



2014 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES
JANUARY 4, 5 & 6 2014
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

CONSTANT BECOMING: INNOCENCE AS ANTIDOTE TO PURITY IN MICHEL TOURNIER'S WRITING

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Constant Becoming: Innocence as Antidote to Purity in Michel Tournier's Writing

From both Eastern and Western cultures and a wide spectrum of disciplines, the pursuit of purity is omnipresent. This pursuit can do more harm than good as soon as it degenerates into an ideological belief. In this work I will demonstrate and analyze Michel Tournier's critical stance on purity throughout his novels and essays while showing how "innocence", from a perspective of constant becoming, becomes an antidote in his writing.

Hawaii University International Conferences
January 4-6, 2014, Honolulu

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By Dr. Marc Yang

Well-respected dictionaries, such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *Larousse*, offer very similar definitions of "purity". The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines purity as the "condition or quality of being pure; freedom from anything that contaminates and pollutes; freedom of mixture or modifying addition", while *Larousse* specifies purity as "qualité de ce qui est pur, non pollué; qualité de ce qui est sans défaut, sans altération; qualité de ce qui est sans souillure ni tache morale". Both definitions insist on two key components: purity categorically rejects and opposes itself to "mixing" (becoming something else), and purity is the desirable and idealized attribute. In other words the aforementioned definitions are conceptualizing purity as both value judgment and description of the natural/ideal state of being or idea. In this paper, my discussion will focus on purity as a value judgment.

In both Western and Eastern cultures, one tends to view both purity and innocence as interchangeable, but Michel Tournier, one of today's most influential French writers, strongly disagrees. In a rather revolutionary way he views *purity* as a "wicked inversion" (inversion maligne) of *innocence*. As an operating tool, I propose the concept of "constant becoming" in my philosophical reading of Tournier, and, using this approach, aim to show why his view on purity makes perfect sense in the context of his writing.

One of my favorite contemporary French philosophers, Pierre Hadot offers us a most honest and precise assessment of centuries' of evolution of Western philosophy in the following statement: "In a certain sense, one might say that there have always been

two opposing conceptions of philosophy. One emphasizes the pole of discourse, the other, the pole of the choice of life."¹ In my opinion by favoring philosophy as a way of life and in privileging the present over the past and the future, Hadot in fact embraces "constant becoming" as an authentic way of life. There have always been two opposing conceptions of purity: one fanatically defends the pole of purity while rejecting the idea of "becoming" as impurity and corruption, the other, the pole of Tournier's "innocence", values becoming as the true state of being while welcoming the richness of life. Plato and Kant represent the former while Heraclitus, Nietzsche, and Hadot the latter. In both Plato and Kant's conception of purity, the idea of "becoming" always denotes alteration, corruption, and impurity; thereby advocating intellectual purity as a philosophical and moral ideal that excludes any possibility of "becoming". In contrast Heraclitus insists on ever-present change in the universe, famously saying: "No man ever steps in the same river twice". Nietzsche privileges the "child" (innocence), the last of his three "metamorphoses" (camel, lion, and child), and Hadot asserts that the present alone is our happiness.

Regarding purity there are also two opposing poles in Eastern philosophical traditions. In Buddhist teaching there is no place for the idea of original sin, nor space for the conception of purity. In contrast, Confucian philosophy imposes the idea of purity crystallized in the form of a strict hierarchical order where constant becoming is deemed impossible. Not surprisingly both Nietzsche and Hadot are influenced by Buddhist philosophy.

¹ Pierre Hadot, *The Present Alone is Our Happiness*, trans. by Marc Djaballah and Michael Chase, Stanford University Press, 2011, p.60.

Before moving to my philosophical reading of Tournier's writing, I would like to state that the pursuit of purity as a value judgment permeates both Eastern and Western cultures, and that when this pursuit degenerates into ideological² extremism, it inevitably becomes harmful and disastrous. From distant history to recent memory, whether it's religious, cultural, or racial³, or it's societal, moral, or even culinary⁴, the ideological pursuit of purity tends to devolve into the intolerances of fundamentalism, fascism, racism, Puritanism, and nationalism.

Michel Tournier's critical stance on purity throughout his novels and essays stays very consistent. Whether it's in his major novels of *Friday* (*Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*), *The Ogre* (*Le Roi des Aulnes*), and *Gemini* (*Les Météores*), or in his collections of essays *The Mirror of Ideas* (*Le Miroir des idées*) and *Keys and Locks* (*Des clefs et des serrures*), Tournier never fails to warn us about the danger of the very idea of purity. I would suggest that, in fact, he created all his main characters in the three major novels in such a way that they all represent an antidote to purity. Tournier made them heroes of constant becoming under different avatars. Their adventures/misadventures bring us to witness the fatal effects of the pursuit of purity while offering innocence as antidote.

Very early on in his first novel *Friday*, Tournier already directs the readers' attention to the question of purity. In the prologue to the novel, you will find Captain

² My understanding of ideology here is à la Deleuze: any particular discourse claiming to be universal is ideological.

³ The book *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* by Robert N. Proctor reveals all the dark sides in the ideological pursuit of purity under Nazis (Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁴ During the second half of 1996 a culinary debate between too pronounced factions (*classic cuisine* and *nouvelle cuisine*) of chefs in France escalated into an ideological war. As opposed to *nouvelle cuisine* the traditional chefs (represented by Joël Robuchon and a dozen leading chefs) who defend French culinary purity said the use of foreign flavors and spices were masking French ingredients and suffocating France's national cuisine. See David Burton's introduction to his book *French Colonial Cookery: A Cook's Tour in the French-Speaking World* (London: Faber, 2000).

Pieter Van Deyssel reading Egyptian tarot cards to Robinson Crusoe, and while describing Robinson presently as a devout, greedy, and *pure* organizer, predicts he will finally end up regaining his childlike innocence. At the end of the prologue, you will also find the captain warning Robinson: "Crusoé, écoutez-moi bien: gardez-vous de la pureté. C'est le vitriol de l'âme" (Tournier, 14).

What does purity really mean in Tournier's eyes? The answer is to be found in this eloquent passage from the journal of Abel Tiffauges, the main character of *The Ogre*:

L'une des inversions malignes les plus classiques et les plus meurtrières a donné naissance à l'idée de la pureté.

La pureté est l'inversion maligne de l'innocence. L'innocence est amour de l'être, acception souriante des nourritures célestes et terrestres, ignorance de l'alternative infernale pureté-impureté. De cette sainteté spontanée et comme native, Satan a fait une singerie qui lui ressemble et qui est toute l'inverse: la pureté. La pureté est horreur de la vie, haine de l'homme, passion morbide du néant (Tournier, 124-125)

Through the voices of his novel's characters, Tournier made his critical stance on purity very clear. In a certain sense, the exploration of the question of purity-impurity occupies a center place in all three of his major novels. For instance in *Friday*, the first stage of Robinson's experience on the island clearly illustrates how much he is obsessed with purity. This stage started as his hope to be rescued by a passing ship dashed away. Frantically trying to restore Puritanism on the island, he created the "île administrée" modeled after British Empire. The way in which Robinson envisioned the "île administrée" attests his obsession with purity. In his *log-book* he wrote:

Je veux, j'exige que tout autour de moi soit dorénavant mesuré, prouvé, certifié, mathématique, rationnel (Tournier, 67).

Without a doubt this "île administrée" represents a pure rational order where constant becoming is completely excluded, and where no "mixing" is allowed. Viewing any form of becoming something or someone other than prescribed by this pure rational order as imminent threat, Robinson's negative reaction toward Friday's "impurity" in their first encounter became inevitable. His disappointment resulted from his obsession with purity.

Dieu m'a envoyé un compagnon. Mais, par un tour obscur de sa Sainte Volonté, il l'a choisi au plus bas degré de l'échelle humaine. Non seulement il s'agit d'un homme de couleur, mais cet Araucanien costinos est bien loin d'être un pur sang, et tout en lui trahit le métis noir (Tournier, 146.)!

How to cure Robinson's obsession with purity? Here came Tournier's tour de force: as the story reached the stage of the monumental explosion of the "grotte", the author of *Friday* made Robinson learn from his new companion whose "impurity" he initially lamented. Friday was the one to guide Robinson into the new world of constant becoming. From "Robinson tellurique" to "Robinson solaire", Tournier brings us to witness the birth of a new Robinson embracing constant becoming incarnated in Friday's innocence—an innocence once viewed as "impurity" by Puritan Crusoe.

Then in his novel *The Ogre*, a dark epic on Nazi Germany, Tournier takes pains to show us how the myth of pure blood pushed Nazism into a culture of evil, suffering, and death. In Tournier's view, whether it's moral, religious, political, or sexual, the myth of purity always leads to arbitrary exclusion. When nationalism, patriotism, and Nazism are driven by the obsession of purity, they all become "wicked inversion" of innocence.

Having Tournier's aforementioned position on purity in mind I suggest that the "phorie" (gesture of carrying/saving a child in the context of the novel), the main them of *The Ogre*, makes sense only when interpreted as an act of overcoming purity. The very ambiguity of "phorie" points to innocence, the "benign inversion" (inversion *bénigne*) of purity.

Finally in his third major novel *Gemini*, Tournier structured the whole story on this purity-impurity tension that constantly threatens to destroy a perfect world of twins. To Paul, the older twin, the world of twins ("cellule gémellaire") was pure, so he desperately fought against any sign of threat to the purity of their life. But for John, the younger twin, he was hopelessly fascinated by the "impurity" of ever changing life adventures (symbolized by the "météores"), so much so that he became resentful to the "pure and perfect" world of twins, and ended up running away from this prison-like life. From then on we witness Paul's pursuit of his run-away twin brother, a pursuit that went on 30 years in time and stretched around the world in space, hoping to bring his brother back to the world of purity. Going through the impurity of time and space, always half a step behind his run-away brother, Paul was just about to finally reunite with John in Berlin when the erection of the Wall cut the city in two... The final scene of the novel was when Paul struggled to crawl in an infernal tunnel to reach his brother on the other side of the Wall, but then crushed by construction materials when he had almost reached the end. As a result Paul lost both his right arm and right leg. This tragic event coincides with John's enigmatic

disappearance forever and brings the story to its end. According to my reading of *Gemini*, the author's intention is not to suggest to readers that the purity of the perfect world of twins will finally be found again through the “purity” of time and space, but rather to have the personality and body of the two brothers go through the test of richness (impurity) of real time and space where nothing can escape from constant becoming. Obviously the novel cannot be read as a quest of purity, but rather a search for innocence. Tragically Paul had to lose both his right arm and right leg, but also the disappearance of his brother John as the hefty price he had to pay for his obsession with purity. To vehemently denounce the ideology of purity, Tournier thus wrote in his book *The Mirror of Ideas*:

L'homme chevauché par le démon de la pureté sème la mort et la ruine autour de lui. Purification religieuse, épuration politique, sauvergarde de la pureté de la race, recherche anticharnelle d'un état angélique, toutes ces aberrations débouchent sur des massacres et des malheurs sans nombre. Il faut rappeler que le feu—«pur» en grec—est le symbole des bûchers, de la guerre et de l'enfer (Tournier, 173).

Along with other images of purity, sexual purity is another peculiarity Tournier wrestles with in his writing. It's not difficult for readers to discover that homosexuality occupies an important place in all three of his major novels, but Tournier's critics frequently misinterpreted his use of the role of homosexuality. In my interview with the author in August 1996, responding to certain critiques of Abel Tiffauges, protagonist of *The Ogre*, Tournier made the following statement:

Car il est clair que l'interprétation pédérastique que des critiques parreseux, expéditifs ou laborieusement malveillants ont parfois donnée d'Abel Tiffauges va à l'encontre de toute ligne du roman.⁵

In line with Tournier's rejection of ideological pursuit of purity I would argue that the role of homosexuality in his writing should be understood as a tool of "transvaluation" (or revaluation) à la Nietzsche. I believe it's only in this perspective that homosexual characters such as Alexandre and Abel Tiffauges would become relevant, as Tournier's main aim was to challenge conventional sexuality as the procreation imperative, destined to obey a model of Victorian morality. According to Tournier, this conventional sexuality is based on hatred and fear of sex and generates a "generalized anti-eroticism". As antidote to this conventional sexuality serving procreation imperative, Tournier purposefully created those homosexual characters who, free of the procreation chain, embrace the innocence of eroticism with courage, joy, and humor. They all represent a subversive energy against an ideologically established sexuality that stigmatizes sex. In his book of collected essays *Keys and Locks*, Tournier wrote:

Don Juan n'est rien d'autre que la personification mythologique de l'érotisme défiant la société, le mariage et la religion, et s'affirmait avec courage et une gaieté héroïque contre l'ordre castrateur (Tournier, 106).

Advocating the innocence of eroticism, Tournier was not promoting homosexuality in his writing, but rather using this sexuality to defend sexual pluralism against heterosexuality—the only “prescribed” sexuality of those times. For this very reason, readers often would notice that Tournier's characters are

⁵ Zhaoding (Marc) Yang. *Michel Tournier: La Conquête de la Grande Santé*, Peter Lang, 2001, p. 120.

more fascinated by non-genital sexuality. The way in which Tournier explores sexuality in his writing is to suggest that life is not justified by a diabolic purification imposed by the ascetic ideal, but is affirmed by a love of everything that is human, including sexual innocence.

Due to time limits I have to end this paper's discussion now and with a definite conclusion. Although Tournier himself always encourages *multiple* interpretations of his writing, yet when it comes to his rejection of ideological pursuit of purity, it seems to me that there is only *one* viable interpretation: since the very essence of this ideological pursuit of purity is to exclude *others*, and since the very goal of Tournier's writing is to rehabilitate *them*, he therefore is inevitably a warrior courageously fighting against the very idea of purity in that innocent battleground of constant becoming.