell be displaced and the possibilities of life lucidly embraced.