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Elise Finielz, Cornell University 

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Reading *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* as a 'Legend of the Just'

ELISE FINIELZ, Cornell University

Abstract

This article offers a reading of Simone Schwarz-Bart's novel *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972) in the light of André Schwarz-Bart's *Le Dernier des Justes* (1959). Through the author's exalted poetic language, Télumée is elevated to the rank of a Just woman of the Caribbean, as is Ernie Lévy among Jewish Europeans, for both their stories are exemplary of the greatness of a whole generation of people, who are victims of antisemitic persecution or transatlantic slavery and colonial racism. By narrating the living memory of these characters in both a realistic and mythical language and honoring the nobility of their hearts without explicit political discourse, both novels provide a subversive perspective, as they question the borders between the ancient generations and the younger ones, between the living and the dead. This calls for a positive representation of ancestral, religious, and traditional values, and purports a common ethical vision transcending the social, gender and racial categories imposed by a colonial history. It is in this ethical vision that resides the political significance of the two novels, that speak to us universally today.

"Nos yeux reçoivent la lumière d'étoiles mortes"¹, "pour bien longtemps encore, les gens connaîtront même lune et même soleil, et ils regarderont les mêmes étoiles, ils y verront comme nous les yeux des défunts."² Thus start and end the two groundbreaking literary works of André Schwarz-Bart *Le Dernier des Justes* (1959) and his wife Simone Schwarz-Bart *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972), binding the two novels under the love of past generations illuminating the lives of those still living.

Simone Schwarz-Bart's novel *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* was acclaimed for introducing a Black female voice in French literature.³ Academic critics have praised the author for expressing Creole rural and oral traditions and Creole identity, for preserving the memory and history of the Caribbean,⁴ for expressing female subjectivity and introspection⁵ and for resisting the ontological dislocation after slavery.⁶ If the realist aspects of the story

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1. André Schwarz-Bart, *Le Dernier des Justes*, Paris, Seuil, 1959, p. 13. Henceforth *DJ*.
 2. Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*, Paris, Seuil, 1972, p. 255. Henceforth *PV*.
 3. *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* won the Grand Prix des lectrices *Elle* in 1973, and it was the first time that a national French prize was awarded to a Black women writer from the Caribbean.
 4. See the seminal work of Kathleen Gyssels, *Filles de Solitude : Essai sur l'identité antillaise dans les (auto-) biographies fictives de Simone et André Schwarz-Bart*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1996 ; *Le folklore et la littérature créole dans l'œuvre de Simone Schwarz-Bart*, Brussels, Académie des Sciences d'Outre-mer, 1997. See also Fanta Toureh, *L'Imaginaire dans l'œuvre de Simone Schwarz-Bart : Approche d'une mythologie antillaise*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1997.
 5. Ronnie Scharfman, "Mirroring and Mothering in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*", *Yale French Studies*, n° 62, 1981, p. 88-106.
 6. Natalie Melas, "Catastrophic miniaturization in Aimé Césaire and Simone Schwarz-Bart", in *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison (Cultural Memory in the Present)*, Redwood City, Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 170-228.

have been considered for their political significance as uncovering colonial oppression,⁷ the legendary elements, the spirituality and popular wisdom are generally viewed for only expressing old traditions and recreating a myth (in the sense of an idealized image frozen in time).

Recently, Simone Schwarz-Bart, when asked about her first novel, explained that Télumée and the generations of women she descends from are “the Justs within her”.⁸ This encouraged me to reconsider Télumée as a reflection of André Schwarz-Bart’s protagonist Ernie Lévy, the last of a generation of Just, and to contemplate a particular ethical vision of life inherited from past generations. This analysis intends to renew the meaning of Télumée’s courage that literary critics have already praised, a resistance to colonial oppression but grounded in a particular spiritual vision of life that does not appear immediately. Indeed, *Pluie et vent* does not refer directly to sacred scriptures and its mystical tone is generally expressed in a secular language or what one would see as ‘popular wisdom’ or metaphysical reflections. Through Simone Schwarz-Bart’s exalted poetic language, Télumée is elevated to the rank of a Just woman of the Caribbean, as is Ernie in *Le Dernier des Justes*, for their stories are exemplary of the greatness of a whole generation of people, who are victims of persecution, slavery, and its aftermath.⁹

I contend that, by telling the story of these characters in both a realistic and mythical language and aestheticizing their nobility without any explicit political discourse, Simone and André Schwarz-Bart provide a subversive vision, which questions the borders between the living contemporary generations and their ancestors. This calls for a positive representation of ancestral, religious, and traditional values and their significance with a broader implication for our time. It is hence decolonial, in the sense that it takes into account the knowledge, wisdom and spirituality of those who have experienced the violence of exile and deportation and who have been silenced or sidelined up to now. Both novels embrace a particular ethical vision beyond the social, gender and racial categories imposed by a colonial history.¹⁰ And, to my mind, in this ethical vision resides a precursory political significance, which can speak to us universally today, not just as particular tales for the Caribbean or Jewish community.

My comparative approach of Simone and André Schwarz-Bart’s first novels confirms the reversibility of their work that critics have already shown. Kaufmann explains, citing André Schwarz-Bart, how the author intended his series of novels succeeding *Le Dernier des*

7. Maryse Condé, *La parole des femmes : essai sur des romancières des Antilles de langue française*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1979, p. 35 ; Renée Larrier, *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, p. 66-67 ; Vanessa Massoni da Rocha, “Simone Schwarz-Bart et l’écriture de la violence (post)coloniale dans le roman *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*”, *Dialogues francophones*, vol. 21, n° 1, 2015, p. 83-95.

8. Camille Clavel, *Simone and André Schwarz-Bart, la mémoire en partage*, INA, 2018.

9. The novel and its author have been criticized for being politically disengaged and the main character Télumée for being a passive victim of domestic violence and harsh conditions of life. See for example Bridget Jones, “Introduction”, in Simone Schwarz-Bart, *The Bridge of Beyond*, trans. Barbara Bray, London, Heinemann, 1982, p. iv-xviii.

10. Regarding the categories of gender and race from a decolonial perspective, see Maria Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”, *Hypathia*, vol. 25, n° 4, 2010, p. 742-759.

Justes to be reversible, based on the contiguity of the Shoah and transatlantic slavery.¹¹ Thanks to Simone, he was able to accomplish his initial project, as they co-authored *Un plat de porc aux bananes vertes* (1967). Thus, Simone came to writing and publishing. She wrote two novels independently: *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972), *Ti Jean L'Horizon* (1979) and a theater play *Ton beau capitaine* (1987). In reading *Pluie et vent* and *Le Dernier des Justes* together, my comparative approach goes against any competitive and hierarchical analysis of the two novels. It departs from any polemical attacks that would diminish the legitimacy of one of the authors and their value.¹² If *Télumée Miracle* can be seen as the last of a lineage of Just women, *Pluie et vent* is not a copy, an imitation, or an equivalent of *Le Dernier des Justes* in the Caribbean. It came to existence more as an echo, writing in the burning wounds of the history of slavery, while carrying its unique "colors and perfumes".¹³

My intention as a critic and reader is to listen to the unique and beautiful melody of André and Simone Schwarz-Bart's novels, while appreciating and learning from their transversal and universal tonality. In line with Aimé Césaire's decolonial approach of the universal,¹⁴ I claim that the two novels draw from the relative marginality of subaltern people an experience that is common to a world where colonial powers have generated tremendous economic profits out of the most violent environmental and human exploitation. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire explains how colonialism "dehumanizes even the most civilized man". He adds that "'Europe' is morally and spiritually indefensible."¹⁵ The Second World War tragedy is a result of what he calls the "boomerang effect" showing that Hitler "applied colonialist procedures to Europe, which until then had been reserved exclusively for the 'Arabs' of Algeria, the 'coolies' of India and the 'niggers' of Africa".¹⁶ If colonial violence has spread universally, ethical responses have also come out to resist it. As the sun shines for everybody on earth, Just people of courage and faith rise up everywhere in the world. Simone and André Schwarz-Bart's novels are a testimony to this faith in humanity. Their words of wisdom, the holiness and ethical vision they carry can resonate with anyone.

11. Francine Kaufmann, "L'œuvre juive et l'œuvre noire d'André Schwarz-Bart", *Pardès*, vol. 44, n° 1, 2008, p. 142-143.

12. When *Pluie et vent* came out, Simone was questioned in her legitimacy as a woman writer for some aesthetic resemblance with her husband's novel. In this period when French Caribbean literature was still emerging and women writers did not have a voice, her original style was perceived as "exotic" and imitative. See Fanny Margras, "Pluies et vents sur Solitude. Étude de la réception des œuvres d'André et Simone Schwarz-Bart en Guadeloupe en 1972", *Continents Manuscrits*, n° 16, 2021, p. 5-15.

13. André Schwarz-Bart, "Pourquoi j'ai écrit *la Mulâtresse Solitude*. André Schwarz-Bart s'explique sur huit ans de silence", *Le Figaro littéraire*, 26 January 1967, p. 9.

14. Ramón Grosfoguel, "Vers une décolonisation des 'uni-versalismes' occidentaux: le 'pluri-versalisme décolonial' d'Aimé Césaire aux zapatistes", trans. Natacha Filippi and Emmanuel Hoch Delgado, in Achille Mbembe et al. (eds.), *Ruptures Postcoloniales*, Paris, La Découverte, 2010, p. 130-132.

15. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2000, p. 32.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 36. See also Michel Rothberg, "Un choc en retour: Aimé Césaire's Discourses on Colonialism and Genocide", in *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Redwood City, Stanford University Press, p. 66-110.

Living memory and storytelling as a spiritual praxis

Le Dernier des Justes is the account of more than seven hundred years of antisemitism in Europe, from the twelfth century until the Shoah. It recounts the story of a family of “Just men”, the descendants of Rabbi Yom Tom Lévy, martyr of York in 1185. Each generation of the Lévy family engenders a Just man who, according to a Yiddish legend belongs to the 36 Just men on which the world rests.¹⁷ In the novel, the Just men, whether they know it or not, take on the pain and suffering of the world, for if one went missing, all mankind would cease to exist. Each Lévy generation experiences antisemitism and persecution until the last descendant Ernie, who is murdered with his people in the gas chamber of Auschwitz.

Fleur Kuhn Kennedy has shown that memory is central to traditional Jewish culture. Since the nineteenth century, in an increasingly secularized Western world, literature became the place where the desacralized Jewish memory continued to exist, following, and countering the abrupt course of historical events. It is precisely the experience of violence that spurs the need to preserve traces of the past and to make sense of it. History enters the novel under the sign of death.¹⁸ But André Schwarz-Bart wrote *Le Dernier des Justes* to not only remember the Shoah, but to reinstate the dignity of an entire people. Ninety per cent of the Jews in Poland had been exterminated; along with the massacre, Yiddish language and culture disappeared.¹⁹ His novel is not only a tribute to the six million Jews whose life ended “in thin particles” but to the traditional and spiritual (Hasidic) values, the sacred vision of life they cling to while facing extreme violence. It is hence an attempt to fictionalize, aestheticize and renew the spirituality and values of a people who suffered and died without choosing to take arms. The novel rehabilitates the victims who were seen as complicit for they died without “heroically” defending themselves, so that their death would not be forgotten or considered as another humiliation.²⁰ His novel, hence, does not aim at filling a void or an absence, as one would think from a historical and memorial perspective, but aims to honor their presence.

It should be noted that by honoring his people, André Schwarz-Bart did not intend to be a spokesman of the Jewish community, but to respond to the injunction of memory as an act of love. He pays them homage by symbolically placing a little white stone on their graves as required in the Jewish tradition, where the novel replaces the physical ritual of the mortuary, which could not take place. Through his writing, André Schwarz-Bart restores a dialogue with the previous generations; to forget them would be like a second death that is not only physical but also spiritual. By maintaining a subjective and existential relationship

17. Gershom Scholem, “The Tradition of the Thirty-Six Hidden Just Men”, in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, New York, Schocken, 1995 [1971], p. 251-256.

18. Fleur Kuhn Kennedy, *Le Disciple et le Faussaire. Imitation et subversion romanesque de la mémoire juive*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2016, p. 48.

19. See Raul Hillberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 1128.

20. Francine Kaufmann explains that Schwarz-Bart’s intention to write the novel spurred from his willingness to respond to young orphans he worked with in a youth center, who had to face the recurring question of why Jewish people had not defended themselves and if they really died like sheep led to the slaughterhouse (*Pour relire Le Dernier des Justes : Réflexions sur la Shoah*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1987, p. 18).

with their presence, the prophetic message of his people can be renewed. André's perspective could be seen as "decolonial", since it exhumes the vision and ways of being in the world of a subaltern or minor culture, Hasidism, within Europe and European Judaism.

Simone Schwarz-Bart's novel *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* responds to a similar aspiration in the Caribbean context. She writes in the memory-trace of her own people to pay homage and to sanctify a time in which an older generation of women had lived and was about to disappear in silence.²¹ In an interview, she phrased her intentions as follows:

J'avais vraiment besoin de respirer son odeur, comme une fleur qui livre un parfum dont on essaye de retrouver le nom et cette femme-là un jour m'a regardée et c'était un peu la fin je pense qu'elle sentait venir. Elle m'a dit : « Alors nous allons tous disparaître sans qu'il n'y ait aucune trace, pourtant nous avons existé. Cette terre nous l'avons foulée tant nous l'aimons et tout va disparaître comme ça ? » [...]

Ce livre c'est un hommage à ces femmes que j'ai côtoyées, c'étaient des femmes fortes, et obligées d'être fortes alors que l'esclavage avait vraiment déconstruit complètement les hommes, les avait mutilés parce que tout simplement ne leur permettant pas d'assumer leur rôle de père, de mari, de protecteurs d'une famille. Quand on vend vos enfants à des maîtres différents on éparpille le sang. Comment peut-on ne pas être diminué ?

La femme par contre était obligée de compenser, il y avait un devoir de transmettre aux enfants les valeurs, les références, et aussi une joie de vivre, et bien sûr ces femmes c'étaient *des Justes en moi*.²²

Simone Schwarz-Bart creates an allegorical and exemplary character, informed partly by the real life of Stéphanie Priccin, a woman she knew from Goyave in Guadeloupe, that she poeticizes and re-writes through the filter of her own imagination. While simultaneously restoring the memory of a whole generation and thus the collective history of Guadeloupe that had never been told in a written form, the novel celebrates the courage and silent resistance of those living under slave conditions and colonial domination, whose existence continued to be negated by the dominant French culture even after the abolition of slavery.²³

Writing a novel (as opposed to a testimony), exactly as did André Schwarz-Bart, allows her to express the soul of her people, and to show how their existence still has a meaning. She links that aspect to the oral tradition of Africa: "Je pense, voyez-vous, comme les Africains, que lorsqu'un vieux meurt, toute une bibliothèque disparaît..."²⁴ She wants to safeguard a living story – to relay not just an account of their life but to consider the heuristic value of their teachings and important stories. Yet, the novel is intended as a "memory space"²⁵ – which implies that it does not aim at erecting a monument to this exemplary character but functions as an open space where one can circulate through time and enter in relation with the characters at a subjective and existential level.

21. Roger and Eliane Toumson, "Interview avec Simone et André Schwarz-Bart, sur les pas de Fanotte", *Textes, Études et Documents*, n° 2, 1979, p. 18.

22. Camille Clavel, *Simone and André Schwarz-Bart, la mémoire en partage*, INA, 2018 (my emphasis).

23. Myriam Cottias, "'Forgetting the past' for 'citizenship': Barter and resentment in Martinique (1848-1946)", trans. Lysa Hochroth, *New Contrée*, n° 42, 1997, p. 161.

24. Roger and Eliane Toumson, "Interview avec Simone et André Schwarz-Bart", art. cit., p. 18.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Loosely based on historical facts, *Le Dernier des Justes* is rooted in an ancient spiritual tradition of storytelling. If one considers the Torah originating from an oral tradition, Hasidism, the pietistic reform movement among Eastern European Jews of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, renewed the traditions of storytelling while bringing a popular dimension to the Jewish mysticism of the Kabbalah.²⁶ This movement has for a long time been marginalized within European Judaism, but has recently been revived by thinkers such as Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Marc-Alain Ouaknin. As the last mystic movement of Judaism, Hasidism came as a movement of emancipation to shake the rigidity of the institutions, creating a renewed ethical relation to time at a personal and existential level. Consonant with the mystical movement of Kabbalah, it is a response to the historical and political conditions of the Jewish as a people in exile.²⁷

After the trauma of the expulsion from Spain in 1492, the Lurianic Kabbalah encouraged the Jewish community to consider their own exile as an allusion to the cosmic exile of G-d (the dispersion of the *Shekinah*, the divine feminine presence) and not as a fatality, and as a positive mission or a responsibility vis-à-vis history, to prepare the world's redemption.²⁸ The Hasidic movement that emerged in Poland under the leadership of the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good name) extended this vision of 'revolt in history' at a personal and existential level: the capacity for each individual to be in direct contact with the divine, to perfect oneself and to participate in repairing the world. This was an affront to the elitist and dogmatic view that the common people were not erudite enough to comment on sacred scriptures. The Baal Shem Tov and the Hasidic movement claimed that anybody can have a direct relationship with words and bring a worthy interpretation of holy scriptures through the practice of exegesis (*Pardes*). Considering that spirituality does not reduce itself to the erudite circles who devote their life to studying the holy books, they questioned the hierarchical social divisions within Judaism to provide a direct access to the practice of hermeneutics.²⁹ In fact, demonstrating the pitfalls of those who accumulate knowledge but only come to repeat what is already said, Hasidism claimed the importance of questioning and transforming oneself through the study of words. It is a movement that attempts to emancipate followers from the imposition of rigid meanings of words, to assert the subjectivity of each individual.

In addition, the Baal Shem Tov showed a different way to access the mystery: he started to narrate tales.³⁰ He affirmed the transformative power of storytelling, in particular stories of the *Tzaddikim* ('righteous ones' or 'Just') as an exalted form of engaging with

26. Yitzhak Buxbaum, *Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism*, Northvale, Jason Aronson, 1994, p. 6-7.

27. Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Tsimtsoun : Introduction à la méditation hébraïque*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1992, p. 30-31.

28. Marc-Alain Ouaknin, "Ouverture hassidique", in Josy Eisenberg (ed.), *Dieu et les Juifs*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2009, p. 138.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 141-142; Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, trans. Maurice Friedman, Atlantic Highlands, Humanities Press International, 1988, p. 61.

30. On that practice another Hassidic master, rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, would have explained: "Si je continue à vous mener sur ce chemin [enseigner la sagesse à travers les textes de la tradition] vous allez avoir l'illusion que vous pouvez atteindre une vérité définitive. Alors ce que je vais faire, c'est dire des contes" (see Marc-Alain Ouaknin, "Ouverture hassidique", art. cit., p. 145).

mystical study. The *Tzaddikim* being considered as those who serve the divine on earth, praising and studying their lives is equivalent to praising the divine, and is a spiritual practice as valuable and powerful as praying or studying the traditional holy books.³¹

While Hasidism is a movement within a specific religious tradition, it can also be seen as a search of mankind to redefine its own humanity, by rejecting prejudices, illusions, and ideological stereotypes and by renewing an ethics open to the divine mystery of the world and the other. Hasidism developed an ethic directed towards the other and a capacity to see the transformative power of the relation to the foreigner.³²

I now draw a parallel between Hasidism and Caribbean culture, not as a tradition frozen in time, but as living cultures that were born out of the violent experiences of exile and slavery. Caribbean culture, with its Creole language, dancing, musical and spiritual traditions, like Hasidism, is a force to renew a humanity that has been reduced to its most bare attribute, a naked body, deprived of its own language and name. Forced to come into contact with the other, this humanity survived and created anew. This new 'modern' humanity reinvented a way of being to the world that can inspire and teach us today and is not just the remnant of an old tradition from the African diaspora and 'pre-modern' cultures. Edouard Glissant puts forth the idea of the *Relation* grounded in the Caribbean concrete experience, which encompasses the idea of a growing, rhizome-like identity. *Relation* is always open to the other as the unexpected, or mystery (or opacity, a term Glissant prefers, insisting on the idea of obscurity present in the process of enlightenment).³³ It can be seen as a Po-ethics – close to the Greek term *Poiesis*, which means making or creating – the movement and opening to the other as a transformative mode of creation in the world.

Glissant's concept of *Relation* can be seen as an ethical response to the blind lights of Western civilization and its dogmas: the imperial domination of oneness and assimilation (a world thinking of itself as The world), absolute truth (that takes the unique root in the *logos* – excluding the *mythos*) and a generalizing and dogmatic concept of universality.³⁴ *Relation* refuses the oppressive and totalitarian qualities of monotheist religion, but nevertheless retains an ethical dimension and could be seen as a secular version of religion in the etymological sense of the word (from the Latin *religare*, to connect). Glissant's *Philosophie de la relation* opens with the ascent of a sacred word: "Il y eut, qui s'éleva, une parole sacrée."³⁵ And in the beginning was a poem.

Like *Le Dernier des Justes*, *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* retraces the story of a legendary family: four generations of women, starting just after the abolition of slavery. Most of the novel focuses on the character of Télumée, the last of her lineage, retracing her birth, childhood, and adulthood. As her name indicates, she represents the earth (*Tellus* in Roman mythology is the goddess of the earth). She is part of the Lougandor family, a name reminis-

31. Yitzhak Buxbaum, *Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism*, op. cit., p. 9-15.

32. Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Tsimtsoun*, op. cit., p. 23-24.

33. Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wings, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1997; *Poetic Intention*, trans. Natalie Stephens and Anne Malena, Calicoon, NY, Night Boat Books, 2010.

34. "Categories in Edouard Glissant's Writings (2nd version)", Online at coursil.com.

35. Edouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la relation ; poésie en étendue*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009, p. 11.

cent of Africa (in Wolof, *Lougan* means 'a piece of land').³⁶ If *Télumée* is a legend, I argue that the mythic elements are not to be considered as creating one single and fixed meaning. Rather, it would be a myth that calls for the movement of meaning and the practice of interpretation – in a sense, a 'decolonial' hermeneutics. Hence, it also responds to an ethical imperative and has a broader political implication. It participates in a well-crafted story of a Just woman. To view Simone's story a unique, secular, Caribbean version of the story of the Just, helps us envision its force of contestation and the ethical vision Caribbean culture purports in general.

From a gender perspective, the novel is also groundbreaking as it reasserts the spiritual role of women that tend to be concealed within a patriarchal perspective. In the Jewish tradition, the *Tzaddik* is usually male, as is the storyteller. In the Caribbean tradition, the Creolist movement honoring the storyteller, praises him as being predominantly male:

C'est lui [le conteur] le seul producteur de littérature audible, une littérature articulée dans l'ethno-texte de la parole et qui, dans la parole, se forge un langage soumis aux ambivalences de la créolisation, à l'opacité de Détour pour survivre à l'inédit insoupçonné de la culture créole.³⁷

Because of the divisions of gender roles in the Caribbean, women usually act as storytellers for children. But as critics have shown,³⁸ the story-telling tradition involves both men and women. We will see that this role appears in the novel and the tales told to children are also stories of the highest ethical values.

The Just as the pillar of the world or the *poto-mitan*

André Schwarz-Bart's legend of the *Lamed-waf* is a variation on a Yiddish legend that thrived in a mystical phase of Hasidism and takes its root in esoteric Jewish tradition. The Yiddish term *Lamedvovnik* designates the 36 righteous men or *Tzaddikim* on which the world is founded. Mentioned in the Torah and the Talmud as an ideal figure, the *Tsaddik*, has no single and stabilized definition.³⁹ It is said in the book of Proverbs (X, 25): "The righteous is an everlasting foundation". The righteous, in ancient Judaic books, is the one through which the divine presence manifests itself for the blessing of the world. Thanks to the presence of only one of them, G-d would save the world (as in the story of Noah). The Babylonian Talmud mentions: "The earth rests on one pillar and a righteous person is its name" (Hagigah 12 b). Through the acts or merits of the righteous, their presence benefits the world.

In the Caribbean, women are considered as the *poto-mitan*, a Creole term that designates the pillar or the crossbeam which supports the house. In the Vodou religion, the

36. Roger and Héliane Toumson, "Interview avec Simone et André Schwarz-Bart", art. cit., p. 18.

37. Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Lettres créoles : Tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature (Haïti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, 1635-1975)*, Paris, Hatier, 1991, p. 41.

38. Renée Larrier, *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 200., p. 14-27; Odile Ferly, "Writing Cultural and Gender Difference: Sylviane Telchid's *Throvia de la Dominique*", *Cardiff University New Readings*, n° 7, 2004, p. 27-28.

39. Gershom Scholem, "Tsaddiq, le Juste", in *La mystique juive : les thèmes fondamentaux*, trans. Maurice R. Hayoun, Paris, Cerf, 1985, p. 103-149.

poto-mitan is the central pillar of the temple, placed in the middle of the peristyle (the sacred center of the temple where the rites are performed), where the deities can descend to inhabit a human body. It symbolizes the connection between the earth and the divine world. In Caribbean culture, the term also designates the extraordinary strength of women who, in the times of slavery have been the pillar of the family and the community, often because the men were denied their paternal status, reduced to their bare physical force in the plantation and even used as reproductive cattle:

Ce sont les femmes qui ont tout sauvé, tout préservé, y compris l'âme des hommes. Ce sont des gardiennes jalouses qui ont toujours lutté en silence. Quand l'homme antillais faisait des enfants sans revendiquer la paternité, celle qui devait assumer la lignée, accomplir les tâches quotidiennes, s'occuper des enfants tout en leur transmettant les traditions ancestrales, c'étaient naturellement la femme.⁴⁰

Women demonstrated an enduring physical force as in the proverb told by Reine Sans Nom to Télumée: "si lourds que soient tes seins, tu seras toujours assez forte pour les supporter" (PV, p.70), originally known in Creole as "tété pa janmen two lou pou lèstomak".⁴¹ More importantly, they preserved the culture and values of the group, keeping alive the bodies and souls of the community. They bore the responsibility of the material, physical and spiritual survival of the group within the context of colonial oppression.

The term 'Just women' is not to be found in Simone's first novel. But one can see a strong correspondence between the lineage of Jewish Just men and the Caribbean women. What characterizes the women of the Lougandor lineage first and foremost is their hope, a faith in life which is the ground of their extraordinary forces.

Dans mon enfance, ma mère Victoire me parlait souvent de mon aïeule, la négresse Toussine. Elle en parlait avec ferveur et vénération, car, disait-elle, tout éclairée par son évocation, Toussine était une femme qui vous aidait à ne pas baisser la tête devant la vie, et rares sont les personnes à posséder ce don. Ma mère la vénérât tant que j'en étais venue à considérer Toussine, ma grand-mère, comme un être mythique, habitant ailleurs que sur terre, si bien que toute vivante elle était entrée, pour moi, dans la légende. (PV, p. 11)

Toussine was herself the daughter of Minerve⁴² who is the first of the lineage and started her life in bondage:

Toute jeune encore, vaillante, les reins toujours ceints d'une toile de journalière, Minerve avait une peau d'acajou rouge et patinée, des yeux noirs débordant de mansuétude. Elle possédait une foi inébranlable en la vie. Devant l'adversité, elle aimait dire que rien ni personne n'userait l'âme que Dieu avait choisie pour elle, et disposée en son corps. (p. 13)

40. Simone Schwarz-Bart, quoted in Mary-Jean Green, "Simone Schwarz-Bart et la tradition féminine aux Antilles", *Présence Francophone*, n° 36, 1990, p. 131.

41. Jean Bernabé, "Contribution à l'étude de la diglossie littéraire : le cas de *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* de Simone Schwarz-Bart", *Textes, Études et Documents*, n° 2, 1979, p. 126.

42. The name Minerve might refer to the Roman Goddess of war, wisdom, justice, craftsmanship and art.

We can see in her description the qualities of the Just, in particular the eyes expressing "la mansuétude" (gentleness, benevolence). Like her mother, she demonstrates faith in life and the power to remain herself whatever the circumstances. From "Reine Toussine" (Toussine Lougandor), she became "Reine Sans Nom" after the accidental death of her daughter Méranée, followed by the birth of her last daughter Victoire. The day of her daughter's baptism, the community proclaims: "Nous avons cherché un nom de reine qui te convienne mais en vain, car à la vérité, il n'y a pas de nom pour toi. Aussi désormais, quant à nous, nous t'appellerons: Reine Sans Nom" (PV, p. 29). Her election as a Queen is a sort of democratic designation, not grounded in a particular filiation or heredity, nor in the transmission of material and territorial possessions, but based on the nobility of her heart and soul.

In the context of Caribbean history, "Sans Nom" could evoke the erasing of the names of the African captives. But it can also refer to the anonymity of the Just, who can sometimes be unaware of their own condition. The theme of anonymity is essential in André Schwarz-Bart's novel: "rien ne [les] distingue des simples mortels; souvent ils s'ignorent eux-mêmes" (DJ, p. 15). The anonymity of the Just is also to be found in the Hasidic tradition. Multiple legends of the 'hidden Just' portray the Messiah, the prophet Elijah or *Lamedvav-tzaddikim* in beggars, travelers, or even robbers.⁴³ Differentiating the *Nistarim* (the hidden Just) from the *Mefoursamim* (the revealed), the hidden Just would be of higher degree as they show humility and are kept from the temptation of pride and vanity.⁴⁴ Humility is seen as a virtue required for the saving of the world. It prevents the creation of a myth, in the sense of a fixed and rigid meaning. Anonymity appears as a necessary exile from one's own being, while the Just accomplishes his mystic mission among the collective.

Victoire, the daughter of Reine Sans Nom, possesses the same noble qualities and the ability to transcend difficulties in life 'with an elevated way to hold her head':

Petite mère était une femme qui portait son visage haut levé par-dessus un cou délicat. Ses yeux toujours entrouverts semblaient dormir, rêver à l'ombre de leurs cils touffus. Mais à bien observer son regard, on y lisait sa détermination à demeurer sereine sous la violence même des vents, et à considérer toutes choses à partir de ce visage haut levé. Personne ne s'était avisé de la beauté de ma mère à l'Abandonnée, car elle était très noire, et ce n'est qu'après que mon père eut jeté les yeux sur elle que tous en firent autant. [...] Lorsqu'elle bougeait, le sang affluait à sa peau, se mêlait à sa noirceur et des reflets lie-de-vin apparaissaient à ses pommettes. Si elle se tenait dans l'ombre, elle colorait l'air qui l'entourait immédiatement, et c'était comme si sa propre présence suscitait alentour une auréole de fumée. (PV, p. 33)

The dark tone of her skin (situating her outside the socially accepted norms of beauty, which explains why nobody has noticed her beauty) creates an alchemistic transformation: a halo representing the divine presence which inhabits her ("une auréole de fumée"). Her words also demonstrate a prophetic language:

43. Francine Kaufmann, *Pour relire Le Dernier des Justes*, op. cit., p. 165-167.

44. Gershom Scholem, *Le messianisme juif: Essais sur la spiritualité du judaïsme*, trans. Bernard Dupuy, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1974, p. 361.

ils peuvent toujours dire et redire, ceux qui ne trouvent pas mole leur couche sans avoir mis à mal quelqu'un... N'empêche que je suis qui je suis, à ma hauteur exacte, et je ne cours pas les rues mains tendues pour combler vos ventres creux... (PV, p. 33)

The sentence in its literal meaning expresses Victoire's indifference to the village's gossip, especially those who are delighted to speak maliciously. But the expression "Je suis qui je suis" contains a reference to the biblical story of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3:14) that is also present in *Le Dernier des Justes* ("on est ce qu'on est", p. 28). This reference to the ineffable name of the divine which has raised numerous debates in monotheistic religions – could be read as Victoire's transcending power, her being unconfined to a restrictive category of language and a temporal frame. It speaks of her as an enigma, a capacity to create and recreate the meaning of who she is, beyond the negative, fixed representation of the other. The expression "à ma hauteur exacte" illustrates the nobility of her soul, and demonstrates her faith in her own being, her capacity to rise above any slander or prejudice.

Double hearts, multiple hearts – the enlightening presence of the Just

Télumée inherits the noble qualities of her bloodline, with her beauty, grace, and the capacity to transcend manifest reality. Her long journey does not consist of a series of heroic exploits but rather a long process of maturation and spiritual elevation. Protected by the grace of her grandmother, just like Ernie is guided by his grandfather, she learns how to 'shine' and to suffer. Her mysterious power does not reside in any particular action or mission to accomplish. The Just is like the sun, enlightening the world through their mere presence:

- Oh, dis-moi, vénéré grand-père, chuchota-t-il d'une voix à peine audible. 'Qu'est-ce qu'y doit faire un Juste dans la vie, hein ? [...]
 - Le soleil, amour, murmura-t-il avec hésitation, est-ce que tu lui demandes de faire quelque chose ? Il se lève, il se couche : il te réjouit l'âme.
 - Mais les Justes ? insista Ernie. [...]
 - C'est la même chose, dit-il enfin. Les Justes se lèvent, les Justes se couchent, et c'est bien... [...]
- Écoute, si tu es un Juste, un jour viendra où tu te mettras tout seul à ...luire : tu comprends ? (DJ, p. 212)

A similar image occurs in Simone *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* :

Ton affaire est de briller maintenant, alors brille et le jour où l'infortune te dira : me voilà, tu auras au moins brillé. (PV, p. 148)

As Francine Kaufmann has shown, the hereditary filiation of the Just man in André Schwarz-Bart's novel responds to a fictional and historical necessity as it allowed the author to represent the repetition of a violent history of persecution across the generations.⁴⁵ The Just represents an exemplary character who experiences all the challenges and violence faced by the community. Ernie will 'choose' to die with his people in Auschwitz. Télumée also embraces the tumultuous destiny of her people after the abolition of slavery. After a blessed

45. Francine Kaufmann, *Pour relire Le Dernier des Justes, op. cit.*, p. 158-162.

childhood under the protection and love of her grandmother, she becomes a house employee for a wealthy white family and is relegated to the status of “une faiseuse de béchamel” and falls victim to sexual assault by her male employer. She will live through the domestic violence of Elie, her first lover, the brutal labor at a sugar cane plantation, the death of Amboise, a second loving partner murdered during a factory strike and the departure of her adoptive child Sonore.

In *Le Dernier des Justes*, more than an intercessor with the divine, the Just is described as a “container of pain”. Facing the intensity of the violent events and its culmination with the Shoah, the heart of the Just grows and multiplies: “Car les Lamed-waf sont le coeur multiplié du monde, et en eux se déversent toutes nos douleurs comme en un réceptacle.” (*DJ*, p. 15). And what appears important in André Schwarz-Bart’s novel is communication through suffering, or compassion in its etymological sense (from the Latin *compatior*, to suffer with). When released, the novel raised a series of controversies as some would see in Ernie the reenactment of a Christian martyr.⁴⁶ But Ernie choosing to accompany and assist his people does not change the course of events. As stated in the novel, “la mort d’un juste ne change rien à l’ordre du monde [...] Personne au monde, pas même un Juste n’a besoin de courir après la souffrance, elle vient sans qu’on l’appelle...” (*DJ*, p. 220). Télumée herself, facing Elie’s repeated assaults, could be seen as a passive victim of domestic violence. But her grandmother points out the uselessness of this suffering, offering an advice that she follows in the end: “Télumée, mon petit verre en cristal, comme je démêle en ce moment tes cheveux, je t’en supplie de démêler ta vie de la sienne, car il n’est pas dit qu’une femme doive charrier l’enfer sur la terre, et où est-ce dit, où là ça?” (*PV*, p. 161)

Hence, as a Just, neither Ernie nor Télumée Miracle takes away suffering and pain. If they both endure the systemic violence existing in Europe or the Caribbean, it is not to seek martyrdom and redemption. Indeed, if suffering exists, to take pleasure in suffering is unhealthy. Hasidic culture declares joy as an obligation and the *tsaddik* is generally not someone who seeks redemption through penance.⁴⁷ In *Le Dernier des Justes*, Ernie is reprimanded as a young boy by his grandfather for attempting to commit suicide. Télumée’s grandmother exhorts her to choose joy over suffering: “Nous, les Lougandor, ne craignons pas davantage le bonheur que le malheur, ce qui signifie que tu as le devoir aujourd’hui de te réjouir sans appréhension ni retenue. [...] alors fais ce que tu dois, c’est-à-dire : embaume-nous, ma fille...” (*PV*, p. 142). Télumée possesses two hearts like her grandmother Reine Sans Nom: one to accumulate pain and the other joy. This image is also to be found in the proverb told by the old wise women Man Cia: “Sois un vrai tambour à deux faces” (a proverb translated from the Creole: “tanbou a dé bonda”).⁴⁸ This proverb is usually understood as her power of resistance, but to me demonstrates her capacity to suffer pain and to be happy.

46. Francine Kaufmann, “Les enjeux de la polémique autour du premier best-seller français de la littérature de la Shoah”, *Revue d’Histoire de la Shoah*, n° 176, 2002, p. 68-96. See the last section of the article: “Les historiens de l’antisémitisme et la polémique judéo-chrétienne”.

47. Francine Kaufmann, *Pour relire Le Dernier des Justes*, op. cit., p. 182.

48. Jean Bernabé, “Contribution à l’étude de la diglossie littéraire”, art. cit., p. 118.

If both novels portray the characters suffering, giving the reader a full awareness of what this means, suffering continues to be questioned. Meditative questions punctuate both narrations: "Ce qui est loin [...] ce qui est profond, profond, qui peut l'atteindre ?" ; "Sommes-nous des hommes ?" (*DJ*, p. 121-122) ; "Peut-être bien que toutes les souffrances, et même les piquants de la canne font partie du faste de l'homme [...] Parfois mon cœur se fêle et je me demande si nous sommes des hommes, parce que, si nous étions des hommes, on ne nous aurait pas traités ainsi, peut-être." (*PV*, p. 250). No easy or ready-made answers are provided, and these "peut-être" still pierce the hearts of the characters and continue to interrogate.

The 'Miracles' of the Just

In the end, Télumée's suffering and recovery take an exemplary value for the community and confer to her a growing stature, a "panache" in the words of her grandmother.

Si tu es heureuse, tout le monde peut être heureux et si tu sais souffrir, les autres sauront aussi... chaque jour tu dois te lever et dire à ton cœur : j'ai assez souffert et il faut maintenant que je vive, car la lumière du soleil ne doit pas se gaspiller, se perdre sans aucun œil pour l'apprécier... et si tu n'agis pas ainsi tu n'auras pas le droit de dire : c'est pas ma faute, lorsque quelqu'un cherchera une falaise pour se jeter à la mer... [...] Télumée, la peine existe, et chacun doit en prendre un peu sur ses épaules... ah maintenant que je t'ai vue souffrir, je peux tranquillement fermer mes deux yeux, car je te laisse avec ton panache sur la terre... (*PV*, p. 179-180)

It is important to note that Télumée never removes herself from the community. And if she becomes, for others, a model of suffering and rejoicing in life, her exemplary recovery is also the result of help from the community members, with whom she lives in symbiosis. This evolution in stature is also something found in Hasidic literature, as Gershom Scholem explains:

Les auteurs hassidiques avaient très bien compris que le rapport du Juste avec ses congénères obéissait à une dialectique propre. Le Juste ne fait pas que donner. [...] Il ne reçoit pas moins qu'il ne donne. Il est lui-même exalté en voulant exalter ses congénères, et plus il accomplit sa fonction en tant que centre de la communauté, plus sa propre stature croît. En se faisant l'instrument des autres, le fleuve de vie qui coule à travers lui élève éminemment sa propre existence.⁴⁹

But the miracle of the Just does not equate a spectacle leading to heroic action. It resides in the eyes of the beholders: "Les 'armes miraculeuses' ne sont pas des miracles comme certains désespèrent. Iconoclastes à l'inverse, elles brisent les mirages et délient les fantasmes. L'imaginaire est son lieu, le réel, son but."⁵⁰ The miracle is an extraordinary vision of the

49. Gershom Scholem, *La mystique juive : les thèmes fondamentaux*, op. cit., 1985, p. 148.

50. See Jacques Coursil, "La catégorie de la relation dans les essais d'Edouard Glissant, Philosophie d'une poésie", In Jacques Chevrier (ed.), *Poétiques d'Edouard Glissant* Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2000, p. 93-94, footnote 5. The "miraculous weapon" is the title of Aimé Césaire's book of poetry. As noted by Coursil, the "miracle", which comes from the latin *mira* – in French *mirer*, in Spanish

ordinary, a transformation of the violence present in the colonial or racist narrative of the other to perform an opening of the eyes.

Télumée becomes Télumée Miracle because she helps the fallen angel (l'Ange Médard) to die as a human being.⁵¹ She welcomes him in her life and exposes herself to his violence (and as a result, loses her adoptive child Sonore to him). Because of her benevolence, the community honors her with this new title:

Chère femme, l'ange Médard a vécu en chien et tu l'as fait mourir en homme...depuis que tu es arrivée au morne La Folie, nous avons vainement cherché un nom qui te convienne...aujourd'hui, te voilà bien vieille pour recevoir un nom, mais tant que le soleil n'est pas couché, tout peut arriver... quant à nous, désormais, nous t'appellerons : Télumée Miracle... (PV, p. 246)

In *Le Dernier des Justes*, when Ernie turns into a dog, tired of being a human being, he remains a dog "aux yeux juifs" and he concludes in an ironic tone that he prefers to die, rather than give up his eyes: "Nous autres, nous ne rendons jamais les yeux, jamais, jamais, jamais. *Nous préférons rendre l'âme*" (DJ, p. 375).

This teaching of the miraculous weapon, which is usually the weapon of the weak – but also maybe their most powerful one, is present in the tale that Reine Sans Nom narrates to Télumée and Elie. The horse "Mes deux yeux" will take away the driver in an uncontrolled and mad race. Ronnie Scharfman sees this tale as representing the madness of the man.⁵² I would add that the madness does not pertain to a particular gender characteristic but to a mental status in relation with the relegated social position of men in the Caribbean. The madness resides in the lost vision: the driver gives up his eyesight to the horse and wanders all his life, a death drive that prevents him from loving the woman who crosses his way. The tale appears premonitory of the story of Elie, who will later lose his sight and enter the circle of violence, subjecting the woman he loves to physical abuse and psychological disparagement.

Lastly, if Télumée ends her life with joy, standing in her garden, this joy is not complete or absolute. It comes with one little regret as she was unable to express a few words of comfort to Elie who came back in his old days to visit her. The missed opportunity to reconcile or missed words creates the space to preserve the movement of life. It indeed perpetuates an ethical relationship to time, that is a time open to the unpredictable future, and the faith and hope for redemption. Télumée and Ernie, through their joyful presence, challenge the dominant narrative of victimhood. This new vision, like a miracle, also alters the perception of the readers. Both novels create the conditions, through fiction, for the reader to relate with the characters. In the transformative power of a relationship between the characters and the reader also lies the possibility of social and political change.

mirar, in Creole *mi*, operates through the performative action of the eyes, displacing and transforming the gaze while overthrowing points of view to unveil a new reality.

51. The fallen angel in the story symbolizes a homeless man who has lost his dignity. He wanders without purpose in life and appears as predatory to others.

52. Ronnie Scharfman, "Mirroring and Mothering in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent*", art. cit., p. 95.

Conclusion

Honoring a female storytelling tradition, Simone Schwarz-Bart is a pioneer in the French Caribbean literature of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Authors such as Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau, but also Patrick Chamoiseau and Daniel Maximin will expand and reinvent this storytelling tradition. Reading the novel *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* in the light of *Le Dernier des Justes* helps us to reassess Simone Schwarz-Bart's 'poetic intention' and better understand the political aspect of her work: it does not purport any political agenda, but responds to a higher ethical and decolonial imperative, enlightening the disastrous effects of a violent history and creating a space to reflect on our present-day postcolonial world. It is a call for Justice, in the broadest sense of the word. I believe that literature participates in the elaboration of its political definition. André and Simone Schwarz-Bart's first novels help us to better envision the position of postcolonial writers from the Caribbean, as they respond to this ethical imperative, independent and distant from the political field while remaining present by writing. To my mind, this 'ethical turn' is not a turn away from politics as critics have claimed, but complicates the representation and position of the 'engaged' writer.⁵³ It can also be thought of in the terms of Edward Said as a vocation of the intellectual "for the art of representing", underlying the creative aspect of public representation, ever changing and generally outside the framework of a political party: as "someone who cannot easily be coopted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug".⁵⁴

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53. See Peter Hallward, "Edouard Glissant: from Nation to Relation", in *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001, p. 66-125. Peter Hallward distinguishes two phases in the work of Edouard Glissant, a militant one and depoliticized one, which has raised debate among scholars. See Celia Britton, "Globalization and Political Action in the Work of Edouard Glissant", *Small Axe*, vol. 13, n° 3 (30), 2009, p. 1-11; Chris Bongie, *Friends and Enemies, the Scribal Politics of Post/Colonial Literature*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2008; Nick Nesbitt, "Edouard Glissant and the Poetics of Truth", *The C.L.R. James Journal*, vol. 18, n° 1, 2012, p. 102-115.

54. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 11, 13.

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