

In today's commercial world, controlled by the pursuit of wealth, materialistic consumption and social status, it is easy to forget or even to never really experience a true feeling of freedom, to focus on a deep spiritual transformation of self, or as young people call it, to "think outside the box", "get out of one's comfort zone" and step into the unknown. Everything and everyone is valued or judged, organised or managed in some way and sometimes the only way to escape our own defined identity, or should we say to find our true identity, is to travel somewhere. Somewhere distant and remote, where only the mountains can judge our endurance and strength, where only lake surface can reflect our inner thoughts and where only the exhausting length of the journey can force our mind to look into the deepest corners of our personality. This concept is by no means relevant only in the present time and that is only proved by timeless works of Nicolas Bouvier and his *L'usage du Monde*, and J.M.G Clézio, his wife Jémia and their quest for her origin in *Gens des Nuages*. Both of these authors have found their own way of parting with the familiar, escaping the clutches of materialistic, Western style of life and looking for an inner, spiritual transformation of the self. All of this is achieved through travel, a journey through space, in search for a "*lieu où rien ne vous retient*"¹. This reoccurring theme in travel literature of early 20th century is very often a main element of so-called *voyage initiatique*, a pilgrimage full of hardships and new experiences, that allow the traveller to experience a significant personal and spiritual metamorphosis.² In case of Le Clézio, this spiritual journey, sometimes defined as specifically as "*search for God*" in quest to escape the materialism of the external world, is also the main idea of a spiritual dimension of Islam called Sufism.³ And indeed, his journey with Jemia is retracing the religious and historical roots of Sufism, as they depart from Morocco in steps of Aroussiyyine nomads, following Jemia's origins. But these spaces themselves, through which both Le Clézio and Bouvier traverse, play one of the most important roles in their narrative, whether as a cause of hardships that they encounter during their progression throughout the unknown, or as a linkage between the external world and the internal spiritual growth that they undergo.⁴ The goal of this essay is to discuss these places and concepts more in detail, comparing and contrasting the role

¹ Jémia and J.M.G Le Clézio, *Gens Des Nuages* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010)

² Simone Vieme, *Le Voyage Initiatique*, In: *Romantisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1972), pp. 37-44

³ William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2011)

⁴ Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, *Existential Approaches to Travel Writing: Travelling Identities* ([University of China]: Journal for the Study of Christian Culture, 2018)

of various locations and landscapes through which both Bouvier and Le Clézio travel in their narratives.

We have mentioned the fact that the journey itself sees the travellers eliminate the materialism of the outer world from their lives, however, one of the main goals is to also break free from the ethnocentrism and the cultural domination throughout the world and aim their focus on the concept of existence itself. This is true for both Bouvier and Le Clézio, as they aim to achieve this condition, wanting to roam freely in between various cultures without judgement or description, experiencing things in their "true nature" and reaching the ultimate state of disappearance - *disparaître*. As Bouvier says: "*Si on veut convoquer les choses dans leur fraîcheur native, il faut avoir, soi-même, quasiment disparu*"⁵. This state is one of the paramount goals of the narration of these initiatory journeys throughout the unknown, we could say strongly influenced by Sufism ideologies in Le Clézio's case, but also by other ideologies such as Taoism or Buddhism in case of Bouvier and other authors who used existential approaches within their travel narratives.⁶ The aspect of travelling in "the unknown" is the crucial element of the journey, because it makes them tackle and contemplate issues that the normal world fears, such as giving up their material possessions, being lost, and realising the possibility and presence of death and finiteness at the end of the journey - where journey also acts as a metaphorical reference to life and existence itself⁷. In order to understand, how places like desert in *Gens des Nuages* and the progression through these places play a role in achieving this existential liberation from previously mentioned negative elements of the "outer world", we will discuss some of these instances of places and progressions in both works.

First significance of the space through which Le Clézio and Jémia traverse through in *Gens des Nuages* is expressed already in the title itself. The title, having been derived from the Arabic expression "Ahel Mouzna" that could be freely translated as Cloud People, represents the

⁵ Nicolas Bouvier and Irène Lichtenstein-Fall, *Routes et déroutés* (Genève: Les Ed. Métropolis, 1992), pp. 186

⁶ Rachel Bouvet, *L'Art de voyager dans l'Usage du Monde de Nicolas Bouvier*, (Pau: Revues.Univ-Pau.Fr, 2017)

⁷ Olivier Salazar-Ferrer and Nicolas Bouvier, *L'Usage du Monde de Nicolas Bouvier* ([Gollion]: Infolio, 2015)

nomadic style of life of south Moroccan berbers, who are clearly relevant to Jémia's origins, and for whom the clouds were the source of a very much needed rainfall, crucial for the survival of their herds of stock and also themselves. Thus, the title very much propounds the idea that they spend their lives "*à la poursuite de la pluie*"⁸, following the clouds, which is an allegorical reference to the journey of Jémia and Le Clézio, who themselves seek a sort of hydration, the spiritual one, through completion of their own pursuit for Jémia's origins, while presenting to the reader the importance of spirituality and religion in the intercultural space that they travel through⁹.

In *L'usage du Monde*, rather surprisingly, a very important aspect of Bouvier's initiatory journey is the mean of the transport throughout the countryside, their little car Fiat Topolino. Even though they seem to be significantly limited by the speed of the Topolino, it actually gives them bigger freedom, more time to enjoy the progression through the countryside and more time to take in landscapes that surround them. They are not constraint by time nor the space, they don't know what they will come across, neither do they know what they seek and this constant lack of familiar, along with lack of need for fast progress and lack of "knowing what will come" gives them the ultimate experience of *disparition* in space and time, both at the departure from a place and during the journey to another. He expresses this realisation himself in *L'usage du Monde*: "*..ce qui constitue l'ossature de l'existence, ce n'est ni la famille, ni la carrière... mais quelques instants de cette nature, soulevés par une lévitation plus sereine encore que celle de l'amour, et que la vie nous distribue avec une parcimonie à la mesure de notre faible cœur.*"¹⁰

Both authors are undergoing a transformation, floating in the intercultural space, but with some different goals. For Bouvier, the journey is a way of being remote from one's origins, an ideal solution for reaching desired state of delocalisation and freedom, through which the pilgrim reaches instances of this aforementioned growth of the spiritual self. Compared to Jémia who is searching for something, he expects nothing particular to come on the road. Identifying as a

⁸ Jémia and J.M.G Le Clézio, *Gens Des Nuages* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010)

⁹ Bruno Thibault, *La Question de L'Interculturel dans Gens des Nuages* (Contemporary French and Francophone Studies Journal, 2015), 19:2, pp.185-193

¹⁰ Nicolas Bouvier and Thierry Vernet, *L'usage du Monde* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2001)

wanderer, yet very much differently from the traditional "flâneur", he doesn't want to judge the society, people he encounters or space around him. He evades literary practices of idealism and romanticism at every point of the journey, not defining what is beautiful and what is not. He is simply "in-between" things, independently observing the world and patiently waiting for whatever or whoever he meets on the road next and what realisations they will bring about.¹¹ The road as part of the landscape acts yet again as an allegory for the life itself and what it brings about. With this way of dealing with temporalities of various places he passes, he wants to connect with the understanding of exiled life and exiled people, that both he and Le Clézio so very much admire: "*Vivre, se battre et mourir en terre étrangère. C'est cela qui est difficile, et digne d'admiration.*"¹². Through meetings with different people of different cultures he learns what is missing in the outer, modernised Western world, where the scientific thinking had overcome the more meaningful, more insightful spiritual discourse. This is where we can compare this particular approach of Bouvier with Le Clézio's perception of temporality of various places, in particular of the desert.

Jémia and Le Clézio are, as we mentioned, as immersed in the search of spiritual hydration as in the search of her origin, passing through the landscape that reflects this immersion within her own history and return to her roots, to which they later refer to as '*vrai retour*'.¹³ This historical temporality of the desert may as well act as an allegory for reflecting on one's own existence. Both for Jémia, whose forage for sense of relativity to her ancestors reflects another, biographical temporality of the desert, but also for Le Clézio, who we could consider to be reflecting back on his nomadic style of life during his literary career. The use of the desert as the most significant place in this narrative, serves well as a proof for this argument, as it is a place of deep thought and reflection for him, which he states himself: "*vivre au désert, c'est aussi être sobre*".¹⁴ Salazar-Ferrer also identifies this use of a symbolic place like desert in his work *Existential Approaches to Travel Writing*, stating that religious journeys need to utilise symbolic itineraries and progression through or towards symbolic places, in order to express the

¹¹ Liouba Bischoff, *La Géographie Précaire de L'Usage du Monde* (Lyon: Viatica, 2017)

¹² Jémia and J.M.G Le Clézio, *Gens Des Nuages* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp.48

¹³ Bernadette Rey Mimoso-Ruiz, *Le Maroc de Le Clézio: Anthropologie Poétique et Spiritualité* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010), pp.65-74

¹⁴ Jémia and J.M.G Le Clézio, *Gens Des Nuages* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp.95

connection between the inner, religious reshaping of the traveller and the outer world itself.¹⁵ And indeed, the journey of Jémia and Le Clézio has a symbolic end at the Rock of Tbeila, a site southwest of Smara, that they strive to reach. The act of arriving there is not in itself as significant as the deeper meaning it represents, the attainment of the goal, the elevation of the self by taking the leap into the unknown and achieving true existential and spiritual growth. One of these realisations is related to the third, geological temporality of the desert, the feeling of minusculation and fragility of the human life within the vast desert, of which history is far longer than that of one human life, causing sort of an inner calm about the presence of the end of the journey, which is again a clear metaphor for the presence of the death at the end of life¹⁶. The passage through Saguia El Hamra and progression towards the symbolic Rock of Tbeila has reflected the progress in humanism thinking of Le Clézio and his approach towards more divine inner state and the state of disappearance within "*un absolu irréductible*"^{17,18} That is why the final chapters at the rock and the grave are the most meaningful and poetic, as "*they are the perfect, motionless points between life and death*"¹⁹ and they too "*are the gate to the ultimate dissolution of the self into a grain of sand*"²⁰.

As the last very notable point to mention, there is a very strong metaphorical connection between the desert and the element of water, or we could say sea in particular. The absence of water in the desert is a very traditional mystical representation of the God, where the water is the element of purification, sought after both of our discussed authors, as well as by many others like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in his *Le Petit Prince*. His words coming through the persona of the little prince,

¹⁵ Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, *Existential Approaches to Travel Writing: Travelling Identities* ([University of China]: Journal for the Study of Christian Culture, 2018)

¹⁶ Olivier Salazar-Ferrer, *Existential Approaches to Travel Writing: Travelling Identities* ([University of China]: Journal for the Study of Christian Culture, 2018)

¹⁷ Hervé Allet, Review of *Gens des Nuages*, In: *World Literature Today: Miscellaneous* (Oklahoma: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 1998), 72:4, pp. 800-801

¹⁸ Kenneth White, *L'esprit nomade*, In: *Communication et langages* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1988), Vol.75, pp.125

¹⁹ Hervé Allet, Review of *Gens des Nuages*, In: *World Literature Today: Miscellaneous* (Oklahoma: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 1998), 72:4, pp. 800-801

²⁰ Hervé Allet, Review of *Gens des Nuages*, In: *World Literature Today: Miscellaneous* (Oklahoma: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 1998), 72:4, pp. 800-801

who himself offers a wonderful existential dilemma in the book, say clearly: "*Ce qui embellit le désert, c'est qu'il cache un puits quelque part.*"²¹ Very resemblant of the concept in our discussed works, they are all in search of the spiritual, and while it may seem to be found nowhere in the monotonous horizons of the desert, it is in fact everywhere. It is represented in the air and the winds that both forms the dunes, shaping up the horizon of the desert, but also move the surface of the sea, creating waves that so much resemble those sand dunes. It is represented by the sunset and sunrise, that fall in the same way over the horizontal boundary of the landscape of the desert or of the sea. And that horizon is the only boundary we have, both in moving and thinking, when we're alone in the vast emptiness of the ocean or the desert.

We can understand now better, what a significant role a single place or a landmark can play in reflecting a complex personal and spiritual metamorphosis, whether that happens in process of escaping the reality of the outer world, in order to attain inner calm and freedom, or during pursue of greater spiritual understanding of self, or even, "searching for God" through a quest for one's own origin. The reflection on one's existence and the feebleness of that existence, as a part of a *voyage initiatique*, was an important subject of the travel literature during the prime time of these great authors, such as Nicolas Bouvier and J.M.G Le Clézio, and they are no less relevant in the present world, when more than ever we are being surrounded and controlled by the consumerism, materialism and the importance of social status within the modern society "*où l'on ne sait rien des miracles et des mirages, rien de la beauté du pays de pierres et de vent, du silence, du désert*"²².

²¹ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 2017)

²² Jémia and J.M.G Le Clézio, *Gens Des Nuages* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), pp.47

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Additional Reading

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