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## **"Nos frères d'outre-golfe": Spiritualism, Vodou and the mimetic literatures of Haiti and Louisiana**

Jean-Marc Allard Duplantier

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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"NOS FRÈRES D'OUTRE-GOLFE": SPIRITUALISM, VODOU AND THE  
MIMETIC LITERATURES OF HAITI AND LOUISIANA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of French Studies

by  
Jean-Marc Allard Duplantier  
B.A. The Colorado College, 1996  
M.A. Louisiana State University, 2002  
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For Sarah

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## Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	viii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Narrative Syncretism in the Atlantic World.....	6
The Medium's Hybrid Voice.....	14
Vodou's "Possessive" Alterity.....	18
CHAPTER TWO: SPIRITUALISM AND THE FANTASTIC.....	23
"Me voici revenu." Gautier's Spirite and Musset <i>spirite</i> . ....	26
"Le Horla" and the Colonial Other .....	41
CHAPTER THREE: <i>SPECTRES DE HUGO</i> .....	47
"Écartons le trépied" .....	59
"Je Dis la Table Pour Abréger" .....	83
"His Soul Is Marching On" .....	100
CHAPTER FOUR: "FRÈRES DÉJÀ PAR LE SANG": LOUISIANA SPIRITUALISM AND MIMETIC CULTURE.....	105
Louisiana Spiritualism.....	109
Creole Voices.....	113
"Quelques Petites Cailloux" .....	124
<u>Les Cenelles</u> and Creole Romanticism.....	135
Creole Louisiana's Haitian Exile(s) .....	151
Louisiana Voodoo and Haitian Spiritualism.....	167
CHAPTER FIVE: CREOLE BOVARISM: JEAN PRICE-MARS, VODOU AND MIMETIC CULTURE.....	177
Haitian Bovarism .....	181
Bovarism and Cultural Hybridity.....	186
"[L]es agrégats de notre moi": Vodou Identity and the Hybrid Self.....	205
CHAPTER SIX: "COUTÉ LA LIBÈRTE": HAITI'S POSSESSIVE LITERATURE.....	212
Boukman's Repossessed "Serment" .....	214
Boisrond Tonnerre's Ghostly Revolutionaries.....	218
"Il s'agit de moins ici": Creole Romanticism and the "École de 1836" .....	224
Ignace Nau's "Isalina" and Vodou Authority.....	237
Bergeaud's <u>Stella</u> and Aggregate Identity.....	246
Demesvar Delorme's "Veau d'Or" .....	248
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION: <i>SPECTRES DE NAPOLÉON</i> .....	257

WORKS CITED.....	273
VITA.....	282



## Abstract

The nineteenth-century Francophone literatures of Haiti and Louisiana are often dismissed as pale imitations of literary trends in metropolitan France. This study revisits these literatures and explores how Creole writers used borrowed ideas and imitated styles to assemble "relational" Creole identities. Two interrelated spiritual practices—the mid-century craze for “table turning” commonly known as modern Spiritualism, and the syncretistic New World religion Vodou—structured these writers’ mimetic methods, enabling them to speak as, and thereby subvert the hegemony of, their cultural forebears.

In France, the mid-century interest in Spiritualism provided French fantastic literature with a useful system for producing the many "revenants" that populate fantastic fiction. These tales also reveal Spiritualism's larger role as a model for trans-Atlantic cultural production, and demonstrate metropolitan anxiety about the exotic colonial Other. In a similar way, Victor Hugo, confronted by the destabilizing possibility of a polyvocal *au-delà*, found it necessary to defend his singular visionary genius from the polluting voices of the spirits.

In Louisiana, Spiritualism gave free-black poets a tool to channel and challenge the voices of their literary heroes in France. In the mouths of these Creole copyists, the singular Romantic subjectivity that Hugo sought to defend became splintered and distorted, allowing them to construct a hybrid identity by adopting calqued literary voices.

In a similar way the Haitian Vodou adept served as a vessel for the diverse deities that displaced his or her personality. Haiti’s mimetic literature plays on the Vodou ritual practice of possession as it copies European models. Thus what Jean Price-Mars famously described as Haiti’s literary Bovarism is better understood as a nascent literary hybridity.

The Spiritualist séance and the Vodou ceremony enabled adepts to harness the power and authority of the great figures of Western culture by exploiting the portability of their voices. In this way, the nineteenth-century literatures of Francophone Haiti and Louisiana are not pale imitations of Hugo and other French models; they are failed imitations--copies that deviate from their models in order to open up a space for a provisional, relational Creole identity.

## Chapter One: Introduction

Critics often dismiss pre-1915 Francophone literature as a derivative and inferior imitation of literary trends in metropolitan France. In their 1991 Lettres Creoles, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant express a view shared by many critics when they describe this literature as enacting an "exode de soi," and a "bovarysme littéraire": "Comme les nouvelles devaient traverser la mer, nous eûmes toujours une longueur de retard: Parnasse suranné, symbolisme attardé, romantisme de seconde main, en bref, une écriture de chrysocale au travers de laquelle on se projette hors de son monde et hors de soi."<sup>1</sup> When this rather large body of poetry, novels, history, and theater is treated at all--usually in anthologies of "national" literary history--it is organized into the conventional French literary periods and judged by how well it conforms to its literary models. Mid-century Creole writers, for example, often patterned their work on the French symbolist and Parnassian schools that privileged formal artistic questions over worldly concerns; they therefore wrote in a detached style that betrayed none of the writer's particular racial or social difference. This literature suffers when it is compared to the literature of the *négritude* period. As a prehistory of *négritude*'s assertion of a black identity, these nineteenth-century texts seem to be nothing more than pale imitations of their French models, bleached of their self-respect and devoid of any political, social, or--because of their occasionally amateurish style--artistic, relevance.

However, this periodization of Francophone literary history is based largely on the experience of Caribbean and West African countries that gained their independence (or were

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<sup>1</sup>Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, Lettres créoles: tracées antillaises et continentals de la littérature. 1635-1975 (Paris: Hatier, 1991) 69.

departmentalized) in the twentieth century. The examples of Haiti and Louisiana complicate this understanding of Francophone letters.

On December 20th, 1803, the French flag was lowered for the last time in New Orleans as Louisiana officially became part of the United States, the first independent nation in the Americas. Twelve days later, on January 1st, 1804, revolutionary general Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed himself ruler of Haiti, the second independent nation in the New World. While the literatures that emerged from these two former French colonies still relied heavily on French models, they were written not in an effort to conform to the social and artistic expectations of the former colonial culture, but to propose a unique regional "Creole" identity, in the case of Louisiana, and to found an independent national identity, in the case of Haiti. This study examines how this borrowed literature, written in the former colonial language, was used in these identity-building projects.

In the introduction to his 1853 Etudes sur l'histoire d'Haïti, Haitian intellectual Beaubrun Ardouin apologizes for his bad French and links his linguistic inadequacy to his Caribbean identity:

Si cet ouvrage trouve quelques lecteurs à Paris, ils y verront beaucoup d'incorrections dans le style, encore plus de fautes contre les règles de la grammaire: il ne leur offrira aucun mérite littéraire. Mais ils ne devront pas oublier qu'en général, les Haïtiens ne bégaièrent les mots de la langue française que pour constater en quelque sorte leur origine dans les Antilles.<sup>2</sup>

Ardouin is writing from a rather precarious position, for his multi-volume history of this young republic must somehow both conform to and be different from the language (literary French) and the genre (Romantic history) that he has borrowed. Historian and literary critic Joan Dayan claims that Ardouin's assertion of linguistic alterity anticipates both Aimée Césaire's

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<sup>2</sup> B[eaubrun] Ardouin, Etudes sur l'histoire d'Haïti, suivies de la vie du générale J.-M. Borgella (Paris: Desobry et E. Magdeleine, 1853) 9.

"marque nègre," and Edouard Glissant's more expansive term for cultural and linguistic hybridity, "Antillanité." Ardouin, Dayan maintains, must affirm his identity by "nothing less than his resolutely faltering or broken French."<sup>3</sup> Thus we see a strange sort of copying here, a mimesis that in the same gesture asserts its adherence to the model and establishes its deviance from it. Glissant's theory of cultural hybridity encourages us to read Ardouin's statement as an assertion of a provisional, relational identity based on entangled or absent origins, not on a clear cultural genealogy. Ardouin is not asserting a distinct literary identity for himself, his race, or his country. He seems rather to be acknowledging a certain difference in his language that he hopes to fold into his mimetic enterprise. His imitation is imperfect and lacking, and it is in the space of this inadequacy, in the simultaneous deviance from and adherence to the model, that he is able to situate a provisional identity, like the Haitians who "bégaièrent...leur origine dans les Antilles."

In 1845, a group of free men of color in New Orleans published a collection of poetry entitled Les Cenelles. The introduction to the collection, written by Armand Lanusse, a prominent free black educator and poet, articulates a complex mimetic project similar to Ardouin's. Lanusse explains that while the 17 poets who contributed to the collection might never match the accomplishments of their literary heroes, they still encounter the same sort of harassment that these great poets faced before they established their literary reputations:

Mais ceux pour qui nous éprouvons le plus de sympathie, ce sont ces jeunes hommes dont l'imagination s'est fortement éprise de tout ce qu'il y a de grand et de beau dans la carrière que suivent avec tant de gloire les Hugo et les Dumas ...ces jeunes esprits qui, sans avoir la folle prétention d'atteindre jamais à la hauteur où sont arrivés les grands maîtres en littérature dont nous venons de parler, sont pourtant en butte à toutes les

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<sup>3</sup> Joan Dayan, Haiti, History and the Gods (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 9.

tracasseries que ces génies transcendants éprouvèrent au commencement de leur vie littéraire...<sup>4</sup>

It is clear to Lanusse that none of these poets will ever write like Hugo and Dumas, for the Louisiana poets will always pale in comparison to these transcendent French geniuses. At the very least, they may hope that some of this transcendence might filter down to them through the very act of writing. The tragedy of this noble failure is compounded, Lanusse contends, by the fact that these poets must suffer through the very same insecurities and ridicule that their French heroes endured. Thus at a time when there was no shortage of *tracasseries* directed at the free black population of New Orleans, these poets choose instead to shoulder a borrowed persecution and write failed poetry. This failure, I would argue, is at the heart of Lanusse's project. Like Ardouin's acknowledgment of his imperfect French, Louisiana's poets write themselves into their literature at the very point of their inadequacy. These poets have thus cobbled together an identity based on their simultaneous resemblance to and difference from Hugo and Dumas.

Both Lanusse and Ardouin seem to be aware of the fact that the success of their project depends on its failure. But there is a great danger inherent in this sort of imitation, what Edouard Glissant describes as "l'insidieuse promesse de se constituer en l'Autre, l'illusion d'une mimésis réussie."<sup>5</sup> By foregrounding their failure, Ardouin and Lanusse are able to use the identity building tools of mimesis ("se constituer en l'Autre") while still maintaining a certain distance from their model; these writers can thereby play on the edges of this "identitarian" precipice without falling into it.

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<sup>4</sup> Les Cenelles. Choix de Poesies Indigenes ed. Armand Lanusse (Nouvelle Orléans: H Lauve et Compagnie, 1845) bibliothèque Tintamarre: oeuvres louisianaises en ligne. Cenetary College. 8 Aug. 2006. <<http://www.cenetary.edu/french/textes/cenelles1.htm>>.

<sup>5</sup> Edouard Glissant, Le discours antillais. (Paris: Seuil, 1981) 29.

By playing the role of the failed imitator, Ardouin and Lanusse are also conforming to a persistent colonial expectation, what Homi Bhabha in The Location of Culture describes as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite*."<sup>6</sup> Bhabha identifies a mimetic trend in British colonial discourse that produces this familiar yet different Other in order to appropriate its power.<sup>7</sup> But this discourse is not able to fully appropriate or completely copy the Other, for to do so would be to strip it of the very alterity that makes it worth capturing in the first place. Thus, Bhabha continues, "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference."<sup>8</sup> Far from being confined to the cage of a colonial discourse, this Other remains a threatening and destabilizing presence. Although Bhabha is reading this ambivalence of the Other in texts written by white Englishmen, the double logic of mimesis that he describes also holds true for the mimetic literature that I read in this study, for it is in the failure of the mimetic project, the inadequacy and poverty of the copy, that the routes and detours of a relational identity can be traced:

In mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy. As Lacan reminded us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization of repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat, I would add, comes from the

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<sup>6</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994) 86. [Emphasis in original]

<sup>7</sup> Bhabha's point here is related to Glissant's concern for the kind of cultural domination that not only supplies positive cultural models but also "fournit d'elle-même des modèles de résistance à la mainmise qu'elle-même met en oeuvre, court-circuitant ainsi la résistance tout en la favorisant. Par quoi des techniques évidées entretiennent l'illusion d'un universel dépassant." (Glissant, Le discours 29.) Thus the most dangerous part of miming a dominant culture lies not in copying the positive model but in inadvertently copying the subterranean resistance to this model, the modes of resistance native to the very structures that one seeks to overthrow--the word "overthrow" itself being a symptom of the inability to escape from the dominant paradigm of oppression and resistance. Thus "identitarian" models of resistance, like *négritude*, succumb to this danger.

<sup>8</sup> Bhabha 86.

prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity-effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself'.<sup>9</sup>

Bhabha is interested in demonstrating the persistent and threatening presence of the colonized Other in the dominant colonial discourse. In the case of the mimetic texts that I will describe, we can see that the destabilizing by-products of mimesis can work to produce a relational identity--an identity with "no essence, no 'itself'." This is not an identity rooted in a larger historical or racial genealogy, but what amounts to a provisional, hybrid, Creole identity which dances along a surface of metonymic connections.

The mimetic writers of nineteenth-century Haiti and Louisiana wrote themselves into the space of this colonized Other in order to take advantage of these very "identity-effects." This is not to say that these nineteenth-century writers were themselves able to overcome the seductive power of Romantic subjectivity, but rather that they found within the idioms that they imitate, and within the "identitarian regimes" that these idioms construct, a space in which they wrote themselves as Other. As a prehistory of "Antillanité," these mimetic texts no longer appear to be mere pale imitations; they are, rather, fully engaged in the mixing and borrowing that characterizes the Creole world.

#### Narrative Syncretism in the Atlantic World

Few events solidified Louisiana's place in the Caribbean culture area more than the large-scale immigration of Saint-Domingue refugees in the first decade of the nineteenth-century. This migration, which doubled the population of New Orleans in one year, had an important social and cultural impact on Creole Louisiana that has been well documented by historians. While the free black refugees were quickly integrated into Louisiana's existing free black communities,

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<sup>9</sup> Bhabha 90.



they also maintained connections with, and an affection for, their Creole cousins in Haiti. These connections proved useful when several hundred Afro-Creoles moved to Haiti in 1859 and 1860 to escape the increased persecution of the era. Many of these Louisiana refugees were themselves second and third generation Saint-Domingue immigrants.

In 1862 Joseph Colastin Rousseau, a descendant of Haitian immigrants to Louisiana who emigrated back to Haiti, published a long serial article entitled "Souvenirs de la Louisiane" in L'Opinion Nationale, a prominent Port-au-Prince newspaper. Rousseau's article describes the history and culture of Louisiana's free people of color as a way to reintroduce the Haitian public to their "blood brothers" from Louisiana. Rousseau flirts with the early pan-African ideas that were circulating in the Atlantic world at the time, insisting that black Louisianians were, like their Haitian brothers, engaged in active resistance to slavery and racial prejudice:

L'histoire de la race africaine, qui habite la vallée de la Louisiane, est sans contredit une des plus intéressantes mêlée comme elle est aux affaires de toutes sortes de ce pays. Cette race a vécu plus près des blancs, nous osons dire même qu'elle a vécu dans l'intimité avec la plupart d'entr'eux, et au milieu d'un préjugé impossible, dans ce pays, par ses anomalies: avec ses amours, ses haines, ses dévouemens, ses ingrattitudes, ses naïvetés, ses ruses, ses raisonnemens, ses aberrations, ses actes d'humanité ridicules quelquefois et ses préjugés toujours insensés. Cependant est-ce à dire que les hommes de notre race qui vivent là-bas, en subissant un état de choses qu'ils ont trouvé et qu'ils n'ont pu changer, à cause de leur minorité, peuvent être taxés de dégradation? Aura-t-on le courage et le droit de due, comme nous l'avons entendu dire, en Haïti même, que la dégradation est leur état normal? non! et pour notre compte nous amnistions volontiers ceux de nos frères les Haïtiens qui ont pu tenir un tel langage; nous l'attribuons à une ignorance complète des faits de leur part. Non, *nos frères d'outre-golfe* ne sont point dégradés, ce qui le prouve, c'est qu'ils n'ont jamais cessé de s'agiter en se tournant en tous sens dans *le cercle de l'horizon qui les enserre*, cherchant attentivement une issue pour sortir de ce pays; s'aventurer dans l'exil, mais un exil volontaire, décisif et définitif. (sic)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Joseph Colastin Rousseau "Souvenirs De La Louisiane: Moralité De La Poésie" L'Union [Nouvelle-Orléans] : Nos. 61,71, 72?, 86, 87, [?]. 14 Mars, 7, 9 Avril, 14, [?], 30 mai 1863. Originally Published as: "Souvenirs De La Louisiane: Moralité De La Poésie." L'Opinion Nationale [Port-au-Prince)] 25 Octobre, 1, 15, 22, 29 novembre, 6, 27 décembre 1862, 14, 21 fév, 1863. [my emphasis].

These black Louisianians, Rousseau contends, are intimately connected to their white neighbors by bonds of prejudice and servitude. But by constantly resisting, by constantly reaching beyond their localized oppression--"le cercle de l'horizon qui les enserre"--they demonstrate their worth. Black Louisianians transcend their particular situation by maintaining connections to the larger Creole world. Rousseau's description of this trans-oceanic brotherhood--"nos frères d'outre-golfe"--serves as an emblem of the Creole Atlantic culture area that this study investigates because it succinctly describes the polyvocal and syncretistic narrative modes that emerged in this area. This is not a brotherhood of monolithic identity but a community of difference.

These *frères d'outre golfe* travel along the swirling and circuitous routes that connect certain points along the Atlantic rim, primarily Haiti, Louisiana and France.<sup>11</sup> I shall retrace these connections with a view not to fixing or stabilizing these paths, but to discovering how their very interconnectedness leads to the communitarian ideal that Rousseau describes.

In The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, Paul Gilroy sees the Atlantic not as a body of water bordered by many "fully formed, mutually exclusive cultural communities" and their attendant national and ethnic identities, but rather as a complex network

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<sup>11</sup> In listing these three nodal points on the Atlantic rim I have limited myself to "Francophone" cultures. This choice neither assumes the inherent unity of these cultures, nor asserts the primal importance of the French language to what I hope to describe. In later work I hope to examine the ways in which spiritualism and Vodou operated within various Latin American countries (especially Brazil, where Kardecian Spiritualism still plays an important part in various syncretistic religious traditions). This is not to deny important historical similarities between France, Haiti and Louisiana, but rather to say that these are not the only historical connections that one might consider. Any examination of a rhizomatic web of connections must necessarily be limited and provisional. I have chosen these three points because I have access to them, not because they play a foundational role in the circulation of Spiritualism in the Atlantic world.

of interrelations.<sup>12</sup> This approach rejects traditional notions of deep cultural or racial *roots* that distinguish one group from another and privilege coherent cultural genealogies over provisional, metonymic links. Gilroy's "black Atlantic" is a space defined not by borders but by border crossing, a culture area that coheres (at least provisionally) around the web of *routes* that cross its surface.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Gilroy's understanding of the Atlantic world echoes Rousseau's "outre-golfe." The physical gulf separating Haiti, Louisiana and France is redefined by the traces of crossings that dot its surface. I would further expand this geographical figure into the spiritual realm; oceanic gulfs are like the vast *gouffre* that separates the world of the living and the world of the dead. To cross this gulf is to both connect distant shores and define the space of this separation; it is a spiritual communion that at once defines and bridges the gap. The Vodou ceremony and the Spiritualist séance, like the wandering ship, link disparate worlds.

Gilroy takes the ship as his "organizing symbol," for ships traced routes between various points on the Atlantic and were thus "mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected."<sup>14</sup> Ships do double duty in Gilroy's book, for they both figuratively describe the connections that link various points in the region and literally establish trade routes along which peoples and cultures also flow. Ships were, furthermore, models of this interconnectivity-- not simply the vessels that carried culture but "modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity."<sup>15</sup> These heterogeneous vessels, filled with sailors, slaves, cargo, books, and seeds from around the world,

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 7.

<sup>13</sup> Gilroy 19.

<sup>14</sup> Gilroy 16.

<sup>15</sup> Gilroy 12.

spread heterogeneity wherever they went. In a similar way, this study examines a wide variety of texts and other cultural artifacts that are the residue of these connections.<sup>16</sup>

This study will therefore follow the patterns of cultural transmission already established by economic, political and demographic connections between France, Louisiana and Haiti. In the eighteenth-century, when Louisiana and Haiti were both French colonies, Louisiana was the poor cousin to its rich Caribbean neighbor. Yet these two colonies shared a similar plantation-based economy and French colonial culture. The Haitian revolution (1791-1804), which was heavily influenced by French Revolutionary politics and ideas, put an end to Napoleon I's colonial ambitions in the Americas and precipitated his decision to sell Louisiana to the United States in 1803. Ten thousand refugees from Haiti settled in Louisiana in the years after the Haitian revolution, reinforcing the French language and "Latin" character of New Orleans. Many of these refugees were highly educated free people of color who assimilated quickly into the already well-established community of "hommes de couleur libres" in New Orleans. In the 1840s, as the racial persecution in New Orleans worsened, some free black New Orleanians sought refuge in Haiti and France. Refugees from the France's nineteenth-century revolutions found their way to New Orleans and often established themselves as teachers and journalists. For example, in 1860 Haitian journalist Eugène Heurtelou corresponded with Victor Hugo over the recent execution of

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<sup>16</sup> In his 1996 book Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance, Joseph Roach also follows the lead of Gilroy's work in his consideration of an Atlantic "oceanic interculture," his primary points of interest being New Orleans and London. His analysis of very diverse cultural practices in these two cities is organized around a performance-based model of cultural transmission and memory. For Roach cultures reproduce or reinvent themselves through a process of "surrogation", the replacing of a dead "actor" with his "understudy" (or, more likely, someone randomly chosen from the audience). My interest in the mimetic technology of spiritualism is thus related to this performance studies model in that both seek to account for the inevitable alterity in any mimetic enterprise, or, in Glissant's terms, the *détour* inherent in any attempt at *retour*. See: Joseph Roach, Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance (New York: Columbia UP, 1996) 29-30.

John Brown in the United States. This correspondence was featured two years later on the first page of a new French-language newspaper published in New Orleans after the federal occupation of the city during the Civil War. The paper, L'Union, and its free-black editors, shared a similar political ideology with Heurtelou and Hugo and were eager to demonstrate their connection to French republican ideas and Hugo's hope that "servitude in every form will disappear".<sup>17</sup> Thus we see that the established routes along which ideas and artifacts flowed also served as conduits for cultural imitation.

Again following Gilroy's lead, this study examines one of the "guiding symbol[s]" of these interconnected points, the explosion of modern Spiritualism in the early 1850's. Spiritualism ("spiritisme" in France)<sup>18</sup> which traces its most immediate roots to Mesmerism and the work of the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, burst from a small New York town and quickly became a worldwide religious movement. On March 31, 1848, the Fox sisters of Hyadesville, New York began to receive messages from the spirit world. Word of their contact with the spirits of the dead quickly spread through the United States and Europe and sparked an intense interest in various techniques for communication with the "beyond." Members of Spiritualist groups gathered together for séances during which they linked hands around a table and listened to messages tapped out by the spirits of the dead.

During the winter of 1853, the "tables-tournantes" craze took hold in France. Victor Hugo, in exile on the island of Jersey in the English Channel, participated in such a circle and wrote poems in collaboration with such dead poets as Shakespeare and André Chenier. What

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Caryn Cossé Bell, *Revolution Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1997) 222.

<sup>18</sup> Because the term "spiritualisme" was already being used in France to describe the philosophy of Victor Cousin, those who began to communicate with spirits in the 1850s called what they did *spiritisme*. See: Thomas A. Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France* (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1993) 336, n.4.

started as a parlor game quickly became a worldwide religious movement that survives to this day. In France, the works of Allan Kardec provided a metaphysical system and a regularized dogma for French *spiritisme*. The movement grew quickly, and an 1869 estimate claimed that there were four million American, and one million European Spiritualists, 600,000 of these being French.<sup>19</sup>

This explosion of interest in speaking to the dead provided French fantastic writers, especially Théophile Gautier, Guy de Maupassant, Gérard de Nerval, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, with a rich supernatural material. Spiritualism also spawned the first spirit novels, a unique genre of popular fiction supposedly written by the spirits themselves.

New Orleans, like most cities in the United States, supported several Spiritualist groups. One of these groups published a journal, Le Spiritualiste de la Nouvelle-Orléans, which printed séance records. This group, led by a prominent local mesmerist and refugee from Napoleon III's France, was influenced by Kardec's writings and the work of American Spiritualists. When this journal was condemned by the Catholic Church and suppressed by local authorities, a group of free men of color continued meeting secretly to hold séances. They received messages from great writers and thinkers of European history and spoke to locally famous figures from the city's past.

Like Gilroy's ship, my focus on Spiritualism and Vodou will operate on several levels at once. First, on a figurative level, these ceremonial practices can be used to describe the process of cultural copying. A Louisiana poet who writes a poem in the style of Lamartine might be said to be "channeling" the poet's voice and ceremonially adopting his authorial prestige. He is, in a sense, "possessed" by the voice that he has adopted.

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<sup>19</sup> Lynn Louise Sharp, Rational Religion, Irrational Science: Men, Women, and Belief in French Spiritualism, 1853-1914, diss., UC Irvine, 1996, 19.

These religious practices were also, like the ship, important vessels for the transportation of ideas. Spiritualism's wild popularity and its rapid spread from New York to most major American and European cities was soon followed by the international circulation of many Spiritualist journals and books. Indeed the many innovations in communications technology of the nineteenth-century were often understood as having metaphysical corollaries in Spiritualist practice, and a prominent American Spiritualist journal was entitled The Spiritualist Telegraph. Furthermore, Spiritualist séances were, again like Gilroy's ship, "modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity."<sup>20</sup> Not only did the séance work to transmit many ideas and opinions, it was itself a great fountain of alterity and difference-- a hybrid, heterogeneous collection of voices that played on the problematic narrative position of the dead and the equally indeterminate narrative position of the medium. Spiritualism enabled its practitioners to harness the power and authority of the great figures of Western culture while simultaneously exploiting the fundamental instability and portability of these voices. In this way Spiritualism is an ideal tool and the perfect narrative device for building a mimetic literature.

In a similar way, we see in the composite character of Vodou deities the same heterogeneous cultural cargo that one might find in the hold of Gilroy's ship. The Vodou gods are many things at once, and their changing aspects both rehearse and transform the history of the Atlantic world.<sup>21</sup> More than a figure for the hybridity of Atlantic culture, the Vodou ceremony also ritually reenacts the horrors of possession and dispossession that animated the Atlantic economy. The "possessed" Vodou initiate is, like the Spiritualist in the séance, at once emptied of identity and overfilled with alterity. Thus these two complementary cultural forms,

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<sup>20</sup> Gilroy 12.

<sup>21</sup> Dayan 64.

Spiritualism and Vodou, provide tools for crossing the geographical and spiritual gaps that define Atlantic culture.

### The Medium's Hybrid Voice

Spiritualism, which today is not merely outside of accepted scientific inquiry but something of a scientific heresy, was understood during its explosive beginnings as a promising new mode of empirical investigation. Cultural historian Michel Pierssens traces the origins of the split between institutionalized science and "pseudo-science" to the epistemological crisis that the wildly popular Spiritualist movement caused in France. The spirit séances that many French people experimented with in their homes forced the dominant scientific discourse to provide explanations for this new phenomenon and to address the cosmology it proposed with new theories and experiments. But Spiritualism was also threatening to the scientific establishment simply because of its wild popularity: "Tout modeste salon a pu se faire laboratoire ouvert sur l'au-delà et l'infini, et tout acteur anonyme d'une 'séance' a pu croire qu'il pourrait témoigner de l'émergence d'une nouvelle vérité."<sup>22</sup> The production of rational knowledge and empirical truth was suddenly democratized as people joined together to create and defend this new path to truth. Thus Spiritualism spawned what Pierssens calls a "technologie de l'au-delà," the invention of a wide variety of machines and detectors, as well as a comprehensive theoretical system and an alternative cosmology, to record and explain spiritual phenomena.<sup>23</sup> By turning their salons into laboratories, Spiritualists were able to produce scientific knowledge based on the same logical and empirical categories that gave mainstream science its descriptive power.

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<sup>22</sup> Michel Pierssens, "Le Syndrome des tables tournantes: Crise du savoir at 'scinces psychiques' au XIX siècle" Temps Modernes 45:528 (1990) 109.

<sup>23</sup> Pierssens 95.



In his 1991 Abyss of Reason, Daniel Cottom suggests that Spiritualism's great popularity was due not to what it revealed about the spirit world--it offered little that was new in this regard--but rather in the way in which these revelations were produced:

Turning from spiritualism as speech to spiritualism as a way of speaking discloses a view that makes a difference, all the difference in the world. It shows modern spiritualism as an attempt to reinvent the human subject. In the practice of spiritualism, linguistic and otherwise, in the very drift and uncertainties of this movement, there appears a search for new definitions and configurations of human faculties.<sup>24</sup>

This study focuses both on the usually quite banal content of the spirit communications, and on the way in which this literary production served to "reinvent the human subject." The rigor with which Spiritualists investigated what happened in their homes led them to develop what amounts to a narrative technology of alterity-- a complex ceremonial apparatus that functioned through the modulation of narrative voice and the radical instability of identity in the séance.

On one level, Spiritualist communications rely on a rhetorical trope that allows the medium to write in the place of the dead spirit. By writing down a message from André Chénier's spirit (written messages were privileged above all other forms of spirit communication) the medium could both communicate with, and write as, André Chénier. The language of the message would demonstrate that the message had originated with Chénier, and the unfamiliar handwriting would demonstrate Chénier's presence at the séance. It would be useful to someone trying to write *like* someone else to be able to write *as* this person. But while this spiritual ventriloquism might describe the basic configuration of the Spiritualist narrative situation, it does not take into account the instability and fluidity of both the medium and the spirits in the séance.

Allan Kardec's 1862 Livre des médiums, a practical manual for aspiring mediums, describes two hierarchies on either end of spirit intercourse. Mediums vary in their natural ability

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<sup>24</sup> Daniel Cottom, Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations and Betrayals (New York: Oxford UP, 1991) 109.

to receive messages, be they the most basic taps or the most advanced automatic writing. The intelligence, life experience (including previous lives), and the malleability of her soul and "périspirite" (or "astral body") also affect a medium's ability to receive messages from the spirit world. Mediums can also be tricksters or charlatans. In the spirit world, the spirits' identities fall along a similar hierarchy. The most imperfect or the most recently dead retain a more concrete identity, while the most advanced spirits--those that have moved to the highest levels of transcendence and purity--begin to lose their individuality. Spirits can also be tricksters and charlatans and can deceive the medium by writing under an assumed name. Even well intentioned spirits sometimes borrow the name of another spirit, and advanced spirits can send second-hand messages through a spirit "mandataire," who will faithfully transmits the message to the medium. Entire communities of spirits send collective messages, and spirits are able to send messages to the larger Spiritualist circle. Finally, certain spirits can become dangerously obsessed with a medium, and a medium can develop an unhealthy attachment to a spirit. Thus there are many variables that surround the spirit séance and complicate the communication between realms. This being the case, Kardec advises that spirit messages be read with the same skeptical attention to detail that one adopts when reading a literary text. It is only in the language of the message that the truth of the spirit's identity can emerge:

On juge les Esprits, comme les hommes, à leur langage; si un Esprit se présente sous le nom de Fénelon, par exemple, et qu'il dise des trivialités ou des puérités, il est bien certain que ce ne peut être lui; mais s'il ne dit des choses dignes du caractère de Fénelon et que celui-ci ne désavouerait pas, il y a, sinon preuve matérielle, du moins toute probabilité morale que ce doit être lui. C'est dans ce cas surtout que l'identité réelle est une question accessoire; du moment que l'Esprit ne dit que de bonnes choses, peu importe le nom sous lequel elles sont données.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Allan Kardec, Le livre des médiums (Paris: E. Dentu, 1862) 327.

Spiritualists expected to receive a divine revelation in the Spiritualist séance, a transcendent message arriving directly from a benevolent spirit in the *au-delà*. But they often encountered quite the opposite; spirits lied, gave bad advice, and spouted pages of incoherent nonsense. Furthermore, the messages that arrived along these circuitous paths between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead were of dubious origin and only reached the level of transcendence when their origins became so obscure as to make an identification of the spirit impossible. It was not the identity of the spirit, but its alterity, that served as proof of its divinity. As a narrative technology, then, the Spiritualist séance erects an economy of alterity in which free-floating identities are the common currency.

In The Darkened Room, Alex Owen describes the potentially transformative power of the Spiritualist séance, especially for women mediums. The Spiritualist séance provides a space in which the voice of feminine desire could be heard and enacted. Being a medium gave women not only a privileged position from which to speak, but also a space in which a woman's culturally coded passivity became a valuable quality: "The Spiritualist definition of passivity was a crucial departure from its hegemonic meaning and, in a move which potentially transformed gender categories, men earnestly sought to develop it."<sup>26</sup> I will make a similar argument about the nineteenth-century Atlantic texts that I examine. By adopting the position of the medium, whether in the Spiritualist séance or simply in writing in the voice of a famous poet, the writer has turned his own relative powerlessness to his advantage. Because of his marginal social position the medium is able to slip into and out of various voices. Thus the writer's difference becomes a powerful cultural tool.

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<sup>26</sup> Alex Owen, The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) 9.

But while Spiritualism can be a tool for mimetic culture, it can also be seen to threaten the foundation of the culture that it is copying. The uncanny presence of this colonial copier threatens the stability of metropolitan identity. Perhaps the most striking figure for this colonial imitator is Maupassant's menacing "Horla," a stowaway on a ship making an Atlantic crossing. The Horla upsets the possibility of narrative stability and identity by copying his way into the narrator's position in the text. The Horla is, to use Bhabha's term, a mimic who, in his copying of colonial culture, threatens the ground upon which that culture is built. For this reason, Victor Hugo sought to protect his transcendent poetic voice from the corrupting influence of the spirit world. While the Spiritualist séance was a great source of inspiration and revelation to Hugo, he was nonetheless threatened by its destabilizing influence.

Finally, what I describe as Spiritualism's technological innovation extends beyond the spirit séance. I explore how these texts are a mimetic/mediumistic complex of narrative techniques that plays on the alterity of the writer/medium. If Spiritualism is also emblematic of a larger mode of cultural transmission, then the difference of the medium has the same function as the difference of the imitating colonial writer, and both are thus writing from and towards a relational "Creole" identity. In this way we can not only trace the influence of Spiritualism on nineteenth-century literature, we can also explore how this mimetic mode of cultural production and transmission functioned in the Atlantic world.

#### Vodou's "Possessive" Alterity

It has been difficult to assess the extent to which Haitians embraced the worldwide Spiritualist movement. Unlike New Orleans, Haiti did not have a Spiritualist journal, and extensive research in the libraries and archives of Haiti and the United States has yet to reveal the records of any Spiritualist circles that might have existed in Haiti. However there is some

evidence of Spiritualist activity in nineteenth-century Haiti. For example, in a memoir of his childhood entitled Au Gré Du Souvenir, Haitian novelist Frédéric Marcelin described his colorful maternal uncle, a well-known Spiritualist in Port-au-Prince.<sup>27</sup>

Whatever the connection between Spiritualism and Vodou, there are clear ritual similarities between these two ceremonial practices. The destabilizing power of the Spiritualist séance rests in the medium's ability to adopt the many voices of the spirits. In ceremonial "possession" the Vodou adept, like the medium, is able to shift between various identities. Anthropologist Erika Bourguignon asserts that the Vodou worldview explodes the unity of the monolithic identity: "In this worldview every creature, spirit, human or animal, has potentially a multitude of identities. This concept is expressed in voodoo rituals when human beings take on the identities of spirits. A number of spirits, some known and some as yet unknown, may present themselves through any given person"<sup>28</sup>

Haitian Vodou initiates describe the experience of identity exchange as being "ridden" like a horse by a "mèt tèt," or master of the head. The initiate does not abandon his or her personality, but rather shares it with another external personality. The possessed initiate, like the Spiritualist medium, is a mouthpiece for the gods. In such a position he may become someone completely different while at the same time maintaining his everyday personality. Thus like the Spiritualist séance, the vodou ceremony can be seen as a powerful tool for the proliferation of voices. The speaking subject may dance between himself and the gods.

But in the colonial world the act of surrendering one's personality to another has deep historical resonance. In Haiti, History and the Gods, Joan Dayan explores the historical implications of Vodou possession: "To be ridden by the mèt tèt, to be seized by the god, is thus

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<sup>27</sup> Frédéric Marcelin, Au Gré Du Souvenir (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1913).

<sup>28</sup> Erika Bourguignon, "Religion and Justice in Haitian Voodoo" Phylon 46:4 (1985) 293-294.

to destroy the cunning imperial dichotomy of the master and the slave, or colonizer and colonized."<sup>29</sup> The possessed initiate does not surrender herself to the god; she is, rather, engaged in a creative negotiation of self and other within the space of her personality. Within the ambiguous relationship of master and servant, or horse and rider, the initiate does not abandon herself, but rather offers up her everyday identity as a stage upon which various other identities might speak and dance. The Vodou worldview has a model for complete possession of the individual: the zombi. But, as Dayan notes, the possessed initiate is explicitly unlike the zombi in that she maintains a difference from the identity that is riding her:

Whereas the zombi is the husk of the human emptied of substance--nothing more than a thing--the human "possessed" can satisfy needs and impulses, can open up to a plenitude possible only because of the ultimate nonidentity of the spirit and the spirit-possessed.<sup>30</sup>

The vodou initiate is able to speak as another while maintaining a separate identity. Thus the term "possession" is an inadequate and inaccurate description of this ambiguous dance of identities. The relationship between the initiate and the god or "lwa" who "rides" him does not leave the initiate powerless, for "the forms of this experience of letting go and opening out do not depend on ownership. The lwa 'rides' or 'dances' or 'descends' but does not coerce his partner into 'possession.'"<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the "plenitude of possibility" of which Dayan speaks enables the vodou initiate, like the Spiritualist medium, to speak to and through an idiom of radical alterity. In as much as the Spiritualist medium and the "possessed" initiate open themselves outward, allowing other voices to emerge from their mouths, they are engaged in a similar activity; they are both repositories of alterity engaged in a ritual performance of their own identity as

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<sup>29</sup> Dayan 72.

<sup>30</sup> Dayan 72.

<sup>31</sup> Dayan 74.

difference. Ritual possession, like the Spiritualist séance, serves as a model for mimetic creolization and disrupts the hierarchical ontological assumptions of colonial culture.

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This study explores how the Spiritualist and Vodou modes of ritual ventriloquism manifest themselves in the literature of the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. Chapter Two explores the narrative innovations that the Spiritualist movement lent to the French fantastic tale, specifically Maupassant's "Le Horla" and Gautier's "Spirite." These tales turn on Spiritualist modes of literary production, and in doing so reveal how important Spiritualism was for the French fantastic. They also suggest the ways that Spiritualism can serve as a model for the larger phenomenon of trans-Atlantic cultural production.

Chapter Three examines Victor Hugo's experimentation with Spiritualism during his exile on Jersey in the English Channel. Hugo and his circle spoke to and collaborated with the spirits of dead poets to compose verse. The records of these séances demonstrate how Hugo, confronted by the destabilizing possibility of a polyvocal *au-delà*, thought it necessary to defend his singular visionary genius from the polluting voices of the spirits.

In Chapter Four the scene shifts to the New World. The Spiritualist séance and the Vodou ceremony enabled adepts to harness the power and authority of the great figures of Western culture by exploiting the portability of their voices. These ceremonial tools served as the model for the creation of a mimetic culture in the New World. This chapter examines the literary works of Louisiana's community of free people of color and reads the records of an important Spiritualist circle that this group supported. The transcripts of these séances serve as a key to understanding how the mimetic literature produced during this period speaks through and against borrowed literary voices. Louisiana's free-black writers constructed literary memorials to themselves by channeling and challenging the voices of their literary heroes in France. In the

mouths of these Creole "copyists," the singular Romantic subjectivity that Hugo sought to defend became splintered and distorted, allowing them to construct a hybrid identity in calqued literary voices.

In a similar way, Chapter Five and Six examine the mimetic literature of nineteenth-century Haiti with an eye towards understanding how Vodou ceremonial possession served as a model for cultural production. The Vodou adept was a vessel for the diverse deities that displaced his or her personality. Ceremonial possession, like mimetic writing, plays on the boundaries between self and other. What Jean Price-Mars famously described as Haiti's literary bovarism is better understood as literary hybridity. Indeed, much of Haiti's literary history can be seen as a battle between the mimetic and the anti-mimetic. From the first flowering of literary Romanticism in Haiti, to Haiti's first novel, Émeric Bergeaud's Stella (1859), and the works of Demesvar Delorme, Haiti's mimetic literature demonstrates a tendency to both copy and undermine European models.

These ceremonial tools served as the model for the creation of a mimetic culture in the New World. The mimetic writer upset the integrity of self and other by simultaneously occupying both of these positions. In this way the Vodou initiate and the Spiritualist medium shared with the mimetic poet the ability to perform self as other. This second-hand Romantic subjectivity, like Spiritualist *méduimnité* and Vodou possession, was part of a complex imitative mode of expression that emerged in the mid-century Atlantic world. The nineteenth-century literature of Francophone Haiti and Louisiana are not pale imitations but failed imitations--copies that deviate from their models in order to open up a space for these writers to create a provisional, relational, Creole identity.



## Chapter Two: Spiritualism and the Fantastic

In 1853 the *tables-tournantes* craze took hold in France. In many fashionable Parisian salons people gathered together around a small circular table, linked hands, and waited for the table to move and tap out messages from the *au-delà*. While modern Spiritualism owes much to the work of Franz Mesmer and the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, both of whom enjoyed a strong following in France, the mid-century fad for table turning séances was imported from America. On March 31, 1848, the Fox sisters of Hyadesville, New York began to receive messages from the spirit world. Word of their contact with the dead quickly spread through the United States and Europe and sparked an intense interest in various techniques for communication with the "spirit realm." The initial craze for table turning soon faded, but a worldwide religious movement emerged in its aftermath.<sup>32</sup>

Paris and Lyon were early centers of Spiritualism, but interest soon spread, and most cities and towns supported at least one Spiritualist group. In 1889 Spiritualist circles in more than 50 French cities and towns sent delegates to the Congrès spirite et spiritualiste international. These groups were governed by democratic principles and were committed to sharing power among their members. Circles maintained their autonomy but were heavily influenced by Allan Kardec's books and his journal, the Revue spirite. Some groups also published their own journals to disseminate the messages that they received from the spirit world.<sup>33</sup>

Spiritualism offered a refuge for writers silenced in the wake of Louis Napoléon's 1852 coup d'état, notably Eugène Nus.<sup>34</sup> Many journalists and publishers turned to Spiritualism as a

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<sup>32</sup> Lynn Louise Sharp, Rational Religion, Irrational Science: Men, Women, and Belief in French Spiritualism, 1853-1914. diss., UC Irvine, 1996, 17-19.

<sup>33</sup> Sharp 144-155.

<sup>34</sup> Sharp 63.

way to continue writing and printing without being censored.<sup>35</sup> While Spiritualist writing was not openly hostile to the Second Empire (Napoléon III himself dabbled in Spiritualism), its structure allowed writers and publishers to distance themselves from the opinions offered in their writing. Furthermore, the Catholic Church criticized Spiritualists for the same reason that the French authorities persecuted novelists like Flaubert: the absence of a responsible voice in their work. Church authorities in France saw the absence of God's omniscient voice in any message originating in the *au-delà* as proof of Satan's devious presence at the séance.<sup>36</sup> The messiness of spirit communication, the unstable identity of the spirits, and above all the fact that the spirits had only a partial knowledge of the universe and a limited point of view, was a sure sign that Spiritualism was unholy.

While Spiritualism was fundamentally a religious movement, it also inserted itself into many other discourses. Politically, most Spiritualists endorsed democratic principles and favored a republican form of government, although these opinions were rarely expressed openly during the Second Empire. On a social level, Spiritualist groups crossed class boundaries and allowed women to play a significant role in group activities. On a scientific level, Spiritualists saw their work as a part of the larger scientific discourse and claimed to be involved in a rigorous empirical investigation of certain unexplained phenomena. In the related medical arena, Spiritualists proposed a comprehensive system to diagnose and treat diseases. Finally, on a literary level, the Spiritualist circle provided a new model for the production of literary texts. Dead poets and novelists often visited spirit circles and dictated new literary works.

In these circles it was common for visiting spirits to communicate in verse, and great literary figures often dictated poems and plays from the beyond. Victor Hugo, in exile from

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<sup>35</sup> Sharp 66.

<sup>36</sup> Sharp 112.

Second Empire France, experimented with Spiritualism and collaborated with the spirits of dead poets to compose verse. There also appeared during this time a number of "spirit novels" supposedly dictated from the beyond.<sup>37</sup> In addition to Allan Kardec's work, there was a massive surge of Spiritualist publishing during this period, including many works that sought to discredit the movement. There was also an effort made to publicize the many Spiritualist experiments that took place during this time. For example, Camille Flammarion's novel *Lumen* was a widely read tale of a stellar journey that combined the most recent astronomical discoveries with a generally Spiritualist vision of the afterlife.

This chapter explores the interaction between Spiritualism and the literature of the French fantastic. The fantastic tale emerged in France after a popular 1829 translation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's fantastic stories. Baudelaire's translations of Poe (1852-1869) reinvigorated the French fantastic and led to a renewed interest in mesmerism, hypnotism, and madness in these tales. Spiritualism also played a role in such fantastic works as Gautier's Spirite (1865) and "Avatar" (1856), Maupassant's "Le Horla" (1886, 1887), "Lui?" (1884) and "Qui Sait?" (1890), Nerval's "Aurelia" (1853-54), and several stories by Villiers de L'Isle-Adam including "L'Intersigne" (1867) and the novel L'Eve future (1881). The explosion of interest in Spiritualism provided French fantastic literature with a regularized system for producing the many "revenants" that populate these tales. This chapter is not a comprehensive survey of references to Spiritualism in the French fantastic. It will instead focus on two fantastic tales -- Gautier's Spirite and Maupassant's "Le Horla"--in an effort to understand how Spiritualist modes of literary

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<sup>37</sup> These include Jean Mornas (1885) by Jules Claretie, Un caractère (1889) by Leon Hennique and several novels by Henri Riviere including La Main coupée (1862), Les Mépris du Coeur (1865), and Pierrot et Cain (1866).

production influenced the French fantastic, and what this says about Spiritualism's larger role as a model for cultural production and transmission.

"Me voici revenu": Gautier's *Spirite* and Musset *spirite*.

Théophile Gautier's short novel *Spirite*, which was published serially in *Le Moniteur universel* in late 1865 and appeared in book form in February 1866, is perhaps the most explicit treatment of Spiritualism in canonical French fiction. Guy de Malivert, the novel's main character, is courted by, and falls in love with *Spirite*, the ghost of a former admirer. In an embedded narrative, *Spirite* tells her story to Malivert, who serves as a medium for her messages. She describes how during her short life she admired him from afar, but was never able to meet him. Convinced that Guy is in love with the widow Madame d'Ymbercourt, Lavinia d'Aufideni (*Spirite*'s living name) enters a convent and dies shortly thereafter. Because in the afterlife she is able to "read" Malivert's heart, *Spirite* soon discovers that he is not in love with Madame d'Ymbercourt. She thus begins to contact him in the hope that their souls can be united in the *au-delà*. With the help of the Swedenborgian adept baron de Féroë, Malivert learns to communicate with *Spirite* and soon falls in love with her. He rejects Madame d'Ymbercourt and becomes devoted to his otherworldly love. At the end of the novel Malivert is killed by bandits in Greece and ascends into the heavens to be united with *Spirite*.

Gautier's novel is heavily influenced by Balzac's Swedenborgian novel *Seraphita*, and the cosmology that he describes in the novel is generally a Swedenborgian one.<sup>38</sup> But *Spirite* is also clearly influenced by the mid-century fad for table turning, for it describes the specific ceremonial techniques developed in Kardecian Spiritualism. This Spiritualist influence is especially evident in scenes that involve spirit writing. For example, Guy de Malivert first

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<sup>38</sup> Marc Eigeldinger, Introduction, *Spirite, nouvelle fantastique*, by Théophile Gautier (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1970) 21.

becomes aware of a certain uncanny spiritual presence that surrounds him when, as he is sitting down to write a letter, he begins to daydream. Moments later he looks down at the page and discovers that he has written a very frank note to Madame D'Ymbercourt that puts the lie to their lukewarm relationship. In spite of the fact that his hand is still holding the pen, Guy looks down at his desk, exclaims "l'étrange billet que voilà!" and wonders how he could have written this note:

Guy regarda attentivement le billet et il lui sembla que le caractère de l'écriture n'était pas tout à fait le même qu'il employait d'habitude. "Voilà, dit-il, un autographe qui serait contesté par les experts si ma littérature épistolaire en valait la peine. Comment diable cette bizarre transformation a-t-elle pu se faire? ... Si j'étais un peu superstitieux, il ne tiendrait qu'à moi de voir là dedans un avertissement du ciel au lieu d'une distraction inqualifiable."<sup>39</sup>

Guy's mediumship here, his "écriture automatique," and the novel's fluent description of spirit communication and Spiritualist doctrine, led many readers to assume that Gautier was a practicing Spiritualist. When the novel was published, Gautier himself discovered on his desk many "étranges billets" sent to him by his Spiritualists and Swedenborgian readers. During this period he received, as his daughter Judith later recalled, "lettres les plus singulières et les plus folles" from a wide variety of mediums and magnetists.<sup>40</sup> One of these letters was sent by a female medium who also enclosed a message in verse that she claimed to have received, "au moyen d'écriture automatique," from the spirit of Alfred de Musset. Allan Kardec's Revue spirite later published the poem, which, because of its apparent stylistic similarity to Musset's poetry and its reference to Gautier's novel, caused a minor sensation in literary circles:<sup>41</sup>

Me voici revenu. Pourtant, j'avais, Madame,  
Juré sur mes grands Dieux de ne jamais rimer.

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<sup>39</sup> Théophile Gautier, Spirite, nouvelle fantastique (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1970) 44.

<sup>40</sup> Eigeldinger 12.

<sup>41</sup> Gabriel Delanne, Le Phénomène spirite 5e ed (Paris: Chamuel, 1897) 119. (See also: Sharp 189.)

C'est un triste métier que de faire imprimer  
Les oeuvres d'un auteur réduit à l'état d'âme.

J'avais fui loin de vous, mais *un esprit charmant*  
Risque en parlant de nous d'exciter le sourire!  
Je pense qu'il en sait bien plus qu'il n'en veut dire,  
Et qu'il a, quelque part, trouvé son revenant.

Un revenant! vraiment cela paraît étrange.  
Moi-même j'en ai ri quand j'étais ici-bas,  
Mais, lorsque j'affirmais que je n'y croyais pas,  
J'aurais, comme un sauveur, accueilli mon bon ange.

Que je l'aurais aimé, lorsque, le front jauni,  
Appuyé sur ma main, la nuit, dans la fenêtre,  
Mon esprit, en pleurant, sondait le grand *peut-être*,  
En parcourant au loin les champs de l'Infini!

Amis, qu'espérez-vous d'un siècle sans croyance?  
Quand vous aurez pressé votre fruit le plus beau,  
L'homme trébuchera toujours sur un tombeau,  
Si, pour le soutenir, il n'a pas plus l'espérance.

Mais ces vers, dira-t-on, ils ne sont pas de lui.  
Que m'importe, après tout, le blâme du vulgaire:  
Lorsque j'étais vivant, il ne m'occupait guère,  
A plus forte raison, en rirais-je aujourd'hui.

A. DE MUSSET<sup>42</sup>

The second quatrain of this poem is directed at Gautier and his recently published novel and is thus a spirit reading of Spirite. In claiming that Gautier has "trouvé son revenant," the poem is likely referring to the love affair between Gautier and Carlotta Grisi, who served as a model for the character Spirite/Lavinia, and to whom Spirite was dedicated.<sup>43</sup> Thus we see that the novel caused a stir not only among living Spiritualists, but also among the dead, who were rather amused to read about themselves and their spirit world. This poet has, in a sense, been summoned forth by Gautier's novel. Musset speaks in order to acknowledge that he read the

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<sup>42</sup> Delanne 119.

<sup>43</sup> Eigeldinger 11-14.

novel and to provide a spirit critique of the work.<sup>44</sup> But in order to speak from a position of authority, this spirit poet must establish his own identity as Musset. This poem thus highlights the problem of identity in Spiritualist communication-- a problem that also animates Gautier's Spirite.<sup>45</sup> I will thus be interested here in discovering the way in which Gautier's novel uses this problem of identity in the spirit realm. How does the alterity that the spirit séance puts into circulation operate in the novel, and what does this say about the process of cultural transmission and spirit communication?

Before turning to the novel, however, I would like to linger for a moment over Musset *spirite's*<sup>46</sup> verse message. This poem follows a pattern similar to other spirit communications from well-known, recently departed public figures. The Revue spirite paired obituary notices of such figures as Rossini, Berlioz, Eugène Nus and Charles Dickens with post-mortem messages from their spirits that confirmed the validity of the Spiritualist project and the truth of the

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<sup>44</sup> The texts produced in the Spiritualist séance can be read with critical assumptions similar to those that one brings to a novel or a poem. Whether it is truly a spirit communication, a product of a group hallucination, or simply an elaborate fraud, this poem is as relevant a cultural artifact as Gautier's Spirite. Because spirit communications (and for that matter most novels) are so concerned with establishing their own validity, this study deal with the problem of authority in as much as it functions within the text and in the text's reception. But as a matter of practical criticism we must remain thoroughly undecided as to the ontological status of the spirits and their writings. This study shall be interested in *reading* these spirit communications, not in *explaining* them.

<sup>45</sup> Musset *spirite's* reading of the novel is further complicated by the fact that in Spirite, Lavinia quotes Musset as she dresses herself for her first ball in hopes of impressing Guy de Malivert: "Tout en me regardant au miroir de ma toilette pendant que la femme de chambre donnait la dernière main à son oeuvre, je me disais: 'Aime-t-il le bleu? Dans le *Caprice*, d'Alfred de Musset, Mme de Léry prétend que c'est une couleur bête'" (Gautier 121).

<sup>46</sup> This conventional designation--a writer's name qualified by the tag *spirit*, as in "Shakespeare *spirit*" or "Hugo *spirite*"--has become useful to librarians and bibliographers as they attempt to establish a stable authority with which to catalog works attributed to the dead. See: Helen Sword, Ghostwriting Modernism (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2002).

Spiritualist cosmology.<sup>47</sup> Musset, like these other figures, has apparently been converted by his experiences in the afterlife.

In addition to his conversion to Spiritualism (or, perhaps, because of it) Musset *spirite* is also quite intent on establishing his identity with the living Musset. "Me voici revenu" he announces, responding to a specific call from the medium. He is reluctant to compose verse as a spirit, and this reluctance is further proof of his being Musset: "Moi-même j'en ai ri quand j'étais ici-bas." The living Musset would have mocked such spirit verse, yet as "un auteur réduit à l'état d'âme," he swallows his pride and engages in the "triste métier" of spirit writing. As a spirit he is thus different from the living Musset, and yet he continues to claim that he *is* Musset, using this very difference as evidence. He is able to write a poem as Musset precisely because he knows that Musset would have found such a spirit poem preposterous.

This is a rather awkward narrative position, and the poet anticipates his own failure by imagining the critical reaction to the poem: "Mais ces vers, dira-t-on, ils ne sont pas de lui." In this moment he has put himself in the position of the poem's readers, and has thus briefly stepped outside of even the spirit voice that he is trying to establish. But, once again, this alterity is proof of his identity, for the position of the reader is the position that the living Musset would himself occupy: "Un revenant! vraiment cela paraît étrange." This poet--or rather this *je poétique*, for the structure of the séance allows any spirit or combination of spirits to assume a specific identifiable voice--must simultaneously write and read the poem as Musset. He can, in short, only speak as Musset by being different from Musset. Finally, this narrative situation is further complicated by the fact that the poem is actually written by the hand of the medium.

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<sup>47</sup> Sharp 186.



But the poem misjudges its own reception. Unlike many of the poems produced during séances, the language of this spirit author seems to match that of the living author. Shortly after the Musset *spirite* poem was published, Albéric Second, the publisher of the Grand Journal, ran into Théophile Gautier in the home of Mme. Binszk-Korsakoff. Second took advantage of his encounter with Gautier to ask him for his opinion on the poem which he reported in the June 7th 1866 issue of the Grand Journal:

[Gautier:] Une dame qui n'a jamais commis un seul distique de sa vie, m'a envoyé des vers que *l'Esprit* d'Alfred Musset lui aurait dictés à mon adresse.

J'ai lu des pages attribuées à Balzac et à Mme de Girardin, des chansons attribuées à Béranger, des maximes attribuées à la Rochefoucault, qui sont de pures inepties.

Avant de lire les vers d'Alfred Musset dont l'envoi m'avait été annoncé, je supposais qu'ils seraient du même tonneau, et, lecture faite, j'ai dû changer d'avis. L'auteur de *Spectacle dans un fauteuil*, mis à part, je ne connais personne,--*personne*, qui soit capable d'avoir écrit ces vers. J'avoue que c'est une énigme qu'il m'est impossible de déchiffrer.<sup>48</sup>

Gautier here claims that the difference between the banalities of most spirit poetry and this poem lies in the language itself. This poem, Gautier contends, is a stylistic dead-ringer for Musset. Or, to be more precise, the unique voice that the living Musset employed is clearly evident in this poem. And while we should be careful not to read too much into with what is merely an offhand comment made at a party, we can see that the poem is interesting to Gautier precisely because it plays with authority and identity. What is "impossible de déchiffrer" is not the particular meaning of the poetic language, but the enigma of the signature at the end of the poem: "A. DE MUSSET." And so the poem has succeeded where it thought it would fail. Or perhaps the final quatrain's prediction-- "Mais ces vers, dira-t-on, ils ne sont pas de lui"--is yet another attempt to speak *as* Musset by establishing a certain difference from him. In either case, it is precisely this ambiguity of identity in spirit communication that animates Spirite.

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<sup>48</sup> Delanne 119-120.

In the first chapter of the novel, Guy de Malivert, after being somewhat surprised and confused by the first instance of automatic writing, decides that he would rather visit Madame d'Ymbercourt than write another letter excusing himself from this obligation. As he is leaving he hears a strange, muted sigh emanate from his room. During the carriage ride, Guy wonders who or what might have made this sound.

Guy n'y pensait qu'avec cette espèce d'anxiété pleine de questions qu'éprouvent les plus fermes esprits, qui, sans le chercher, se rencontrent avec l'inconnu. Il n'y avait personne dans la chambre - personne, excepté Jack, créature peu sentimentale -; le soupir doucement modulé, harmonieux, attendri, plus léger qu'un susurrement de brise dans des feuilles de tremble, était féminin indubitablement; on ne pouvait lui nier ce caractère.<sup>49</sup>

Rereading Gautier's comments to Second, we can see that Gautier's and Guy de Malivert's uncanny encounters with the spirit world are uncannily similar, both in sentence structure--the repeated "personne--personne"--and in the situation that they describe.<sup>50</sup> Gautier has reacted to this strange spirit text in the same way that Malivert reacts to the sigh. They both

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<sup>49</sup> Gautier 48.

<sup>50</sup> A pillar of the theory of the fantastic, Freud's essay on "The Uncanny" speaks directly to the problem of *l'étrange* in spirit communication:

"In our great cities, placards announce lectures which will tell us how to get into touch with the souls of the departed; and it cannot be denied that many of the most able and penetrating minds among our scientific men have come to the conclusion, especially to the end of their lives, that a contact of this kind is not utterly impossible" (Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" *The Standard Edition*. ed. and tr. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966) 149.

The uncanny feelings that arise from such communication stem from a return of the repressed, in this case not repressed infantile complexes but the return of a collectively repressed "primitive" belief in the supernatural:

"We--or our primitive forefathers--once believed in the possibility of these things and were convinced that they really happened. Nowadays we no longer believe in them, we have surmounted such ways of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new set of beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation" (Freud, "The Uncanny" 155-156).

In reading Gautier's and Malivert's uncanny moments described above, particularly the strange similarity between them, we might say that Gautier is haunted by Spirite; the very language of the novel returns to him when he is confronted with a situation similar to the one he wrote about in the novel.

hesitate, able to read in the poem or sigh a difference from what they expected to hear--either the banalities of most spirit messages or the sounds of Jack the valet. The sigh is too feminine and the poem too well written to be easily dismissed, and they both react with "cette espèce d'anxiété pleine de questions." Thus in encountering these spirit messages, Gautier and Malivert have hesitated between concluding that what they have heard or read is a fraud and that it is actually the voice of a spirit.

In Introduction à la littérature fantastique, Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as a genre that engineers a hesitation on the part of the implied reader, a hesitation that operates on several levels at once: the reader hesitates between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events in the story, and between remaining a reader outside of the text and being drawn into an identification with the (usually first-person) narrator.<sup>51</sup> Gautier's and Malivert's reactions to the spirit communication conform to Todorov's definition of the fantastic, for both hesitate in their reading of the spirit message. In Gautier's case this hesitation is only a function of the reading directions that the poem has itself supplied. The poem, like most Spiritualist texts, is extremely self-referential. Indeed many spirit communications are nothing more than a reiteration of established Spiritualist ideas about spirit writing and the reception that it should receive. In this way Todorov's observation about the self-referential nature of the fantastic seem also to apply to spirit communications:

Le fantastique, à la différence de beaucoup d'autres genres, comporte de nombreuses indications sur le rôle que le lecteur aura à jouer (ce qui ne veut pas dire que tout texte ne le fait pas). Nous avons vu que cette propriété relève, plus généralement, du procès d'énonciation, tel qu'il est présenté à l'intérieur du texte..<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, Introduction à la littérature fantastique (Paris: Seuil, 1970).

<sup>52</sup> Todorov 94.

However, the point I want to emphasize here is not the extent to which these spirit communications, and Gautier's and Malivert's responses to them, conform to Todorov's definition, but rather the fact that both readers hesitate over the problem of the identity of the speaking voice. Todorov is not interested in actual readers, but in the implied reader, "tel qu'il est présenté à l'intérieur du texte." Thus Gautier's hesitation in reading the poem is a byproduct of the poem's own self-aware discussion of the "procès d'énonciation." Furthermore, Todorov's definition of the fantastic demands a hesitant, incomplete identification between implied reader and the *héros* of the story. In this sense Spiritualism was a useful narrative tool for the fantastic in general, and for Gautier's Spirite in particular, because of the model it provides for this identification between reader and character. The ambiguity of spirit identity complicates this already halting identification. As we continue on with a reading of the Spiritualist moments in Spirite, we shall see the ways in which these moments engender a certain creeping alterity in the text.

Spirite is widely read as an allegory of the writing process in general and of artistic inspiration in particular. After a long night of medium writing, Guy is visited by the baron de Féroë, who at first mistakes Spirite's text for "inspired" writing: "- Je comprends, reprit le baron, Apollon dictait, Homère écrivait: ces vers-là sont les meilleurs."<sup>53</sup> But when Malivert tells his friend that he was actually possessed by another consciousness as he wrote, Féroë explains to him that has served as a medium for this spirit. Spirite has written her story with Guy's hand. At the very beginning of the long narrative that Spirite transmits to Guy, we see that she feels compelled to establish her own identity precisely because she has invaded *his* identity:

Il faut d'abord que vous connaissiez l'être indéfinissable pour vous qui s'est glissé dans votre existence. Quelle que soit votre pénétration, vous ne pourriez parvenir à démêler sa

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<sup>53</sup> Gautier 165.

vraie nature, et, comme dans une tragédie mal faite où le héros décline ses noms, qualités et références, je suis forcée de m'expliquer moi-même... Ce monde invisible, dont le réel est le voile, a ses pièges et ses abîmes, mais vous n'y tomberez pas. Des esprits de mensonge et de perversité le parcourent; il y a des anges noirs comme il y a des anges blancs, des puissances rebelles et des puissances soumises, des forces bienfaisantes et des forces nuisibles...je suis simplement une âme attendant encore son jugement, mais à qui la bonté céleste permet de pressentir une sentence favorable.<sup>54</sup>

The very fact that Spirite has entered into Guy de Malivert's consciousness--"glissé dans votre existence "-- demands that Spirite not only announce herself, but also that she establish that her intentions are good. In this passage Spirite rehearses the same problem of identity in the spirit séance that Allan Kardec discusses in his Livre des médiums. Kardec's book served as a practical manual for Spiritualists seeking to form spirit circles and aspiring mediums trying to contact the beyond. In the spirit world, the identity of the spirits fall along a rather fluid hierarchy: recently dead souls retain many of their distinguishing characteristics while older or purer spirits, those that have moved to the highest levels of transcendence, begin to lose their individuality. Yet the spirit world, as Spirite explains, contains "ses pièges et ses abîmes." For every benevolent spirit there is a trickster or charlatan who can deceive the medium by writing under an assumed name. Even well intentioned spirits sometimes borrow the name of another spirit, and advanced spirits can send second-hand messages through a spirit "mandataire," who will faithfully transmit the message to the medium. As they near a purely transcendent state, spirits belong to communities of transcendence and may send collective messages under the name of one of their well-know members. It is for this reason, Kardec claims, that so many spirits discover that their guardian angel is St. Paul.

In Gautier's novel, we see that Spirite is eager to assure Malivert that she is not a malevolent spirit, that she means him no harm, and that she is "simplement une âme attendant

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<sup>54</sup> Gautier 109.

encore son jugement."<sup>55</sup> In order to differentiate herself from these dishonest souls, Spirite must describe her life on the earth. She provides Malivert with a message through which he can read her identity. With all of the potential complications to spirit identity, Kardec proposes a similar strategy, advising that spirit messages be read with the same skeptical attention to detail that one adopts when reading a literary text: "En soumettant toutes les communications à un examen scrupuleux, en scrutant et en analysant la pensée et les expressions comme on le fait quand il s'agit de juger un ouvrage littéraire." <sup>56</sup> It is only in the language of the message that the truth of the spirit's identity can emerge, as explained here by a spirit responding to Kardec's questions:

[Kardec:] Par la facilité avec laquelle les mauvais Esprits se mêlent aux communications, il paraît qu'on n'est jamais certain d'avoir la vérité?

'Si, puisque vous avez un jugement pour les apprécier. A la lecture d'une lettre, vous savez bien reconnaître si c'est un goujat ou un homme bien élevé, un sot ou un savant, qui vous écrit; pourquoi ne pourriez-vous le faire quand ce sont des Esprits qui vous écrivent? Si vous recevez une lettre d'un ami éloigné, qui vous prouve qu'elle est bien de lui? Son écriture, direz-vous; mais n'y a-t-il pas de faussaires qui imitent toutes les écritures; des fripons qui peuvent connaître vos affaires? Cependant il est des signes auxquels vous ne vous méprenez pas; il en est de même des Esprits. Figurez-vous donc que c'est un ami qui vous écrit, ou que vous lisez l'ouvrage d'un écrivain, et jugez par les mêmes moyens.'<sup>57</sup>

This reading strategy is not as demanding as it first seems. The Spiritualist need not have an intimate knowledge of all spirits who might speak during the séance, but must simply be wary of logical inconsistencies in the messages. As long as there is an internal correspondence between the spirit's character and the spirit's language, then the medium can assume that he is dealing with an upstanding and honest soul. As Kardec explains, the problem of identity in the spirit realm can be ignored if the messages that one receives are logically coherent.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Gautier 109.

<sup>56</sup> Kardec 336.

<sup>57</sup> Kardec 348-9.

<sup>58</sup> Kardec 327.

But while benevolent messages can signal a benevolent spirit, there is no guarantee as to a particular spirit's honesty. Spirits sometimes received messages that were signed by God or Jesus, which, Kardec warned, were often messages from trickster spirits. Any reading of spirit messages must therefore penetrate the surface of the text--in this case the physical manuscript that the medium produces--to access the true identity of the spirit. Spirite, in Gautier's novel, has herself used this reading strategy to learn more about Malivert. Malivert's pseudonymous writing in the journals has provided Spirite with a way to read the truth of Malivert's soul:

Lire un écrivain, c'est se mettre en communication d'âme; un livre n'est-il pas une confidence adressée à un ami idéal, une conversation dont l'interlocuteur est absent? Il ne faut pas toujours prendre au pied de la lettre ce que dit un auteur: On doit faire la part des systèmes philosophiques ou littéraires, des affectations à la mode en ce moment-là, des réticences exigées, du style voulu ou commandé, des imitations admiratives et de tout ce qui peut modifier les formes extérieures d'un écrivain. Mais, sous tous ces déguisements, la vraie attitude de l'âme finit par se révéler pour qui sait lire; la sincère pensée est souvent entre les lignes, et le secret du poète, qu'il ne veut pas toujours livrer à la foule, se devine à la longue; l'un après l'autre les voiles tombent et les mots des énigmes se découvrent. Pour me former une idée de vous, j'étudiai avec une attention extrême ces récits de voyage, ces morceaux de philosophie et de critique, ces nouvelles et ces pièces de vers semées çà et là à d'assez longs intervalles et qui marquaient des phases diverses de votre esprit.<sup>59</sup>

Here, too, the identity of the writer is intimately tied to his literary productions, but, like the spirit messages produced at a séance, this identity is hidden beneath certain linguistic "déguisements." The process of reading removes the various veils behind which the writer might hide, for "la vraie attitude de l'âme finit par se révéler pour qui sait lire." In this way we can see that it is only through reading that a stable identity can emerge from the text.

In "La lecture comme hantise: *Spirite* et *Le Horla*" Ross Chambers suggests that in addition to being an allegory for writing and poetic inspiration, *Spirite* posits a model for its own reading. Conforming to the trend in the fantastic that Todorov highlights, this novel promotes a

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<sup>59</sup> Gautier 117-118.

specific reading design. Chambers sees in the novel an extended effort on the part of the text to subdue its own implied reader, to enter into and possess the reader, and thus to guard its own identity as a written text from the threatening alterity of the reader's presence:

Toutefois la passivité du héros--passivité que le texte ne manque pas de souligner--demande une autre interprétation encore: en même temps que celle d'un écrivain soumis à sa Muse, c'est celle d'un lecteur, de ce type de lecteur qui admet la domination d'un texte afin de vivre à travers lui une aventure autre que la sienne, une aventure qui est proprement d' "autre monde".<sup>60</sup>

Chambers sees the embedded narrative dictated by Spirite as an important part of the model for reading that the text establishes:

Episode, pourtant, qui est aussi le point pivot du texte, non seulement parce que le récit au moyen duquel Spirite prend forme dans le monde de Guy raconte le long processus de prise de voile par laquelle Lavinia, méconnu de Guy, disparaissait de la sphère humaine; mais aussi parce que, fasciné désormais, Guy n'aura plus besoin de connaître Spirite à travers des formes matérielles pour l'aimer et la désirer. Moment, donc, de dépassement de la forme, qui montre le héros lecteur captive désormais par le contenu ineffable que la forme ne faisait que véhiculer.<sup>61</sup>

In this way we can see that Spirite narrates her own identity as immaterial spirit while at the same time demanding that Malivert embark on a similar transcendent journey. Chambers's reading allows us to see how Spirite's narrative realigns the positions of reader and writer in such a way as to defend the identity of the text as written text from the alterity of the reader. As a reader, and therefore a figure for the implied reader, Malivert is passive, letting himself be fully possessed by the text that he reads. In the communicative act of which the novel *Spirite* is a part, this emptying of Malivert leads to his being cast as reader who is progressively deprived of his readerly identity (that is, as the threatening other to the text's written identity) as he advances closer and closer to the transcendent union with Spirite: "Rapt de l'âme qui n'est pas seulement le

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<sup>60</sup> Ross Chambers, "La lecture comme hantise: *Spirite* et *Le Horla*" Revue des sciences humaines, 49, 177 (1980): 105-117.

<sup>61</sup> Chambers, 110.



noyau d'où se développe toute l'idée narrative du texte, mais aussi le modèle--pour ce texte--de ce que doit être l'action d'un texte sur son lecteur ravi."<sup>62</sup>

While Gautier's novel uses this hollowed-out reader as a strategy to control its own reading, we can see that in a Spiritualist context the loss of this reader's identity--which can also be described as a loss of the reader's alterity, a surrendering of difference in the face of the text's own proscribed reading model--can in fact be a very useful stance from which to produce literary texts. Mediums vary in their natural ability to receive messages, from the basic taps to the most advanced automatic writing. The intelligence, life experience (including previous lives), and the malleability of her soul and "périspire" (or "astral body") also affect a mediums ability to receive messages from the spirit world. But the primary quality that a medium must have is the ability to empty herself, to be dominated by the will of the spirit in the same way that Malivert (and, by extension, the implied reader) are dominated by the text. Thus as Malivert proceeds towards his transcendent unity with Spirite, and it is in the penultimate phase of his transcendence, when he has one foot in this world and the other in the *au-delà*, that he is able to produce his best work as a writer:

Jamais il ne s'éleva à une pareille hauteur, et les plus grands poètes eussent signé ce qu'il écrivit ce jour-là. Comme, une strophe achevée, il rêvait à la suivante, il laissa vaguement errer ses yeux autour de l'atelier et il vit Spirite couchée à demi sur le divan, qui, la main au menton, le coude enfoncé dans un coussin, le bout de ses doigts effilés jouant dans les nuages blonds de ses cheveux, le regardait d'un air amoureuxment contemplatif. Elle semblait être là depuis longtemps; mais elle n'avait pas voulu révéler sa présence, de peur d'interrompre le travail de Guy. Et comme Malivert se levait de son fauteuil pour se rapprocher d'elle, Spirite lui fit signe de ne pas se déranger, et, d'une voix plus douce que toutes les musiques, elle répéta strophe pour strophe, vers pour vers, la pièce à laquelle travaillait Guy. Par une mystérieuse sympathie elle sentait la pensée de son amant, la suivait dans son essor et même la dépassait; car non seulement elle voyait, mais elle prévoyait, et elle dit complète la stance inachevée dont il cherchait encore la chute.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Chambers 110.

<sup>63</sup> Gautier 177-8.

Gautier has employed the idea of a divine language that admits no materiality and is thus an abyss of authorial identity. Here we see that the ideal poem that Malivert composes (a poem which does not appear in the text), perfectly reflects divine truth. The mediating philosophies and conventions of his earlier writings have disappeared in this transcendent new composition, laying bare the truth of his soul. But this writing erases all difference, and Guy's poem is hardly his own, for "les plus grands poètes eussent signé ce qu'il écrivit ce jour-là." In such a situation, he is easily replaced in the act of writing, and Spirite is able to recite the poem without reading it and completes the last line for him.

Following Chambers's reading, we can see that Malivert has here been emptied of his difference from the text, and that the particular identity of the writer and the individual poem are lost in a transcendent identity. But what if this stifling loss of identity in transcendence that we see in Gautier's novel occurred a different situation? What if the medium/reader was already in a position that denied him his alterity--say, the compromised position of the colonial Other. Chambers's reading of *Spirite* posits as a model a community of communication, in which writer and reader are each sufficiently different so as to enjoy a distinct function and identity. But in the absence of this community, in a situation in which the reader is denied an identity and voice before even sitting down at the table to read, we might suggest that the Spiritualist model can serve as a tool to create an interpretative space and relational identity. It is for this reason that in nineteenth-century France many mediums were women, and that during the same period in Louisiana the most successful mediums were free people of color.

Thus the hollowed-out reader, which Gautier's novel has used to dominate the alterity of the implied reader, could alternatively be used as a platform from which one might launch a renewed difference. Furthermore Spiritualism was a tool for the production of alterity that, in the

mimetic post-colonial setting of the nineteenth-century Atlantic world, allowed for the provisional formation of relational identities.

We must also remember that unlike Gautier's version of Spiritualism, Kardec's Spiritualist universe is only partly transcendent. Most messages are poorly written and of dubious origins, and many spirits are tricksters or charlatans. In such a situation the tyranny of transcendence is no match for the community of voices that emerged from the tables and the community of readers who eagerly awaited these messages.

At the end of Spirite, as the baron de Féroë witnesses the co-mingling of Malivert and Spirite, he himself longs for a similar transcendence: "Les voilà heureux à jamais; leurs âmes réunies forment un ange d'amour, dit avec un soupir mélancolique le baron de Féroë. Et moi, combien de temps me faudra-t-il encore attendre?"<sup>64</sup> The baron de Féroë's sigh echoes Spirite's earlier sigh that so puzzled Malivert. Signs of frustration and longing, these sighs mark a desire for the dissolution of self in the *au-delà*. Yet emerging from this same transcendent realm we also hear not sighs but the laughter of a doubly different poet crossing back and forth over the borders of his identity, chuckling at those who do not recognize him:

Mais ces vers, dira-t-on, ils ne sont pas de lui.  
Que m'importe, après tout, le blâme du vulgaire:  
Lorsque j'étais vivant, il ne m'occupait guère,  
A plus forte raison, en rirais-je aujourd'hui.<sup>65</sup>

### "Le Horla" and the Colonial Other

From sighs to laughter and now to shrieks of terror: in Guy de Maupassant's "Le Horla" the narrator is tormented by a menacing, ethereal otherness that haunts him day and night and finally causes him to cry out in fear:

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<sup>64</sup> Gautier 215.

<sup>65</sup> Delanne 119.

Oh! Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! Est-il un Dieu? S'il en est un, délivrez-moi, sauvez-moi! secourez-moi! Pardon! Pitié! Grâce! Sauvez-moi! Oh! quelle souffrance! Quelle torture! Quelle horreur!<sup>66</sup>

Maupassant wrote two versions of "Le Horla." In the first, published in 1886, the narration of the haunted (and unnamed) protagonist is framed by the *aliéniste* Dr. Marrande who introduces his patient to a group of his colleagues. The second version, published a year later, takes the form of a journal in which the narrator describes the progress of this haunting and his efforts to escape from this creature's grasp. He first senses a certain presence that surrounds him as he lies awake at night, unable to sleep. A visit to Mont-Saint-Michel briefly alleviates his uneasiness, but when he returns home the mysterious presence visits him again. At night he feels it suck out his very life from between his lips. He performs several experiments to discover what it is that is haunting him, and one night he even charges after the invisible creature, chasing it around his bedroom. An article he reads leads him to suspect that a boat he saw pass on the Seine the day before he first felt ill might have transported this creature from Brazil, where there was an outbreak of similar possessions. The narrator speculates that this creature is a new type of being that will one day dominate man the way man currently dominates the world. Finally, in desperation, the narrator traps the creature in his bedroom, slips outside and burns the house to the ground. Having done this he realizes he might not have actually killed the Horla, and that to truly be rid of it he might have to kill himself.

While this story does not explicitly treat Spiritualism or table turning, it does describe an interesting episode of mesmerism in which the narrator witnesses the well-known Dr. Parent hypnotize his cousin. He later likens his own state to that of his cousin's while she was hypnotized: "Elle subissait un vouloir étranger en elle, comme une autre âme parasite et

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<sup>66</sup> Guy de Maupassant Les Horlas, récits (Paris: Actes Sud, 1995) 62-63.

dominatrice."<sup>67</sup> But the being that possesses the story's narrator is quite different from Dr. Parent's dominating will, for the Horla is an alien being that exists on a different plane. Allan Kardec's Livre des médiums devotes an entire chapter to this very problem, what Kardec calls spirit "obsession." Mediums, it seems, are sometimes in danger of being possessed (a term that Kardec explicitly disavows because of its inflammatory connotations) by the spirits that they contact:

Au nombre des écueils que présente la pratique du spiritisme, il faut mettre en première ligne l'obsession, c'est-à-dire l'empire que quelques Esprits savent prendre sur certaines personnes. Elle n'a jamais lieu que par les Esprits inférieurs qui cherchent à dominer; les bons Esprits ne font éprouver aucune contrainte; ils conseillent, combattent l'influence des mauvais, et si on ne les écoute pas, ils se retirent. Les mauvais, au contraire, s'attachent à ceux sur lesquels ils trouvent prise; s'ils parviennent à prendre de l'empire sur quelqu'un, ils s'identifient avec son propre Esprit et le conduisent comme un véritable enfant.<sup>68</sup>

Kardec breaks down this colonization of the identity into three types: "l'obsession simple," by which he means the continued and unwelcome interruption of a spirit during a conversation between a medium and other (more polite) spirits; "la fascination," in which the spirit is able to secretly enter into the mediums thoughts, temporarily tricking him into believing whatever he says; and "la subjugation," in which the medium is completely possessed, mind and body, by the spirit.

It is interesting to note here that Kardec describes this possession using colonial terms. The spirit can possess the medium--"prendre de l'empire"-- by invading the medium's own soul and *identifying* with it. He inserts himself into the very selfhood of the medium and colonizes his identity. This description is very similar to the language that the narrator of "Le Horla" uses to describe his own possession:

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<sup>67</sup> Maupassant 63.

<sup>68</sup> Kardec 308.

14 août-- Je suis perdu! Quelqu'un possède mon âme et la gouverne! Quelqu'un ordonne tous mes actes, toutes mes mouvements, toutes mes pensées. Je ne suis plus rien en moi, rien qu'un spectateur esclave et terrifié de toutes les choses que j'accomplis...<sup>69</sup>

The self is thus dominated by the other in ways very similar to the domination of a subjugated people by a colonial power. In both cases there is an invasion of identity, a hollowing out of their "propre Esprit" and a replacement by a dominating colonial consciousness. In "'Le Horla,' Sex, and Colonization" Gerald Prince brings this reading a step further, suggesting that the Horla's threatening presence is similar to the presence of the colonial other that has itself decided to invade the former colonial power:

The Horla thus represents a thoroughly different race, something which Maupassant's texts signals explicitly on two occasions. It is a race born in Brazil, a race that could have also arisen in the Indies but not in Paris or Bougival, a race, therefore, linked to places which are not only exotic and connotatively suggestive of magic or savagery (the Horla practices a kind of modified cannibalism) but which are also former French colonies. And the protagonist's nationalism and pride in his roots slowly translates into xenophobia, racial fear, the terror of being a victim of colonization.<sup>70</sup>

It is not simply the presence of the colonized Other that strikes fear into the heart of the narrator, but the presence of the Other as a radically different consciousness that might supplant the narrator's entire being. Thus the boat that brings the Horla close to the narrator is "un superbe trois-mâts brésilien, tout blanc, admirablement propre et luisant."<sup>71</sup> On its surface the boat is shiny and white, but in its interior it carries a threatening difference.

Following this colonial reading, we can see that the Horla would not be so threatening if he were not encountered in such a familiar place. The terror inspired by the Other begins at the very site of a rooted identity:

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<sup>69</sup> Maupassant 62-63.

<sup>70</sup> Gerald Prince, "'Le Horla' Sex, and Colonization" Alternatives ed. Warren Motte and Gerald Prince (Lexington, KY: French Forum, 1993) 181-188.

<sup>71</sup> Maupassant 38.

8 mai.--Quelle journée admirable! J'ai passé toute la matinée étendu sur l'herbe, devant ma maison, sous l'énorme plante qui la couvre, l'abrite et l'ombrage tout entière. J'aime ce pays, et j'aime y vivre parce que j'y ai mes racines, ces profondes et délicates racines, qui attachent un homme à la terre où sont nés et morts ses aïeux ...<sup>72</sup>

Having thus attached himself to a place and defined himself by this clear lineage, the narrator is quite sensitive to any foreign presence. His relationship to the outside world is necessarily a xenophobic one. Like the possessed medium, the narrator of "Le Horla" has become trapped in a situation that endangers his identity. We should thus look not to the invading Horla, but to the narrator's own rigidly defined, rooted identity as the source of his problem. As Ross Chambers's reading shows, this story can be read as an anti-model for its own reading; it covertly advocates an egalitarian community of readers and writers, a model which is itself very close to the ideal séance in Kardecian Spiritualism.<sup>73</sup> This relationship breaks down in Spiritualism when the medium and the spirit betray this communitarian ideal, for the medium is only able to receive messages from the beyond when she remains flexible and supple in her own identity. The spirit too must respect the autonomy of her interlocutor. She can transmit messages

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<sup>72</sup> Maupassant 38.

<sup>73</sup> Ross Chambers sees in "Le Horla" an inversion of the model that *Spirite* proposes for its own reading. Rather than the text's undermining of the reader's threatening alterity, "Le Horla" figures the reader as the Horla, the threatening presence that might destroy the text, but who also, in an important scene later in the story, is a fundamentally incompetent reader. This text is thus an anti-model, a demonstration of the failure of the authoritarian model for reading:

La relation non-autoritaire entre le texte et son lecteur dont nous avons cru discerner les linéaments en dégagant certaines implications du Horla apparaît donc justement comme le modèle d'une relation *démocratique* entrée l'institution littéraire et le public des lecteurs: commerce non-aliénant parce qu'à base d'égalité. (Chambers 117)

This reading of the story brings us back to Kardec's discussion of the problems of spirit obsession. Just as in the case of a possessed medium, there is an interruption of the democratic community by an alienating authoritarian figure. Both the narrator of "Le Horla" and the possessed medium suffer from, in Chamber's words, "une abdication progressive d'identité" (Chambers 112). For Kardec the three progressive degrees of possession constitute a fundamental breakdown in the proper spirit-medium relationship. This ideal relationship is a fundamentally democratic one, in which both spirit and medium share a measure of power.

but must not become overly ambitious and colonize the medium that communicates with her. We might thus see that in "Le Horla" the narrator's terror is a function not of the Horla's presence, but of his own rigid identity.

"Le Horla" and Spirite have used Spiritualism to inject a certain uncanny difference into their texts. But rather than embracing the destabilizing narrative possibilities that this imported alterity brings with it, they have instead used this difference as a bridge to the same. In Spirite, the transcendent trumps this alterity, drawing it back into a homogenized divine realm. In "Le Horla," the visiting other is a maddening presence that demonstrates narrator's failed mediumship and his rigid inability to partake of the other. That these stories do not embrace the democratic, egalitarian potential of Spiritualism is, in the end, not at all surprising. They are fantastic tales and therefore play on the uncanny sameness of the Other. It is perhaps for this reason that Spiritualists frowned upon this fantastic description of Spiritualism and sought to distance their movement from these stories.

But it is nonetheless important to note that Spiritualism has appeared in these texts as a difference machine, a technology for the production of alterity. Later chapters examine how Spiritualism, as a mode of cultural production and transmission, enables relational "Creole" identities. In the uprooted setting of Haiti and Louisiana, the Horla's presence might work to produce, not destroy, identity. In as much as the Horla is a Creole spirit returning to pollute the ontological purity of the *metropole*, his threatening presence might undermine the stability of the singular authorial voice. In a similar way, Victor Hugo, in his spiritual experiment during his Jersey exile, flirted with the transcendent possibilities that Spiritualism seemed to offer. But when confronted by the destabilizing possibility of a polyvocal *au-delà*, Hugo, like Gautier and Maupassant, found it necessary to neutralize the potential threats from the spirit voices.



Chapter Three:  
Spectres de Hugo

(Pendant une suspension de séance, Victor Hugo improvisa les vers suivants:)

Toi qui du vieux Shakespeare as ramassé le ceste,  
Toi qui près d'Othello sculptes le sombre Alceste,  
Astre qui resplendis sur un double horizon,  
Poète au Louvre, archange au ciel, ô grand Molière,  
Ta visite splendide honore ma maison.  
Me tendras-tu là-haut la main hospitalière?  
Que la fosse pour moi s'ouvre dans le gazon:  
Je vois sans peur la tombe aux ombres éternelles,  
Car je sais que le corps y trouve une prison,  
Mais que l'âme y trouve des ailes.

(agitation de la table.)<sup>74</sup>

Tables Tournantes transcripts.  
Jersey, February 10th, 1854.

Victor Hugo descends from his position in the *Panthéon* with clock-like regularity: a state sponsored celebration of the anniversary of his birth in 1902 was followed by a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1935, similar ceremonies in 1952 and 1985, and the recent observance of the Hugo bicentennial in 2002. Hugo returns to frequent the monument to himself that he diligently constructed while he was alive. Indeed the elaborate state funeral in late May and early June of 1885, which culminated with his installation in the newly deconsecrated *Panthéon*, was, according to Avner Ben-Amos, merely a confirmation of the position that he had already carved out for himself in the French imagination--"l'apothéose de son apothéose."<sup>75</sup> In life Hugo walked among the "Grands Hommes"; when he died, his immortality was a foregone conclusion, and his elevation to the *Panthéon* but a fulfillment of his

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<sup>74</sup> Les Tables Tournantes de Jersey ed. Gustave Simon (Paris: Conard, 1923) 205.

<sup>75</sup> Avner Ben-Amos, "Les funérailles de Victor Hugo." La République. Vol. 1. Les lieux de mémoire. ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, 1984) 475.

prefigured divinity. The date of Hugo's death joined the date of his birth (already in the later years of his life an important event in the Parisian social calendar) as a temporal signpost that measures and regulates cultural memory.<sup>76</sup>

Hugo's death was immediately seen as an epochal shift in France's cultural history. "Le dix-neuvième siècle sera le siècle de Victor Hugo, comme le dix-huitième fut celui de Voltaire," Le Figaro claimed.<sup>77</sup> The massive public funeral and installation of Hugo's mortal remains in the Panthéon not only confirmed his fame, it also sought to fix and control how he was remembered, to provide a chamber in which his voice, still resonating, might nonetheless be contained. One of the most well known celebrations of Hugo's passing is Mallarmé's "Crise de Vers", which uses funeral imagery to describe the liberating effect of Hugo's death:

Un lecteur français, ses habitudes interrompues à la mort de Victor Hugo, ne peut que se déconcerter. Hugo, dans sa tâche mystérieuse, rabattit toute la prose, philosophie, éloquence, histoire au vers, et, comme il était le vers personnellement, il confisqua chez qui pense, discours ou narre, presque le droit à s'énoncer. Monument en ce désert, avec le silence loin; dans une crypte la divinité ainsi d'une majestueuse idée inconsciente, à savoir que la forme appelée vers est simplement elle-même la littérature; que vers il y a sitôt que s'accentue la diction, rythme dès que style. Le vers, je crois, avec respect attendit que le géant qui l'identifiait à sa main tenace et plus ferme toujours de forgeron, vînt à manquer; pour, lui, se rompre.<sup>78</sup>

For Mallarmé, poetry, liberated by the death of its tyrannical master, has itself risen from the grave. During Hugo's reign, pure verse --"la divinité ainsi d'une majestueuse idée inconsciente"-- was imprisoned in the monumental crypt of his *oeuvre*. The death of the tyrant, who had reduced all speaking to his own personal speech, left a void that was filled with the very materiality of verse itself. With Hugo constrained to his own monument, verse was free to rise from the dead. It

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<sup>76</sup> Les Tables 476.

<sup>77</sup> qtd. in Ben-Amos 482.

<sup>78</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé. "Crise de vers" Oeuvres complètes. ed. Henri Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) 362-363.

had, in effect, swapped places with Hugo, filling the elocutionary vacuum that he left behind with its own pure and liberated form.

Yet Hugo's absence--"manquer"-- is not as complete as Mallarmé first indicates. The elocutionary disappearance of the poet (in general) and of Hugo (in particular), is compromised by the fact that poetry is liberated only in so far as it can remember its own imprisonment. In discussing recent innovations in French verse, Mallarmé claims that "la réminiscence du vers strict hante ces jeux à côté et leur confrère un profit."<sup>79</sup> The structures that had so constrained poetry, and that were co-equal with Hugo himself--"il était le vers personnellement"--now enable the newly liberated verse to be just that, liberated. And so while Hugo's tyrannical regime was over, the steady drum beat of his poetry would haunt the generations that follow.

But *haunt* is not the right word here, for the echoing rhythms of Hugo's verse are neither unexpected nor unwelcome. Hugo's persistent rhythmic presence is not the irregular rattling chains of a restless spirit; it is, rather, the echoing voice of a cultural icon resonating in a public monument. His poetry, like the memory of Hugo the public figure, is a known cultural norm, and it is perhaps fitting that the regular centenary cadence of these celebrations of his death and birth are, like his echoing *alexandrins*, cut in two by a hémistiche at the mid-century mark. Hugo's elocutionary disappearance is thus assured by his orderly elocutionary *revenance*; his periodic return to the cultural stage, like the rhythm of his verse, follows a proscribed and predictable pattern.

These monumentalizing efforts are not inconsistent with Hugo's own thoughts on his role in death. In his long meditation on "genius" in William Shakespeare, Hugo constructs a literary pantheon by compiling long lists of luminaries to which his name will certainly be added. Unlike

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<sup>79</sup> Mallarmé 362.

famous generals whose greatness rests in their material accomplishments, Hugo's geniuses do not fade when they die: "Pour qui n'a eu d'autre action que celle de l'esprit, la tombe est l'élimination de l'obstacle. Être mort, c'est être tout-puissant."<sup>80</sup> The great power inherent in death arises from the transformation of earthly spirit into pure soul. The genius's body is left behind, but so too is any residue of his material existence that might have tarnished his work. In death the genius is polished and buffed, the undeniable brilliance of his masterpieces shines forth, and his true identity as genius is revealed as self-evident and unassailable. In this way the diversity of the genius's voice is boiled down to its monumental form--the *chef d'oeuvre*--and these masterpieces are the site of the genius's continued presence in death: "Pour qu'un esprit donne toute sa clarté, il lui faut la mort. L'éblouissement du genre humain commence quand ce qui était génie devient une âme. Un livre où il y a du fantôme est irrésistible."<sup>81</sup> In this sense, the genius becomes fully present as genius only at his death, for he returns from the dead as pure spirit to inhabit the monumental space of his timeless masterpieces.<sup>82</sup> Thus, according to Hugo's own formulation, at his death his soul would slide snugly into his monumental *oeuvre*, where he would dwell, fully present and co-equal to his own echoing voice.

We can recognize in Mallarmé's essay, in the great public funeral in Paris, and in Hugo's own understanding of his monumental Oeuvres Complètes, the need to entomb, isolate, and separate (whether by exaltation or expulsion) the figure of "Victor Hugo." These memorials are related to Freud's understanding of "the work of mourning," the separation of the ego from the lost love object that requires a series of rehearsals and tributes during which "each single one of

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<sup>80</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare. Oeuvres complètes de Victor Hugo. Philosophie II. (Paris: Hetzel, Quantin, 1882) 368.

<sup>81</sup> Hugo, William Shakespeare 372.

<sup>82</sup> See Victor Brombert, "Hugo, Shakespeare and the Promontory" in Writing in the Modern Temper, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Stanford: Anma Libra, 1984).

the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it."<sup>83</sup> These monuments to Hugo (and by Hugo) are all attempts to "ontologize" his remains, to fix his death in a stable and solid ground. They assign to Hugo a place in the national Pantheon that both elevates and contains his voice. They establish a fixed and regular memorial space, separate from the space of the living, in which Hugo's spirit can appear and speak according to a posted schedule.

But these monuments have been only partly successful. I have begun with this exploration of Hugo's regular *revenge*, the monument built for him and the monumental pose that he assumed at his death, in order to better understand a series of irregular, haunting visits by Hugo's spirit. Hugo's monuments, whether temporal (both in the sense of his echoing prosody and of his regular return for anniversary celebrations) or spatial (the sheer mass of his cultural displacement, on library shelves and in the public imagination) are menaced by his own restless ghost. His spirit wanders about in defiance of the polished monumental apparatus built to contain him, making many unscheduled appearances.

On April 20th, 1930, the spirit of Victor Hugo transmitted several messages in verse to a circle of Vietnamese Spiritualists at Tây-ninh, the "Holy See" of the syncretistic Vietnamese religion Caodaism.<sup>84</sup> Hugo, or *Nguyêt Tâm Chân Nhân*, "Holy Spirit of the Moon," was an important spiritual informant to the founders of this religion, and today he occupies a prominent place in the Caodai pantheon. During this particular séance, Hugo's spirit elaborated his vision of

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<sup>83</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, V.14. ed. and tr. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957) 245.

<sup>84</sup> Gabriel Gobron, Histoire et Philosophie du Caodaïsme (Paris: Dervy, 1949) 63.

a hierarchical cosmology in which souls progress through distinct spheres, yet retain a certain coherence and identity:

Hugo: ...Oui, chacun de nous a un domaine défini  
Que nous fabriquions avec notre force d'esprit.  
Ames et êtres provenant de notre état karmique,  
Forment ainsi notre ciel ou notre république.<sup>85</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that Hugo's spirit would play a prominent role in Spiritualist circles. His "visionary" poetry was heavily influenced by the same mid-century metaphysical cocktail--Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, the cabala, and several other esoteric traditions--that had influenced Spiritualism. The hierarchical Swedenborgian cosmogony and visionary poetic project of such poems as "Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre" would have struck a chord with Spiritualists around the world. But, perhaps more importantly, Hugo himself had been a practicing Spiritualist.

From September of 1853 until December of 1855, Hugo, in exile on Jersey in the English Channel, participated in an intensive series of Spiritualist séances. Hugo was often joined at these *tables tournantes* by his wife, his children Charles, François-Victor and Adèle, his friend and fellow poet Auguste Vacquerie, and other members of Jersey's community of *proscrits*. In the Fall of 1853 the group began experimenting with this popular new parlor game. After several failed attempts, they were astonished to receive a message from the spirit of Hugo's dead daughter, Léopoldine, who spoke to her mother, father, and brother with taps emanating from a circular table, the number of which corresponded to a letter in the alphabet. Two nights later,

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<sup>85</sup> Gobron 63. This message was translated from Vietnamese into French by Trân Quang Vinh and collected in Les Messages Spirites de la 3ème Amnestie de Dieu en Orient (1962), the only collection of such séance transcripts translated into a Western language. Many of these messages are reprinted in Gabriel Gobron's book and in Jayne Werner's Dissertation. Jayne Werner. The Cao Dai: Politics of a Vietnamese Syncretic Religious Movement. diss. Cornell University, 1976.

Chateaubriand, Dante, and Racine spoke to the group, beginning a long series of messages from great historical figures, literary and otherwise, including Marat, Robespierre, Mohammed, Jesus, Molière, Plato, mythical animals like the Lion of Androcles, various allegorical figures such as La Critique, L'Ombre du sépulcre, and the still-living (though sleeping) spirit of Napoléon III.<sup>86</sup>

While Victor Hugo was never able to successfully serve as a medium during the séances (his son Charles was a gifted medium and the spirits were soon asking for him by name) he did act as the secretary to the table, counting out the number of taps and breaking the uninterrupted stream of letters into words and sentences. Short extracts of the *procès verbaux* of these séances were published after Hugo's death, but it was not until 1923 that a larger selection was edited by Gustave Simon and published by Louis Conard under the title Chez Victor Hugo: Les Tables Tournantes de Jersey. Hugo's increased frequenting of Spiritualist circles around the world in the 1920's is no doubt due to the appearance of this book, and to the subsequent publication of Claudius Grillet's Victor Hugo spirite in 1929.<sup>87</sup>

The Spiritualist séances at Jersey, which I will examine at length in this chapter, provide a clear link between Hugo and the practice of Spiritualism. But, as I mentioned above, they were not published until well after his death, and they have remained at the margins of Hugo's literary production. Hugo's monumental *oeuvre* is, in a sense, haunted by this text, just as his restless spirit haunted the *tables tournantes* after his death.

In the poems that Hugo composed during the winter and spring of 1854-55, one finds a clear thematic link with the spirit communications of the *tables tournantes*. Both the poems and the spirits are concerned with the details of the afterlife, the existence of a divine language, and the nature of human access to the divine. But exactly how Hugo's poetry was influenced by these

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<sup>86</sup> Jean De Mutigny, Victor Hugo et le Spiritisme (Paris: Éditions Fernand Nathan, 1981) 28.

<sup>87</sup> Claudius Grillet, Victor Hugo spirite (Lyon: Librairie Emmanuel Vitte, 1929).

séances is more difficult to determine. Was Hugo inspired by the spirits or were the spirits simply responding to the questions that Hugo posed during the séances? Critics have taken a wide range of positions on the degree to which the séance texts partake of Hugo's genius. The *comptes-rendus* of the séances have been read as the very source of Les Contemplations, as a spiritual inquiry during which Hugo confirmed his complex visionary cosmogony but drew only limited inspiration, as a mere diversion during the long night in exile, and as a spiritual workshop in which Hugo's unconscious mind was freed from its fetters.<sup>88</sup> However much Hugo was

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<sup>88</sup> In *La crise mystique de Victor Hugo*, Maurice Levaillant uses the séance transcripts as a guide to understanding Hugo's mystical poetry. The conversations at the table are "la clef d'or secrète qui donne accès au monument de granit et d'airain" [Maurice Levaillant, La crise mystique de Victor Hugo (1843-1856), d'après des documents inédits (Paris: Corti, 1954) 66.] Levaillant traces the coincidence of Hugo's most mystical poems and the intensity of the séances, and notes many doctrinal similarities between Hugo's "apocalyptic" poems and the séance transcripts, but he does not succeed in creating an actual concordance of verse between the tables and Hugo's work. For example, in his reading of "Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre", a poem ostensibly dictated by a spirit, he finds not the traces of Hugo's conversations at the table but rather "le parfait accord de cet enseignement cosmogonique avec les vues proposées par les discours des tables" (Levaillant 195). In this sense the tables were not so much the source of Hugo's poetic inspiration, but rather a theological workshop at which Hugo refined his eclectic cosmogony.

Jean De Mutigny reads the séance transcripts to diagnose Hugo's mental pathology: "Chose que l'on ignore, Victor Hugo, le plus grand poète français, était atteint d'une maladie mentale: la paraphrénie fantastique" [Jean De Mutigny, Victor Hugo et le Spiritisme (Paris: Éditions Fernand Nathan, 1981) 81.] The fact that the séance transcripts seem to be in accord with Hugo's poetic production can be explained by Hugo's unconscious psychological domination of the tables. The phenomenon of the spirit messages were thus simply the "dédoublement de la personnalité qui fait que l'on attribue à un autre auteur ce que l'on rédige soi-même." (Mutigny 87). In this way the transcripts make up Hugo's unconscious *oeuvre*.

More recently, critics have generally held that the séance transcripts were merely confirmations of Hugo's own theological and philosophical views. As J.C. Ireson suggests, the séances "did no more than reverberate ideas already stored in poems awaiting a suitable moment for publication" [J.C. Ireson, Victor Hugo: A Companion To His Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) 136.]

Critics like Michael Riffaterre, John A. Frey, and Suzanne Nash who are interested in the structure of Hugo's poetry and the architecture of Les Contemplations, have little use for the *tables tournantes* texts.

Finally, in a recent article entitled "Ghostly Politics," Jan Matlock sees in Hugo's conversations with the spirits at the table an attempt to reconstitute the political community from which he was exiled. "The rhetoric of specters, as Hugo relayed it, procured a fantasmatic



influenced by these Spiritualist experiments, the *séance* transcripts remain at the periphery of his oeuvre and they thus blur the formerly straight lines of his monumental work.<sup>89</sup>

Hugo was well aware of the danger that these texts posed to his own literary legacy, and he erected a strict boundary between his own work and that of the spirits at the table :

On trouvera dans les volumes dictés à mon fils Charles par la table, une réponse du Lion d'Androclès à cette pièce.

Je mentionne ce fait ici en marge simple:

Constatation d'un phénomène étrange auquel j'ai assisté plusieurs fois. C'est le phénomène du trépied antique. Une table à trois pieds dicte des vers par des frappements, et des strophes sortent de l'ombre. Il va sans dire que jamais je n'ai mêlé à mes vers un seul de ces vers venus du mystère, ni à mes idées une seule de ces idées. Je les ai toujours religieusement laissés à l'Inconnu, qui en est l'unique auteur; je n'en ai pas même admis le reflet; j'en ai écarté jusqu'à l'influence.

Le travail du cerveau humain doit rester à part et ne rien emprunter aux phénomènes. Les manifestations extérieures de l'invisible sont un fait, et les créations de la pensée en sont un autre. La muraille qui sépare ces deux faits doit être maintenue, dans l'intérêt de l'observation et de la science. On ne doit lui faire aucune brèche. A côté de la science qui le défend, on sent aussi la religion, la grande, la vraie, l'obscur, et la certaine, qui l'interdit. C'est donc, je le répète, autant par conscience religieuse que par conscience littéraire, c'est par respect pour ce phénomène même, que je m'en suis isolé, ayant pour loi de n'admettre aucun mélange dans mon inspiration, et voulant maintenir mon oeuvre, telle qu'elle est, absolument mienne et personnelle.--V.H.<sup>90</sup>

Hugo inscribed this cautionary note on the final manuscript page of the poem "Au Lion d'Androclès." The poem is dated February 28th, 1854, the height of the table turning activity at Jersey, and was published in the first series of La Légende des Siècles in 1859. Le Lion

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elaboration of the dreams of the exiled, but it also enabled Hugo and his wide circle of correspondents and republican allies to take the measure of their responsibility to those who died in the June days of 1848 and to those suffering under Napoléon III's regime" [Jan Malock "Ghostly Politics" Diacritics 30.2 (2000) 68.] Matlock relies on Derrida's understanding of the ethical and political implications of conversing with the dead, which will also play an important role in my reading of the *tables tournantes* texts.

<sup>89</sup> However the most recently published collection of Hugo's Oeuvres Complètes, Jean Massin's 1971 edition for the Club Français du Livre, includes the Jersey séance transcripts. [Victor Hugo, "Procès verbaux des séances des tables parlantes à Jersey." in Oeuvres complètes de Victor Hugo, ed. Jean and Sheila Gaudon. dir Jean Massin. 9.2: 1165-90. (Paris: Club français du livre, 1971).]

<sup>90</sup> Les Tables 14-15. Gustave Simon first published this note in his 1906 edition of La Légende des Siècles. Victor Hugo, La légende des siècles (Paris: Ollendorff, 1906).

d'Androclès was a frequent visitor to the tables in the Spring and Summer of 1854. On March 24th Hugo read the poem that would eventually be titled "Au Lion d'Androclès" to the spirit of the lion who had just announced himself to those gathered around the table. The lion responded in verse, dictating a long poem during séances from April to August of that year. While Hugo did not compose "Au Lion d'Androclès" at the table (he had written it several weeks before he read it during the séance), a certain amount of blending of voices happened during the sessions with the lion. As was usually the case, Hugo corrected the prosody of the spirit verse and suggested alternative words and rhymes. At one point the lion asked if he might borrow a hemistich from a poem that Hugo had written some time earlier. And on April 25th, while the table paused in the middle of a stanza, Hugo quickly completed the last three lines himself and showed them to Auguste Vacquerie who was sitting at his side. When the spirit completed the stanza in much the same way, Hugo read his own version aloud to the amazement of everyone in the room.<sup>91</sup>

It is therefore not surprising to find that in his note Hugo is clearly intent on isolating himself and his work from the potentially polluting influence of the tables. The conversations with the spirits might have produced interesting results, but Hugo felt that these experiments must not be allowed to threaten the legitimacy or authenticity of his own monumental work.

Yet it seems odd to hear Hugo, at the height of his "visionary" power, disavow any and all inspiration that does not arise from within himself. Indeed his description of his artistic integrity in this passage--"ayant pour loi de n'admettre aucun mélange dans mon inspiration"--seems to fly in the face of his voracious appetite for just such inspiration. In his visionary poetry, Hugo claims to be engaged in conversations with a wide variety of beings, from lowly animals to the heavens themselves. In his poetic universe, Hugo hears and interprets messages from the full

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<sup>91</sup> Les Tables 265.

spectrum of creation. The entire length of the great chain of being speaks to him, from the many voices of the natural landscape--"Oui je suis le rêveur; je suis le camarade/ Des petites fleurs d'or du mur qui se dégrade,/ Et l'interlocuteur des arbres et du vent"<sup>92</sup> --to the stars and planets that approach God himself--"Et l'être formidable et serein se leva;/ Il se dressa sur l'ombre et cria: JÉHOVAH!"<sup>93</sup> In the context of this vast visionary project, how are we to understand Hugo's simultaneous desire to "maintenir mon oeuvre, telle qu'elle est, absolument mienne et personnelle"?

In one sense, of course, we can see that it is from within the unity of his pure visionary genius that he can listen to the universe. Like the solitary "navire" tossed by the waves in the prefatory poem of Les Contemplations, the seer-poet is isolated and unified unto himself, a singular consciousness amid the great heterogeneous cacophony of the universe. It is therefore through the purity and unity of his own consciousness and identity that Hugo can exercise his visionary powers.

And so when he encounters the voices that emerge from the table, Hugo must erect a barrier between himself and the *au-delà*. He feels that he must guard his own pure genius from these voices, for if he is to succeed in constructing his great monumental oeuvre, there must be no doubt as to the complete identity between "Hugo" and his genius. If the spirits of the table are understood to have participated in Hugo's verse in any way, then they would succeed in driving a wedge into the heart of the monument that he was constructing to himself. "Hugo" would no longer be, as Mallarmé so succinctly put it, "le vers personnellement." His genius would be separated from his essential self, and the foundations of his monument would crumble.

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<sup>92</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) 84.

<sup>93</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations. 385.

These fears were realized, at least to some small extent, when in 1929 the Spiritualist Henri Azam, a contributor to Allan Kardec's Revue Spirite, received a letter that described a strange symmetry between spiritual messages that he had received and published, and messages delivered to a provincial Spiritualist circle by a gifted young medium, a certain Madame Laval. Azam visited the circle in le Midi, interrogated the spirit "Symbole" who spoke through Laval, and published their conversation in a book entitled La Tombe parle. Le Génie Hugolien ressuscité. L'Esprit "SYMBOLE" animateur des Tables de Jersey. In response to a question about its identity, Symbole gave the following response:

Symbole--

...J'étais le bourdon de l'essaim invisible  
Qui, dans la <<Ruche Hugo>> rimait l'intraduisible.  
L'Insoupçonné, L'Immense en son Enormité.  
Nous étions les cerveaux sous ce front de clarté.  
Crois-tu qu'un seul essor puisse avoir l'envergure  
De tant d'effarement sous la même figure?  
Je sais l'esprit qui souffle et le spectre qui sait;  
J'animais bien souvent les ombres de Jersey,  
J'étais de la pléiade énorme, redoutable,  
Qui chantait le mystère au rythme de la table...  
L'Infini descendait dans l'extase des soirs  
Et l'on voyait fumer de vagues encensoirs.  
Quand la nuit se paraît, telle une ballerine,  
Nous venions profiler à Terrace-Marine  
Nos spectres lumineux de magiques rayons  
Sur la petite table où tremblaient les crayons...<sup>94</sup>

Unlike the other messages from Hugo's spirit that we saw above, this message is not from the unified spirit of Hugo, but rather "le Génie Hugolien ressuscité." Hugo has been separated from his *Génie*; he is no longer a monumental figure, unified and glorified in his shining masterpieces. Symbole, a mysterious allegorical figure, has laid claim to Hugo's own voice, turning the unity of his genius into a buzzing hive of voices and inspiration. Like the talking table that was

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<sup>94</sup> Symbole (spirite), LA Tombe parle. Le Génie Hugolien ressuscité L'Esprit "SYMBOLE" animateur des Tables de Jersey, (Paris: Éditions du Phare, 1967) 12-13.

animated by so many diverse spirits, "Hugo" was but the secretary and figurehead--"ce front de clarté"--of this cacophonous génie.

Azam's spirit communications help us to see Hugo's simultaneous embrace and disavowal of the séances in a better light, for they epitomize the great danger that the *tables tournantes* posed for Hugo: the appearance on the cultural stage of Hugo's "génie" as an entity, (or, even worse, entities) separate from Hugo himself. By building a wall between his own work and the activity at the table, Hugo hoped to avoid just this sort of splintering of his visionary consciousness.

This chapter explores this very tension, the conflict that arose between Hugo's Spiritualist experiments and his visionary ambitions. I would provisionally suggest that while the spirit messages tend to confirm Hugo's cosmology, they also undermined his privileged narrative position as a visionary genius. In this way séance communications "haunt" Hugo's oeuvre, and much of Hugo's interaction with the spirits during the séances can be seen as an attempt to silence and control the heterogeneity and alterity of their voices. These spirits, and the texts they produced, linger on the margins of Hugo's visionary poetry, especially Les Contemplations, and threaten the unity and monumentality of his visionary consciousness. Just as Hugo's restless spirit exceeds his well regulated schedule of reappearances after his death, so too did the voices of the *table tournantes* exceed and problematize the unity and integrity of Hugo's own literary voice.

#### "Écartons le trépied"

Le Spectre: --Ne me plains pas, mais prête ta sérieuse attention--à ce que je vais te révéler.

Hamlet: Parle, je suis tenu d'écouter.

Hamlet. I.v. Translation: François-Victor Hugo<sup>95</sup>

Quand vous voyez passer dans le fond de la scène,  
Hamlet vêtu de deuil, croyez qu'il n'est pas seul.  
Shakespeare est dans son front, Shakespeare est dans sa veine.  
Ce n'est pas un manteau qu'il a, c'est mon linceul.  
Shakespeare (spirite).  
Jersey, Feb. 1, 1854<sup>96</sup>

I will begin this examination of the *tables tournantes* texts by returning to the beginning, by listening again to the first *revenant* that spoke from the table at Jersey. The Hugo family's experiments with the *tables tournantes* began in the fall of 1853 under the guidance of Delphine de Girardin, Hugo's longtime friend and wife of the journalist Émile de Girardin. The *tables tournantes* texts begin with a short narration by Auguste Vacquerie that tells the story of the first successful séance. Vacquerie describes how Mme. Girardin, who arrived on the 6th of September at Marine Terrace, was full of enthusiasm for the table turning craze. On September 7th, she and Victor Hugo tried without success to contact the spirit world using a square table, but it took a small round *guéridon* that Girardin bought in a shop in St. Helier, and two more days of failed experimentation, before the table began to speak. On Sunday September 11th, one full week after the ten year anniversary of her death, Léopoldine Hugo returned to speak to her family and several other family friends who were gathered around the table.<sup>97</sup>

Victor Hugo --Es-tu contente quand ils ["ceux qui t'aiment," i.e. sa famille]  
mêlent ton nom à leur prière?

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<sup>95</sup> William Shakespeare, Oeuvres Complètes de W. Shakespeare. Deuxième Édition. Tome I, Les Deux Hamlets tr. François-Victor Hugo (Paris: Pagnerre, 1863) 234.

<sup>96</sup> Les Tables 166.

<sup>97</sup> Léopoldine never announced herself directly to the table. In fact, it took a bit of deductive reasoning to establish her identity. The spirit first calls herself "fille," and then "Ame *soror*" or "âme soeur." While Delphine de Girardin had lost a sister, and Général Le Flô had lost a sister and a daughter, Léopoldine was the only possible spirit who had both a brother and parents at the table. (Les Tables 32-33).

--Oui  
 Victor Hugo --Es-tu toujours auprès d'eux? Veilles-tu sur eux?  
 --Oui  
 Victor Hugo --Dépend-il d'eux de te faire revenir?  
 --Non.  
 Victor Hugo --Mais reviendras-tu?  
 --Oui.  
 Victor Hugo --Bientôt?  
 --Oui.<sup>98</sup>

Léopoldine is present at the beginning of this text: "Es-tu toujours auprès d'eux? Veilles-tu sur eux?/ --Oui." She has returned to be among her family, returned even though she is always among them, in spite of them, "Dépend-il d'eux de te faire revenir? --Non," and though she is always present, she will return again soon. Léopoldine is thus present and absent at the table, and her phantasmatic voice precedes and exceeds this particular moment.

Whatever her ontological status, Léopoldine does the work of inaugurating this text, and her visit initiated the more than two years of table turning that was to occur at Marine Terrace. It is perhaps not surprising that Léopoldine was the first to visit the tables, given that the séances began in the season of her death. September 4th, a date which would be so important to the structure of Les Contemplations, had only just passed when the Girardins arrived, and Léopoldine's appearance here at the beginning of the séances sets into motion the great flood of communications from the *au-delà* that will follow.

This story, from the arrival of Girardin, to the group's stunned reaction to the revelation of Léopoldine's identity, is a biographical commonplace; the double trauma of Hugo's exile and the anniversary of Léopoldine's death left Hugo vulnerable to the revelations of the tables, and

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<sup>98</sup> Les Tables 34-35.

somehow Hugo's ample genius spilled over into these séances.<sup>99</sup> This story fixes these the *tables tournantes* texts in a relation of dependence to Hugo's visionary work, and it is often used to impart a mystical mood to Hugo's exile. The figure of Léopoldine also links the *table tournantes* texts to Les Contemplations, as if she herself initiated the entire project.

In anticipation of this biographical commonplace, Hugo himself described the somber atmosphere and extreme isolation of his exile in the opening to his 1864 William Shakespeare. And so we turn to a second beginning.

Hugo starts this long meditation on genius in general and Shakespeare in particular with a brief note on how the book grew out of his efforts to write an introduction to his son François-Victor's translations of Shakespeare. In thinking about Shakespeare, Hugo was forced to come to

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<sup>99</sup> According to André Besson, the first séances were a long awaited revelation for Hugo: "Jusqu'ici, malgré ses désirs, ses réflexions sur le sujet, il n'a jamais pu entrer en relation avec les êtres dématérialisés qui le côtoient. Il songe que le procédé des tables tournantes va lui permettre enfin de comprendre le grand mystère de l'après mort" [André Besson, Victor Hugo: Vie d'un géant (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 2001) 387.]

Graham Robb links Hugo's emotional distress at his exile and the anniversary of Léopoldine's death to his easy acceptance of Spiritualism: "It was with his brain in a semi-soluble state that Hugo received the visit, in September 1853, of his old friend Delphine de Girardin..." [Graham Robb, Victor Hugo (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997) 331.]

André Maurois echoes the view that Hugo was out of sorts when the séances began: "Such a state of mind might have been highly dangerous had not Hugo been saved in the first place by his powers of artistic creation (from a fixed idea an artist constructs a work of art), and, in the second by the possession of a prodigious equilibrium....His metaphysical broodings never entirely narcotized his practical good sense." [André Maurois, Olympio: The Life of Victor Hugo tr. Gerard Hopkins. (New York, **Pub?** 1956) 321.]

For Hubert Juin, the table was a remedy to the darkness that surrounded Hugo, allowing him to express what he already knew but "n'oserait pas écrire." [Hubert Juin, Victor Hugo, 1844-1870 (Paris: Flammarion, 1984) 348.]

Alain Decaux sums up this biographical commonplace as follows: "Aujourd'hui, aux yeux de beaucoup, son exile, c'est cela: <<A Jersey, le poète faisait tourner les tables. Dante, Jésus-Christ et Shakespeare venaient lui rendre visite.>> Un sourire d'ironie, un haussement d'épaule. Un vieux fou, décidément, ce Hugo" [Alain Decaux, Victor Hugo (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1984) 826.]



terms with the general mission of the artist and the nature of literary genius, and "de cet agrandissement du point de vue est né ce livre."<sup>100</sup> Hugo opens the book with a chapter on the birth of François-Victor's translation project in which he describes the exile on Jersey. He first paints a picture of the wind-swept island and then he focuses on his house, Marine-Terrace, which reminded him of a "tombeau," and from which one could look out over the island:

De la maison on apercevait, à droite, à l'horizon, sur une colline et dans un petit bois, une tour qui passait pour hantée; à gauche, on voyait le dick. Le dick était une file de grands tronc d'arbres adossés à un mur...<sup>101</sup>

This somber landscape reflected the mood of Marine Terrace's inhabitants:

Le vieux, le père, avait là tous les siens, moins sa fille aînée, qui n'avait pu le suivre. Son gendre était près d'elle. Souvent ils étaient accoudés autour d'une table ou assis sur un banc, silencieux, graves, songeant tous ensemble, et sans se le dire, à ces deux absents.<sup>102</sup>

If this oppressive silence was to be broken, it would be with the family's literary activity:

Un matin de la fin de novembre, deux des habitants du lieu, le père et le plus jeune des fils, étaient assis dans la salle basse. Ils se taisaient, comme des naufragés qui pensent.

Dehors il pleuvait, le vent soufflait, la maison était comme assourdie par ce grondement extérieur. Tous deux songeaient, absorbés peut-être par cette coïncidence d'un commencement d'hiver et d'un commencement d'exil.

Tout à coup le fils éleva la voix et interrogea le père:

--Que penses-tu de cet exil?

--Qu'il sera long.

--Comment comptes-tu le remplir?

Le père répondit:

--Je regarderai l'océan.

Il y eut un silence. Le père reprit:

--Et toi?

--Moi, dit le fils, je traduirai Shakespeare.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare 4.

<sup>101</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare 10.

<sup>102</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare 10.

<sup>103</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare 43.

As a beginning, this scene is very suggestive, not in what it has described, but rather in what it has failed to describe. It is a staging of exile that is filled with silences and suppressions that return to haunt it. There are two ghosts that I hope to follow in this passage. These are not necessarily the "deux absents" that Hugo mentions--Léopoldine and her husband Charles Vacquerie--although their absence will play a part in one of the ghostly threads I will follow. The two ghosts that I am interested in are only partially absent, neither fully missing nor fully present. Like Léopoldine during her visit to the table, they are both present, and absent, and they will return again. By listening to these phantoms we might better see Hugo's strategy for dealing with such ghosts.

The first of these phantoms is the turning table itself. In this staging of the exile the spirits are silent, the Hugo family and the other *proscrits* are silent, and, most importantly, the table is silent: "Souvent ils était accoudés autour d'une table ou assis sur un banc, silencieux, graves, songeant tous ensemble, et sans se le dire, à ces deux absents." This is something more than a simple omission. This description gathers the family around the table, reports the frequency with which they were so gathered--"souvent"--and only then fails to mention the séances. The séances are certainly not present in this description, but neither are they fully absent. The *table tournante* appears here in a phantasmatic form, its faint outline barely visible as the family quietly gathers around it, and as phantoms are wont to do, it returns later in the text.

Having explained the birth of his book, Hugo gives a brief biographical sketch of Shakespeare and then situates him in a long chain of similar "Génies" beginning with Homer, Job and Aeschylus and ending with Dante, Rabelais and Cervantes. But in order to begin this discussion of genius, Hugo must first dispel what he sees as a troubling misconception about the genius and his inspiration. God has created both the natural universe and human thought and art,

but He is at a distance from this secondary creation: "Dieu crée l'art par l'homme. Il a un outil, le cerveau humain. Cet outil, c'est l'ouvrier lui-même qui se l'est fait; il n'en a pas d'autre." In this way all inspiration, however much it partakes of the divine, has its origin within the consciousness of the poet. Hugo thus hopes to put to rest rumors that the genius receives direct supernatural help in composing his work, and he begins by defending Shakespeare from the seventeenth-century critic Forbes:

Forbes, dans le curieux fascicule feuilleté par Warburton et perdu par Garrick, affirme que Shakespeare se livrait à des pratiques de magie, que la magie était dans sa famille, et que le peu qu'il y a de bon dans ses pièces lui était dicté par «un Alleur», un Esprit.

Disons-le à ce propos, car il ne faut reculer devant aucune des questions qui s'offrent, ç'a été une bizarre erreur de tous les temps de vouloir donner au cerveau humain des auxiliaires extérieurs. *Antrum adjuvat vatem*. L'oeuvre semblant surhumaine, on a voulu y faire intervenir l'extra-humain; dans l'antiquité le trépied, de nos jours, la table. La table n'est autre chose que le trépied revenant.

Prendre au pied de la lettre le démon que Socrate se suppose; et le buisson de Moïse, et la nymphe de Numa, et le dive de Plotin, et la colombe de Mahomet, c'est être dupe d'une métaphore.<sup>104</sup>

The table has returned as a "revenant," the ghost of both the silent table at Jersey and of the antique *trépied*. This returning table brings with it the age-old fallacy of confusing the metaphorical inspiration of the genius with actual outside help. Hugo has raised this point in order to dismiss it once and for all. He calls forth the table as a symbol of all supernatural inspiration and names its attendant voices and "auxiliaires extérieurs" --"la nymphe," "le dive," "le buisson," "la colombe"--in order to cast them out of the singular "cerveau humain." Hugo is not claiming that the phenomenon of the *tables tournantes* is fraudulent, for he goes on to affirm the scientific interest that Spiritualism might hold, but he does hope to distance what happens at the table from what happens at the genius's desk:

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<sup>104</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare 44.

Donc écartons le trépied. La poésie est propre au poète. Soyons respectueux devant le possible, dont nul ne sait la limite, soyons attentifs et sérieux devant l'extra-humain, d'où nous sortons et qui nous attend; mais ne diminuons pas les grands travailleurs terrestres par des hypothèses de collaborations mystérieuses qui ne sont point nécessaires, laissons au cerveau ce qui est au cerveau, et constatons que l'oeuvre des génies est du surhumain sortant de l'homme.<sup>105</sup>

The move that Hugo makes here, "écartons le trépied," echoes the language he uses throughout the *tables tournantes* transcripts to disavow the influence of the tables on his work. Here too we see an attempt to separate the singular genius from the chattering of spirits and to wall off the genius and his oeuvre from any polluting voices. Shakespeare, Hugo claims, was no more influenced by magic than he himself is by the *tables tournantes*.

And so the speaking table, whose shadow we saw in the description of Marine Terrace, has been fully summoned forth in the discussion of genius. But Hugo has called the table into full presence only to turn right around and banish it. To enact such a separation--*écarter*--Hugo follows the procedure of an exorcist; he first conjures up the table then he conjures it away. The ghostly table that haunted the Jersey scene has now been cast out, and Hugo can continue on, building his monumental pantheon on the foundation of the genius's singular voice.

Before examining the implications of this exorcism, we will return to the Jersey scene in William Shakespeare to examine the second ghostly presence there. The subdued discussion between Victor Hugo and his son François-Victor at the very end of the first chapter sets up a rather self-serving analogy:

Le père répondit:  
--Je regarderai l'océan.  
Il y eut un silence. Le père reprit:  
--Et toi?  
--Moi, dit le fils, je traduirai Shakespeare.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare 45.

<sup>106</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare 43.

The father, using his visionary powers, will translate the vast oceanic mysteries of the universe into the language of humans; the son, whose powers might not quite rival those of his father, will nonetheless translate Shakespeare's vast, oceanic oeuvre into humanity's greatest language.<sup>107</sup> The two are, in their isolation, engaged in parallel projects, and Shakespeare's monumental oeuvre is, if not equal to the complexity and beauty of nature, at least on the same order of magnitude.

But Hugo and his son are not alone during this scene. This is, we will remember, the first chapter in a book entitled William Shakespeare, and any scene in such a book that features a father and son sharing a crepuscular moment calls to mind the appearance of the specter at the beginning of Hamlet. Unlike the primary figurative move that this passage makes--the analogy between Shakespeare and *l'océan*--this is a faintly drawn, incomplete figure-- the ghost of an allusion. Like the silent gathering around the table, we are only alerted to its phantom presence by its shadow. Lurking in the Jersey landscape, at some distance from Marine Terrace, sits a haunted tower: "De la maison on apercevait, à droite, à l'horizon, sur une colline et dans un petit bois, une tour qui passait pour hantée."<sup>108</sup> We are reminded here of the scenes on the "platform" at Elsinore, but only vaguely. This is not an accurate restaging of the encounter in Hamlet between the specter of the father and his son. The players are present, but the scene itself has been banished. The platform at Elsinore, and its haunting ghost, is present in its absence, a phantom stage barely visible in the background. And, like the silent table, it is a *revenant* because it returns to haunt Hugo's text.

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<sup>107</sup> During the séances, Shakespeare's spirit admitted that "la langue anglaise est inférieure à la langue française." (Levaillant 100.)

<sup>108</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare 10.

For his part, François-Victor seems rather comfortable in his potential role as the Hamlet-like son. In fact, he described the very same scene several years earlier in the 1858 introduction to his translations of the two versions of Hamlet. And so, as we examine yet another beginning, we see that Hugo's 1864 staging of the scene on Jersey is a re-inscription of François-Victor's explicitly Shakespearian version:

"O jeunes gens! jeunes gens! vous tous, mes compagnons, mes amis, vous qui avez grandi en même temps que moi sur les bancs de l'école et qui vous êtes depuis dispersés dans la vie, je vous adjure ici, au nom de cette camaraderie qui rapprochait Horatio d'Hamlet! ne vous laissez pas déconcerter par les éphémères réactions de la matière contre l'esprit. Vous avez, vous aussi, de grandes choses à faire. N'y a-t-il plus de torts à redresser? plus de maux à guérir? plus d'iniquités à détruire? plus d'oppressions à combattre? plus d'âmes à émanciper? plus d'idées à réaliser? Ah! vous qui avez charge d'avenir, ne manquez pas à votre mission. Ne vous découragez pas. Ne vous laissez pas écarter du but suprême par les obstacles que le monde jette sur votre chemin: intérêts ou plaisirs, peines ou joies. Opposez à la fatalité tyrannique l'incompressible volonté. Restez à jamais fidèles à la sainte cause du progrès. Soyez fermes, intrépides et magnanimes. Et, si parfois vous hésitez devant votre glorieuse tâche, si vous avez des doutes, eh bien! tournez le dos aux Polonius niais et aux Rosencrantz traîtres; et jetez les yeux à l'horizon, du côté où le soleil s'est couché, vers ce rocher qui domine la mer et dont le sommet est plus haut encore que la plate-forme d'Elseneur. Regardez bien, et, par cette froide nuit d'hiver, à la pâle clarté du ciel étoilé, vous verrez passer,---armé de pied en cap, le bâton de commandement à la main, --ce spectre en cheveux blancs qui s'appelle le devoir."  
23 février 1858.<sup>109</sup>

We will easily recognize Victor Hugo in this "spectre en cheveux blancs".<sup>110</sup> His politics, like the exhortation of Hamlet's father, are a call to action. Here Hugo urges his son, and his son's entire generation, to take up the sword in "la sainte cause du progrès." But the most explicit intertextual link, and the clearest connection between these two ghostly fathers, brings us, yet again, to a haunted beginning:

"L'homme en songeant descend au gouffre universel.  
J'errais près du dolmen qui domine Rozel  
A l'endroit où le cap se prolonge en presqu'île,

<sup>109</sup> François-Victor Hugo, *Les Deux Hamlets* 99-100.

<sup>110</sup> However photographs of Hugo on Jersey in the late 1850s show that he had yet to grow the imposing white hair and beard that he sported later in his life. (See Robb 428-429.)

Le spectre m'attendait; l'être sombre et tranquille  
Me prit par les cheveux dans sa main qui grandit,  
M'emporta sur le haut du rocher, et me dit:..."<sup>111</sup>

These first lines of Victor Hugo's "Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre" are echoed in François-Victor's staging of the scene: "ce rocher qui domine la mer et dont le sommet est plus haut encore que la plate-forme d'Elseneur." The Jersey landscape plays an important role in the visionary imagery of Les Contemplations in which the barren and solitary promontory often serves as the bridge between the earthly material realm and the heavens. The "dolmen de Rozel" where Hugo embarks on his celestial journey in "Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre," is a group of 23 granite blocks, the ruins of a prehistoric monument that overlook the bay of Rozel on Jersey.<sup>112</sup> In Les Contemplations, this dolmen and other similar promontories on Jersey, serve as a bridge between our own mortal realm and the *au-delà*. These promontories are the sites where Hugo makes contact with his spirit informants in several of the collection's visionary poems, including "Ibo" and "Un spectre m'attendait dans un grand angle d'ombre".<sup>113</sup>

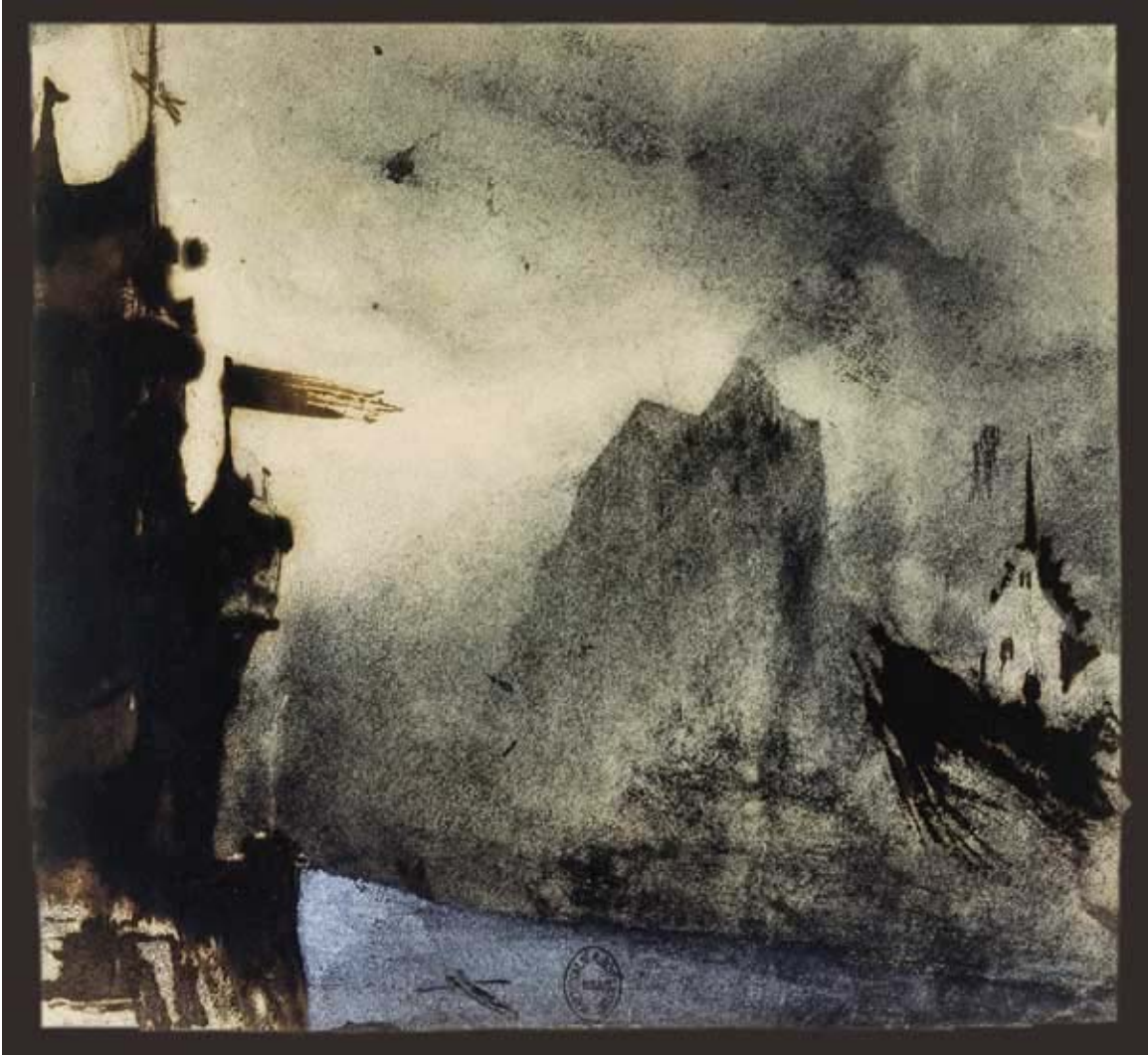
This dolmen is also similar to the "Rocher de l'Ermitage" which played an important part in Hugo's visual art of the period. In a striking stenciled drawing entitled "Le Rocher de l'Ermitage dans un paysage imaginaire" that Hugo completed on May 18th 1855, we see a landscape very similar to the scene that François-Victor described in 1858--" ce rocher qui domine la mer et dont le sommet est plus haut encore que la plate-forme d'Elseneur":<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 386.

<sup>112</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 489, note 302.

<sup>113</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 298-303.



**Fig. 1.** Victor Hugo, Le Rocher de l'Ermitage dans un paysage imaginaire (1855). Plume, encre brune et ecre de Chine, frottis de fusain, goaches blanches et bleue. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris. "Victor Hugo, l'homme océan". Bibliothèque Nationale de France. 25 April 2005 <<http://expositions.bnf.fr/hugo/grands/130.htm>>.

We can identify the mysterious shape that rises in the center of this image as the Hermitage de St. Helier, the ruins of a 12th century chapel that sit atop a large rock outcropping on the coast of Jersey. Hugo began the drawing by tracing a stencil of the *rocher* cut from a



photograph.<sup>115</sup> This large rock is located near the ruins of the Château Elizabeth, which might have inspired the castle on the left side of the drawing.<sup>116</sup>

Encased in shadows and clouds, the peak of the rocher de l'Ermitage rises into the mysterious distance and seems to gather a bank of shadows about itself. Of the three towers in the image, this rock is the tallest and most menacing. The castle towers on the left occupy the foreground and reach the top of the image, but are dwarfed by the more distant and menacing "rocher" in the center, while to the right of the rock is a chapel that perches on its imposing slope. The castle towers fly the flag of the realm, the earthly territory over which it holds dominion. But issuing from the peak of the rock is an inky cloud, the emblem of the unknown and mysterious *au-delà*. For Hugo the promontory is the spot of pure contemplation, the point at which he makes contact with the universe, and is therefore a figure for his singular visionary consciousness. Isolated on a barren rock, Hugo stares out over the sea to contemplate the universe. And so we see that this image, and Hugo's description of Jersey in William Shakespeare, place the castle tower at a distance from the point of visionary departure. The poet's contemplation is isolated from the haunted tower.

But in his version of the Jersey scene, François-Victor borrows the iconography that his father developed to describe a very different scene. By re-imagining Hugo's visionary landscape François-Victor Hugo threatens the singular visionary identity of Hugo's poetic persona, for in his radical recasting of the principle roles in this scene, François-Victor undermines the visionary position that Hugo's poet has established for himself.

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<sup>115</sup> Victor Hugo, l'homme océan (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France/Seuil, 2002) 164.

<sup>116</sup> This castle, built around 1590, was named for Elizabeth I, and therefore is, like the tower of Elsinore, an Elizabethan edifice. This is, perhaps, further reason for François Victor to connect the two towers in his introduction to his translation of Hamlet. (Victor Hugo, l'homme océan 164)

The *rocher* is "plus haut encore que la plate-forme d'Elseneur," and in this sense François-Victor is trying to replace the indecisive, melancholic Hamlet with the strident political activism of his father. By climbing from the Elsinore tower to the higher rock, he hopes to turn his back on "Polonius niais et ...Rosencrantz traîtres." But on this higher platform, one encounters a rather familiar ghost: "vous verrez passer,---armé de pied en cap, le bâton de commandement à la main, --ce spectre en cheveux blancs qui s'appelle le devoir." The white-haired father has drifted up to the dolmen too. The fatherly ghost that that haunts the platform at Elsinore, awaiting an appointment with his son, is now also haunting the dolmen, as Victor Hugo. On this spot where Hugo has repeatedly come to meet his spirit guide--"Le spectre m'attendait"--he himself has become the specter, urging his son on to action. There is a certain easy symmetry between "Hugo the visionary poet" and "the specter" of Hamlet's father, and, in as much as they are distinct roles, Hugo seems equally well suited for both of them. In playing one, he now calls to mind the other; in speaking as one, he speaks as the other.

However this dual dramatic role is not compatible with Hugo's own description of the visionary poet. In order to speak with the many voices of nature in the vast oceanic universe, the poet must be pure and whole unto himself:

J'irai lire la grande bible;  
 J'entrerai nu  
 Jusqu'au tabernacle terrible  
 De l'inconnu,  
  
 Jusqu'au seuil de l'ombre et du vide,  
 Gouffre ouverte  
 Que garde la meute livide  
 Des noirs éclairs,  
  
 Jusqu'aux portes visionnaires  
 Du ciel sacré  
 Et, si vous aboyez, tonnerres,  
 Je rugirai.

Au dolmen de Rozel, janvier 1853.<sup>117</sup>

Standing alone on the dolmen, in his unpolluted singularity--"J'entrerais nu"--the poet can speak across the abyss. In this isolated position the visionary becomes purely himself and therefore a perfect "everyman." Like the storm-tossed boat of the prefatory poem--"Le navire, c'est l'homme"--he is an isolated genius who, because of the unity of his consciousness, can gain access to the entire universe. In the process of describing his essential self-- as the preface to Les Contemplations puts it, "c'est une âme qui se raconte dans ces deux volumes..."-- he can claim to speak for all of humanity:

On se plaint quelquefois des écrivains qui disent moi. Parlez-nous de nous, leur crie-t-on. Hélas! quand je vous parle de moi, je vous parle de vous. Comment ne le sentez-vous pas? Ah! insensé, qui crois que je ne suis pas toi!

Ce livre contient, nous le répétons, autant l'individualité du lecteur que celle de l'auteur. *Homo sum*. Traverser le tumulte, la rumeur, le rêve, la lutte, le plaisir, le travail, la douleur, le silence; se reposer dans le sacrifice, et, là, contempler Dieu; commencer à Foule et finir à Solitude, n'est-ce pas, les proportions individuelles réservées, l'histoire de tous?<sup>118</sup>

This isolated perch on the edge of the promontory represents a narrative position that is at once monumentally ambitious and supremely fragile. In his role as "homo sum," Hugo must truly succeed in isolating himself as a self and in establishing the full plenitude of the universe's difference. The journey that Les Contemplations describes--"commencer à Foule et finir à Solitude"--succeeds as a universal human journey only in as much as Hugo is able to first create this great *gouffre* between his consciousness and the rest of the universe, and then to heroically cross it.

The voyage of his individual soul to a place of pure isolation and individuality occurs in the visionary revelations of Book Six of Les Contemplations. In his position on the promontory,

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<sup>117</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 302.

<sup>118</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 28.

Hugo has found a place where he can speak with spirits. But this place is not, properly speaking, *haunted*. Hugo is not speaking here with an individual, some mere ghost or restless phantom who has returned from the dead, for this is a conversation with the entire universe in the fullness and purity of its difference. The alterity of the universe is as vast as his consciousness is singular, and in between himself and this vast oceanic other lies an abyss. On the promontory Hugo does not speak to some lowly phantom; he speaks to God.

But what if Hugo is not purely himself as he stands on the promontory? What if instead of entering the scene completely naked-- "J'entrerais nu"-- he were to appear wearing the dusty, hand-me-down costume of an Elizabethan ghost: "armé de pied en cap, le bâton de commandement à la main"? What if these conversations with eternity are merely rehearsals of a well-known scene between familiar actors on a creaky old stage? <sup>119</sup> François-Victor has invited a ghost onto the dolmen. He has built a bridge from the castle tower to the peak of a promontory, and the spirits have crossed over. In his introduction to *Hamlet* he has pointing out an ambiguous haunting presence, the spirit of Hamlet's father played by Hugo himself, and in doing so has

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<sup>119</sup> In translating Shakespeare's word "platform" as "plate-forme" in French, François-Victor has imagined this first scene taking place on the "plate-forme d'une tour," or "architrave" of the castle. [Paul Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la Langue Française. Tome Cinquième*. (Le Robert: Paris, 1966) 252.] The height of this platform, which is important to François-Victor's analogy in his introduction, is difficult to determine in the original English. And the stage directions, as François-Victor notes, are the inventions of the various editors:

Le lieu où se passe la scène est rarement indiqué dans le texte original des pièces de Shakespeare; il ne l'est nulle part dans le texte d'*Hamlet*.... Ainsi, dans l'original, rien ne prévient le lecteur que la première scène se passe sur la plate-forme d'Elseneur; ce n'est qu'à la fin de la seconde scène du drame qu'*Hamlet*, donnant un rendez-vous à Horatio et à ses compagnons de garde, leur dit: <<Sur la plate-forme, entre onze heures et minuit.>> (Shakespeare. *Les Deux Hamlets* 373).

English editions give such stage directions as "platform before the castle," which seems to work against this analogy. In either case, the stage-like quality of the platform is undoubtedly important to both Shakespeare's play and François-Victor's introduction.

suggested that all spirit appearances on this rock are *revenants*, and that, as a literary promontory, the dolmen of Les Contemplations owes a debt to Shakespeare's Elsinore.<sup>120</sup>

And so François-Victor has muddied the metaphysical waters by reminding us of a familiar spirit. The ghost that haunts the platform is not so very different from his own father, his own father is not so purely himself, and the *gouffre universel* is not a vast and silent emptiness but is populated with our phantasmatically present dead. As a beginning, then, as a foundation from which visionary journeys are launched, the dolmen has a history. And therefore its singularity is put into doubt, both its temporal singularity--in that it is haunted, it has been *repeatedly* the site of supernatural encounters--and its physical singularity--as just another in a series of promontories it is not longer physically isolated.

And so if François-Victor's reinscription of the dolmen scene reveals a haunting presence in Hugo's original description of the dolmen in Les Contemplations, then Hugo's subsequent re-writing of the scene, at the beginning of William Shakespeare, can be seen as an attempt to purge this ghost from his promontory and defend the purity of his poetic inspiration. Hugo here banishes the tower, driving out the ghosts revealed by his son's introduction to Hamlet by expelling the haunting presence of the Elsinore platform.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> It is not literary influence that Hugo is afraid of, for he is perfectly willing to insert himself in a long line of visionaries, and he willingly acknowledges his debts. It is, rather, the middling, familiar difference of the ghost that he hopes to avoid.

<sup>121</sup> Confronted directly with this accusation, Hugo (and here we extend a hospitable hand to his departed spirit and invite it to speak) would no doubt argue, as he did with the "antique trépied," that by conflating the dolmen and Elsinore, François-Victor's introduction was "dupe d'un métaphor," a misreading of the trope of the dolmen. Like "le démon que Socrate se suppose; et le buisson de Moïse, et la nymphe de Numa, et le dive de Plotin, et la colombe de Mahomet," Hugo's dolmen is but a metaphor for his own pure visionary consciousness. François-Victor's reading, according to this argument, simply fails to recognize the figurative nature of the promontory. But this argument presupposes the unity of the two terms of the metaphor: Socrates's unified genius is replaced by the unified "démon." In the case of the promontory, this

Looking back now to both of the ghostly presences that we followed in the beginning of *William Shakespeare* we can see that this first chapter works to reclaim Hugo's lonely promontory from the ghosts. Hugo silences the tables and banishes the tower so that he can sit, alone and singular unto himself, contemplating the universe. In order to hear the voice of God speak through nature he must quiet all of the difference that he finds close to himself. This description of Jersey is therefore an effort to exorcise the spirits that haunt the book's beginning, that haunt all beginnings. By expelling these ghosts--"écartons le trépied"-- by purging the primal scene of contemplation of its association with Elsinore, and by silencing the talking tables at Marine Terrace, this book is trying for a clean start. At its beginning, William Shakespeare hopes to exorcise itself of all the other haunted beginnings that haunt it.

In Spectres de Marx, Derrida dwells on this problem of haunted beginnings, specifically the "specter of communism" at the beginning of the Communist Manifesto, and the haunted beginning of Hamlet. With their *early* appearance, these ghost initiate what follows.<sup>122</sup> Their appearance sets in motion the beginning, and therefore the inevitable end, of a certain story or

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argument seems to make sense at first glance: the promontory, as a place of silence and exile is a rather well chosen metaphor for Hugo's poetic consciousness, although the literary debt to the Elsinore tower ultimately puts the promontory's unity in doubt.

But in the case of the *table tournantes*, the "table" is anything but unified. The voices that emanate from it do not speak in a unified voice. It can be described as neither the mouthpiece of God, nor a as metaphor for the poet's genius. The table emits a messy, contradictory stream of imperfect and sometimes unattributable speech. It is for this reason that Hugo, as we will see in the next section, constantly tries to reduce the many voices that speak during the séances to a singular voice that he can call the "table." A singular voice emanating from the *au-delà* is much easier to deal with on a figurative level.

This problem of the unity of the metaphor's terms also doubles back to undermine Hugo's own argument. If all of these visionaries--Socrates, Numa, Moses--had the *same* spirit guide, if they each used the same metaphor, then Hugo's argument would be more convincing. But as it is, the difference in each of these metaphors hints at the difference that exists between the spirit guide and the visionary's consciousness.

<sup>122</sup> Jacques Derrida, Spectres de Marx (Paris: Galilée, 1993).

historical process, what Derrida describes as the "mise en scène pour une fin de l'histoire."<sup>123</sup>

These apparitions are founding events, singular beginnings that reach out and give form to their own singular ends. But at the same time they are specters, transients whose precarious ontological status makes them very bad candidates for such foundational work, for "un spectre est toujours un revenant. On ne saurait en contrôler les allées et venues parce qu'il *commence par revenir*."<sup>124</sup> Such problematic beginnings (and endings) form part of what Derrida's names "hantologie" or "[la] logique de la hantise," which both enacts and exceeds any beginning and end, and in its persistent *revenance* renders incomprehensible the eschatological and teleological obsessions of ontology. In this way we see that a haunted beginning is not a singular event but a beginning that puts into question the very possibility of beginnings:

Hamlet commençait déjà par le retour attendu du roi mort. Après la fin de l'histoire, l'esprit vient en revenant, il figure à la fois un mort qui revient et un fantôme dont le retour attendu se répète, encore et encore.<sup>125</sup>

In this sense the phantom at the beginning both precedes and exceeds the range of expectations that it inaugurates. Derrida's reading of this ghostly presence allows us to see that Hugo, by purging the *tables tournantes* and the Elsinore tower from the beginning of William Shakespeare, has sought to isolate his visionary consciousness from any temporal and spatial encroachment by "l'hétérogénéité radicale et nécessaire d'un héritage, la différence sans opposition qui doit le [l'héritage] marquer."<sup>126</sup>

S'il y a quelque chose comme de la spectralité, il y a des raisons de douter de cet ordre rassurant des présents, et surtout de la frontière entre le présent, la réalité actuelle ou présente du présent et tout ce qu'on peut lui opposer: l'absence, la non-présence,

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<sup>123</sup> Derrida 31.

<sup>124</sup> Derrida 32. emphasis in original.

<sup>125</sup> Derrida 32.

<sup>126</sup> Derrida 40.

l'ineffectivité, l'inactualité, la virtualité ou même le simulacre en général, etc. Il y a d'abord à douter de la contemporanéité à soi du présent.<sup>127</sup>

On the dolmen, Hugo is awake and alert, keeping watch for the specter, guarding this "frontière" between his own presence and the abundant alterity of "tout ce qu'on peut lui opposer." In order to defend his visionary perch and his unified presence unto himself from these creeping specters, Hugo has, as we have seen, banished the ghosts, exorcised them from his promontory. Exorcism, Derrida claims, is a two step process, and both steps cohere in the French word "conjugation,"--a calling forth, or conjuring up, and an expulsion, or conjuring away. This makes intuitive sense: in order to cast a spirit out, to make sure that "le mort est bien mort," one first has to summon it into presence. But the calling into presence must not intrude upon the presence of whoever is doing the summoning, for it is in service of this very presence that the exorcism is performed:

Il s'agit en effet d'un performatif qui cherche à rassurer mais d'abord à se rassurer lui-même en s'assurant, car rien n'est moins sûr, que ce dont on voudrait la mort est bien mort. Il parle au nom de la vie, il prétend savoir ce que c'est. Qui le sait mieux qu'un vivant? semble-t-il dire sans rire. Il cherche à (se) convaincre là où il (se) fait peur: voilà que ce qui tenait en vie, (se) dit-il, n'est plus vivant, cela ne reste pas efficace dans la mort même, soyez tranquilles. (Il s'agit là d'une façon de ne pas vouloir savoir ce que tout vivant sait sans apprendre et sans savoir, à savoir que le mort peut être parfois puissant comme le vivant; et c'est pourquoi interpréter une philosophie comme philosophie ou comme ontologie de la vie, ce n'est jamais simple, ce qui veut dire que c'est toujours trop simple, incontestable, comme ce qui va de soi, mais si peu convaincant au fond, aussi peu que la tautologie, une tauto-ontologie assez hétérologique, celle de Marx ou de quiconque, qui ne reconduira tout à la vie qu'à la condition d'y inclure la mort et l'altérité de son autre sans laquelle elle ne serait pas ce qu'elle est.)<sup>128</sup>

We can recognize the work that the exorcism performs, the banishing of the dead in order to bolster one's own eminent presence, as the foundation of Hugo's visionary consciousness.

Hugo conjures up the other as the radical other in order to keep it in a position of extreme alterity

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<sup>127</sup> Derrida 72.

<sup>128</sup> Derrida 85.



and thereby to ensure his own presence. And so we see that the exorcisms of the first chapter of William Shakespeare, and the subsequent disavowal of the *tables tournantes*, find their corollary in the following breathless assertion of Shakespeare's unassailable ontological stability:

Shakespeare n'a point de réserve, de retenue, de frontière, de lacune. Ce qui lui manque, c'est le manque. Nulle caisse d'épargne. Il ne fait pas carême. Il déborde, comme la végétation, comme la germination, comme la lumière, comme la flamme.<sup>129</sup>

With this dizzying prose Hugo is thus engaged in the work of making Shakespeare purely present, so that he will be fully absent, and so that Hugo himself can be fully present. He is attributing to Shakespeare a self-evident wholeness ("tauto-ontologie") and he adopts a philosophy of pure presence in order to assert his own pure presence.

For Shakespeare or Hugo to maintain such a pure ontological position, a great deal of violence is necessary. The purely present poet must jealously defend the borders of his own being, as we see in the great holocaust that Shakespeare rains down on his own heterogeneous oeuvre in the following poem from book three of Les Contemplations:

XXVIII. Le poète

Shakespeare songe; loin du Versaille éclatant,  
Des buis taillés, des ifs peignés, où l'on entend  
Gémir la tragédie éplorée et proluxe,  
Il contemple la foule avec son regard fixe,  
Et toute la forêt frissonne devant lui.  
Pâle, il marche, au dedans de lui-même ébloui;  
Il va, farouche, fauve, et, comme une crinière,  
Secouant sur sa tête un haillon de lumière.  
Son crâne transparent est plein d'âmes, de corps,  
De rêves, dont on voit la lueur du dehors;  
Le monde tout entier passe à travers son crible;  
Il tient toute la vie en son poignet terrible;  
Il fait sortir de l'homme un sanglot surhumain.  
Dans ce génie étrange où l'on perd son chemin,  
Comme dans une mer, notre esprit parfois sombre,  
Nous sentons, frémissants, dans son théâtre sombre,

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<sup>129</sup> Victor Hugo, William Shakespeare 227.

Passer sur nous le vent de sa bouche soufflant,  
 Et ses doigts nous ouvrir et nous fouiller le flanc.  
 Jamais il ne recule; il est géant; il dompte  
 Richard-Trois, léopard, Caliban, mastodonte;  
 L'idéal est le vin que verse ce Bacchus.  
 Les sujets monstrueux qu'il a pris et vaincus  
 Râlent autour de lui, splendides ou difformes;  
 Il étreint Lear, Brutus, Hamlet, êtres énormes,  
 Capulet, Montaigu, César, et, tour à tour,  
 Les stryges dans le bois, *le spectre sur la tour*;  
 Et, même après Eschyle, effarant Melpomène,  
 Sinistre, ayant aux mains des lambeaux d'âme humaine,  
 De la chair d'Othello, des restes de Macbeth,  
 Dans son oeuvre, du drame effrayant alphabet,  
 Il se repose; ainsi le noir lion des jongles  
 S'endort dans l'ancre immense avec du sang aux ongles.  
 Paris, avril 1835. <sup>130</sup>

We can recognize in the poem the progression that Hugo described in the preface to Les Contemplations as the trajectory of the entire collection: "commencer à Foule et finir à Solitude."<sup>131</sup> The heterogeneity of nature cowers before Shakespeare's power and violence, and even the reader must submit to his dominance: "Nous sentons, frémissants, dans son théâtre sombre,/ Passer sur nous le vent de sa bouche soufflant,/ Et ses doigts nous ouvrir et nous fouiller le flanc." Shakespeare devours the diverse beings that populate his oeuvre, including the pesky "spectre sur la tour," and using the power of his own pure presence he lays waste to all difference in his path. If the assertion of the pure ontological presence of the poet, his unity unto himself, is the positive move of exorcism, then the negative move must be one of violence, a casting out of alterity, a holocaust of difference in which the one destroys the many and is left all alone, licking his bloody paws, fully present unto himself.

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<sup>130</sup> Victor Hugo. Les Contemplations 175-6.

<sup>131</sup> Victor Hugo. Les Contemplations 28.

But, as we might expect, these exorcisms are not as successful as they first claim to be. The spirits return from their exile, rising from their bloody death at the hands of Hugo's Shakespeare to threaten the pure presence of the poet.

From January 13th to February 9th of 1854, the Spiritualist circle at Marine Terrace collaborated on a long poem with the spirit of William Shakespeare. Like much of the verse composed at the table, the spirit wrote, revised, and collaborated with the living poets. Shakespeare's long poem is a somewhat rambling dissertation on the role of the poet in death. (The following quotation preserves the changes that were made as the spirit and the circle worked to edit the poem):

Quand vous voyez, aux pieds d'une autre Cléopâtre,  
Alceste, doux lion, courber son dos câlin,  
~~Un invisible acteur passe au fond du théâtre.~~  
Vous n'apercevez pas dans le fond du théâtre  
L'ombre de Poquelin.

Quand vous voyez passer dans le fond de la scène,  
Hamlet vêtu de deuil, croyez qu'il n'est pas seul.  
Shakespeare est dans son front, Shakespeare est dans sa veine.  
Ce n'est pas un manteau qu'il a, c'est mon linceul.

Invisible acteurs, nous jouons nos chefs-d'oeuvre,  
Nos noms sont sur l'affiche aux portes ~~du tombeau.~~ des tombeaux.  
Et si l'on nous sifflait, nous dirions: la couleuvre  
A passé dans nos os.

[Notre statue en deuil s'en vient du cimetière  
~~Et va devant la rampe~~ Et va jouer notre oeuvre. Au donjon d'Elseneur  
Je monte près d'Hamlet frémissant. C'est Molière  
Qui vient chez don Juan et non le commandeur.]

Notre statue en deuil s'en vient du cimetière  
~~Pâle, et vient écouter vos bravos et vos cris,~~  
Nous venons écouter critiques et défis.  
Le commandeur descend du tombeau de Molière  
Je monte près d'Hamlet et je lui dis: mon fils.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Les Tables 166-168.

This spirit who calls himself Shakespeare seems to have a very different agenda from the Shakespeare of Hugo's poem "le pòete." Here Shakespeare, and his fellow spirit Molière, live as spirits within their works, even returning from the dead to play the roles of ghosts. The spirit of the poet certainly resides within the poet's oeuvre, but this spirit seems to enjoy a haunting, partial presence. He lingers in his oeuvre, but he does not dominate it. When Hamlet appears on the stage he may not be alone--"croyez qu'il n'est pas seul"--but he remains Hamlet. There is a filial relationship between Hamlet and Shakespeare--"Shakespeare est dans son front, Shakespeare est dans sa veine./ Ce n'est pas un manteau qu'il a, c'est mon linceul"--but Hamlet is nonetheless distinct from Shakespeare's spirit. And so when Shakespeare himself enters the stage as a ghost and whispers "mon fils," he is asserting his haunting presence in his oeuvre. By this I mean that Shakespeare's spirit is neither purely coequal to his work nor purely different from it. He partakes of a polluted, muddled alterity, the difference of an other that is partly the same.

As a spirit who dictates French alexandrines to the circle, we can easily see how this "Shakespeare" might not be able to fully perform the functions of the "Genius" that Hugo assigns to him. This poem demonstrates the reason that the *tables tournantes* were so problematic for Hugo. For if he is to occupy the position of visionary genius, what is he to make of a poet who is only partly present to his own oeuvre. How can Hugo reconcile the middling voices of the séance with the pure transcendence that he requires for his own visionary poetry? How can Hugo be a visionary when his own promontory is already occupied by Hamlet and Hamlet's father, played by Shakespeare himself, played by Hugo himself?

When the circle at Jersey encountered the spectral presence of Léopoldine, Hugo was confronted with a problem. How could it happen that his daughter, "celle qui est restée en

France," did not actually "rest[er] en France"? What if she occupied some ambiguous, haunted position in relation to him? If Léopoldine, and for that matter, any of the spirits of the table, were neither fully present with him in Jersey nor fully absent from him, then how was Hugo to maintain his privileged position on the promontory? We have seen how Hugo's book William Shakespeare seeks to exorcise the middling spirits from the scene of his visionary inspiration on Jersey. The next section will examine how Hugo, during the séances themselves, sought to dominate and control the spirit voices, to deny them the position of low difference that they occupied in order to defend his visionary cosmology.

#### "Je Dis la Table Pour Abréger"

After the initial enthusiasm over Léopoldine's inaugural message, the spirit séances on Jersey went through several distinct phases. During the first séances, in September of 1853, the spirits that spoke through the *tables tournantes* merely responded to questions with short, one word or one sentence answers. On December 9, 1853, Xavier Durrieu, a new visitor to the *tables tournantes*, asked the spirit of André Chénier if he would like to complete a poem that he had left unfinished when he died. Chénier's spirit agreed, dictating verses letter by letter, and promising to proceed in this way until he had completed all of the fragmentary poems that he left behind at his death. Once Chénier revealed the option of communicating in this way, other great literary figures visited the group and composed verse. Hugo would often serve as an editor during these sessions, offering suggestions to the spirits as they wrote. These verse-writing séances continued, usually once or twice a week, through the winter months of 1853-54. During the summer of 1854, the group met less frequently, but continued to record the verse of the spirits at least twice a month.

But the fall of 1854 saw a rather dramatic shift in the séances. Beginning on September 3rd, the day before the anniversary of Léopoldine Hugo's death, the Spiritualist group began to receive messages from a spirit who identified himself as "La Mort." Victor Hugo, who was not present at the September 3rd séance, soon began an intensive metaphysical debate with La Mort and several other spirits that lasted most of the winter and into the spring. These séances correspond to a period during which Hugo composed many of the visionary and metaphysical poems that would be published in Les Contemplations, including "Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre," "À André Chenier," "Les Mages," and "Magnitudo parvi." On September 19th Hugo posed the following question to the table:

Victor Hugo-- J'ai une question grave à faire. Les êtres qui habitent l'invisible et qui voient la pensée dans nos cerveaux savent que, depuis vingt-cinq ans environ, je m'occupe des questions que la table soulève et approfondit.<sup>133</sup>

Here Hugo makes a clear allusion to Les Contemplations when he describes the very same twenty-five year period that he refers to in the preface to this collection:

Vingt-cinq années sont dans ces deux volumes. *Grande mortalis ævi spatium*. L'auteur a laissé, pour ainsi dire, ce livre se faire en lui.<sup>134</sup>

While the book might have been growing in Hugo's soul for twenty-five years, it seems to have bloomed at the same time that the intensive metaphysical séances were taking place on Jersey.<sup>135</sup> Most critics see the séances as "confirmatory"--a mirror that reflects back to Hugo and his circle exactly what they were thinking and discussing. But this reading of the texts ignores very lively debates and disagreements that took place between Hugo and the various spirits that visited the group. In the fall of 1854 a major disagreement over the nature of communication between the

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<sup>133</sup> Les Tables 304.

<sup>134</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 27.

<sup>135</sup> Ireson notes that Hugo's contract to publish Les Contemplations was "settled sometime in the spring of 1854, and it is from this time that work on the book can be seen to have made rapid progress" (Ireson 130).

divine and the mortal realms developed between Hugo and several of the spirits. This conflict came to a head during two tense visitations by the spirit of Galileo on December 10th and December 17th, 1854. These séances, I would argue, far from being confirmatory messages for Hugo, constituted a threat to the complex cosmology that he was then assembling for Les Contemplations. Specifically, the spirits challenged Hugo's understanding of the transcendent role that the visionary poet played in the universe. Hugo's response to these spirits can, I would further contend, be read as a defense of his cosmology and, by extension, his poetic genius.

This series of séances began, as I mentioned above, with a message from La Mort on the day before the anniversary of Léopoldine's death. La Mort mentions Léopoldine and her husband Charles Vacquerie--"Les époux charmants envolés dans le fleuve pensent à vous"--but then goes on to make a seemingly contradictory statement about the fate of the distinct individual soul in the afterlife: "Quand vous serez morts, vous deviendrez eux et ils resteront vous. Dans le ciel, on ne se rejoint pas, on se fond. Le paradis n'a qu'une bouche. L'amour est ses deux lèvres."<sup>136</sup> Thus in spite of the fact that the individual melts away in the *au-delà*, the married couple is still distinct enough for this spirit to identify them.

This problematic stance on the part of La Mort surfaces again in his discussion with Hugo about the type of books that Hugo will dictate from beyond the grave. La Mort asserts that "Tout grand esprit fait dans sa vie deux œuvres : son œuvre de vivant et son œuvre fantôme."<sup>137</sup> Hugo, recognizing the inherent contradiction in this maxim, asks just what kind of work he will produce once he is dead:

Ce que tu me conseilles de publier après ma mort, sont-ce des œuvres de révélation, et, en ce cas, la révélation, ne serait-elle pas déjà faite? Ou sont-ce des œuvres de poésie contenant, comme toutes mes autres œuvres, seulement à un degré plus profond encore,

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<sup>136</sup> Les Tables 301-302.

<sup>137</sup> Les Tables 306.

l'intuition divine mêlée à la création humaine? En un mot, que devra-t-il y avoir dans mon tombeau, un prophète ou un poète? Ma raison me dit un poète, mais j'attends ta réponse.<sup>138</sup>

Hugo is here concerned with the precarious narrative position of the spirit-poet. His question thus speaks not only to the ontological status of the spirit, but also to the authority with which this spirit will speak. Will Hugo remain an organized consciousness, and will he thus be able to express this identity--“la création humaine”-- in the works that he dictates from beyond the grave? Will the messages that the poet recites reflect his own human consciousness or will they be an expression of divine truth that completely transcends his own poetic voice? Will he create or reveal? These questions concern the same contradiction that the spirit seemed to embrace in talking about Léopoldine and Charles Vacquerie. Have they melted away into the unity of infinity or are they able to speak as individuals and send their greetings to their family?

La Mort responds to Hugo's questions in a rather enigmatic way, saying that Hugo will lose his organized personality and poetic consciousness in the afterlife and yet retain a measure of power and prestige:

O vivant, voici ce que je te conseille: l'œuvre de ton âme doit être le voyage de ton âme; tu ne dois pas prophétiser, tu dois deviner, tu dois deviner le ciel étoilé, y tracer ton itinéraire, y désigner du doigt tes auberges...châtelain de l'immensité, tu dois dire dans ces pages quelles sont les planètes qui t'attendent et parler de leur civilisation, de leur lumière et de leur ombre...le monde doit t'entendre dire: il y a dans l'infini un astre qui s'appelle Saturne et qui souffre; il y a dans l'infini un astre qui s'appelle Mercure et qui souffre; il y a dans l'infini un astre qui s'appelle Mars et qui souffre...<sup>139</sup>

La Mort thus suggests that Hugo will be neither poet nor prophet. He will become part of the very universe that he is to describe in his messages. His individual soul will become part of the infinite, and yet he will remain in a position of authority. He will be “châtelain de l'immensité,” reporting to the living on the suffering of the other planets.

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<sup>138</sup> Les Tables 326.

<sup>139</sup> Les Tables 327-8.



At first glance, this response seems to be in accord with Hugo's own view of the structure of the universe. Hugo's cosmology, as it appears in such poems as "Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre," is characterized by the great chain that links all being together. God, the perfect and infinite creator of the universe, is distinguished from his creation by the criteria of matter. A manuscript text that dates from 1853-54, and that rather succinctly sketches out Hugo's cosmology, establishes matter as the criteria by which to judge a being's level on the great chain of being. The more matter a certain being has, the lower in the cosmic order it will sink:

Dieu a fait la création aussi peu distante [sic] de lui que possible en y mêlant une imperceptible quantité de matière.

le mal tend à éloigner la création de Dieu en augmentant la matière. le poids de la matière grossissante fait tomber de plus en plus la création dans l'ombre, dans la faute, dans le mal.<sup>140</sup>

Man is at an intermediate stage, and is prevented by the material nature of his body from climbing the great ladder to the heavens. On a planetary level, different worlds vary in their relative materiality, and therefore in their closeness to the perfection and infinity of God:

Les mondes sont des êtres. Un monde est une âme.  
il leur est donné de s'éloigner ou de se rapprocher de Dieu.  
il y a des mondes anges: les paradis.  
il y a des mondes démons: les enfers.  
les mondes de récompense.--les mondes d'expiation.  
dans les premiers presque tout est esprit et lumière. dans les autres, presque tout est matière et nuit.  
...  
il y a les mondes intermédiaires; les mondes de purifica[tion] ce qu'on pourrait appeler les mondes-hommes.  
La terre est un.<sup>141</sup>

In Hugo's cosmology the visionary poet can, with the proper guide, transcend the materiality of this world and ascend into the realms of immateriality in order to gain a divine

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<sup>140</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 502.

<sup>141</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 500.

perspective. In Les Contemplations of Victor Hugo: An Allegory of the Creative Process,

Suzanne Nash argues that Hugo's general project in Les Contemplations, like that of Dante and

Milton before him, is to enter into and describe all levels of creation:

From the visionary's point of view the work can be compared to the pattern a pebble makes when thrown into a pond. Contemporary man, who stands on the farthestmost ring of the widening gyre of creation, is blind to his own significance. He is not able to discern from his limited temporal standpoint that his ring or life parallels all past and future rings--that the beginnings of Creation and the course of universal consciousness reflect one another. It is the role of the visionary, be he poet, scientist or philosopher, to bring that pattern into focus for mankind.<sup>142</sup>

In order to accomplish this, Hugo must have access to all levels of this universe. The sixth book of Les Contemplations, "Au bord de l'infini," describes the final stage in the poet's ascent into the immaterial realm. The privilege of entering into this realm is reserved for a select few, as we see in "Les Mages":

Nous naissons tous ce que nous sommes.  
Dieu de ses mains sacre des hommes  
Dans les ténèbres des berceaux;  
Son effrayant doigt invisible  
Écrit sous leur crâne la bible  
Des arbres, des monts et des eaux.

Ces hommes, ce sont les poètes;  
Ceux dont l'aile monte et descend;  
Toutes les bouches inquiètes  
qu'ouvre le verbe frémissant;<sup>143</sup>

These "mages," the visionary poets and thinkers, are thus able to transcend this earthly purgatory. They hear the divine voice of God speaking in all creation and can see past the material to the universal in all creation. Hugo, as Nash suggests, counted himself among those chosen few who were able to transcend the earthly realm:

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<sup>142</sup> Nash 35-36.

<sup>143</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 363.

During his years in exile he had become increasingly convinced that he had been chosen to lead mankind toward reform by effecting its spiritual conversion. Thus, as the architect of his imaginary universe, he felt justified in imposing upon the reader a sequence of steps by which he must ascend to the cosmic height necessary for the panoramic view of the total vision.<sup>144</sup>

Returning to the dispute with La Mort, we can now see that what at first seemed like a confirmation of Hugo's visionary mission, now seems problematic. The various worlds that La Mort suggests Hugo will be able to visit when he has died are simply other purgatory-planets analogous to Earth. La Mort suggest that Hugo, at the time of his death, will not ascend the ladder toward a more perfect and immaterial realm, but will rather make a lateral move to other planets similar to Earth. Hugo's prophetic revelations will therefore not be based on his seeing the divine, but will merely be a confirmation of the suffering on other, similar worlds: "il y a dans l'infini un astre qui s'appelle Saturne et qui souffre; il y a dans l'infini un astre qui s'appelle Mercure et qui souffre; il y a dans l'infini un astre qui s'appelle Mars et qui souffre..."<sup>145</sup> Hugo will be freed from his earthly bounds, but he will, in effect, remain at the same level on the great chain of being.

La Mort has further challenged Hugo's transcendent aspirations by providing in his response a preview of the kind of communications that Hugo will be creating from beyond the grave. He has adopted the voice of the spirit of Victor Hugo and has spoken of the suffering of the planets in the *au-delà*. But at the very same moment, Hugo asserts his own voice into the conversation, in effect interrupting himself:

[La Mort (as Hugo):] Seigneur, votre ciel est couvert de plaies, vos astres sont des gouttes de sang.

Victor Hugo.-- J'ai fait les vers que tu dis. J'ai fait ce vers (dans un autre sens.)  
*De ces gouttes de sang qu'on prend pour des étoiles.*

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<sup>144</sup> Nash 9.

<sup>145</sup> Les Tables 327-8

[La Mort (as Hugo)]--Vos soleils prennent la gangrène, vos lunes ont l'horrible peste du châtement, vos constellations qui s'agenouillent depuis des millions d'années, ont fini par se briser le crâne et le poing contre les ténèbres, et ne sont plus que des moignons d'enfer, vos auréoles ne sont plus que des haillons de rayons, vos prodiges...

Victor Hugo.--J'ai dit:

*Il portait sur son front un haillon de lumière*

--...ont la tête coupée, votre firmament est l'immense égout où roulent tous ces cadavres et vos splendides chevaux ferrés de lumière, fous de rage et prenant le mors aux dents, éclartèlent l'immensité.

(La table s'arrête court.--Le soleil est couché.)

(Immédiatement après, Victor Hugo va chercher dans sa chambre et lit aux personnes présentes la pièce faite par lui et commençant par:

*Sachez que dans le gouffre obscur*

et finissant par:

*D'un de ces mondes effrayants.*<sup>146</sup>

We have here a rather complex narrative situation. La Mort is quoting what Hugo's spirit (however coherent it might be) might say when he is dead. La Mort himself is in an even more ambiguous narrative position than Hugo will be, for he is not the shadow of a formerly coherent human consciousness, but an allegorized figure. Hugo then interrupts La Mort's quotations in order to himself quote Victor Hugo. He has, he asserts, already spoken the words that La Mort says he will one day speak. He has anticipated the perspective that he will have when he is dead and is already able to float through the universe to report on its suffering. After the spirit stops speaking, Hugo is able to produce the manuscript of a poem that proves his argument. As a visionary poet he has access to the perspective that he would enjoy as a spirit.

By referring to his already completed body of work Hugo thus reasserts the prophetic, visionary nature of his poetry. He cites textual evidence to back up the claim that he already has

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<sup>146</sup> Les Tables 328-9.

access to the divine realm. But the divine voices that speak in the tables attempt to deny or restrict this possibility.

This is the heart of the argument that continues on for several more late-night sessions. During these séances the specific question of Hugo's posthumous work is expanded to include the more general debate over of the possibility of any mortal access to the divine. How can man's conventional understanding of constellations, for example, be compared to divine constellations? In the first of two contentious discussions with Galileo, Hugo demands access to the divine language of the *au-delà*. He cannot understand why the spirits that visit the table continue to speak in the conventional language of humans:

Hugo--Voici, non l'objection, mais l'observation. Dans ses admirables paroles de la deuxième séance (22 octobre) , l'être colossal [La Mort] qui me parlait m'a paru trop condescendre au point de vue humain, c'est-à-dire à l'illusion que nous fait le ciel quand nous le regardons...Notre construction des constellations est donc purement arbitraire et résulte d'une illusion d'optique. Il y a évidemment les constellations vraies. Celles que nous croyons voir sont les constellations fausses. Or, puisque notre infirmité humaine comprend cela, la table aurait pu, ce me semble, en nous disant des choses si hautes, nous parler tout à fait le langage splendide de la vérité. <sup>147</sup>

Hugo is disappointed with the spirit's use of human language and here challenges the spirits to speak to him in the divine language on the infinite. He has, after all, already accessed the divine, as we saw in the revelation that his poetry was similar to the words of the spirits.

Galileo responds in two seemingly contradictory ways. He first claims that the divine language is completely inaccessible to humans. "Je réponds deux choses: d'abord, s'il fallait que la table parlât, non le langage humain, mais le langage céleste, vous ne la comprendriez pas."<sup>148</sup> He then goes on to assert that this celestial language does not exist. For God to speak in

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<sup>147</sup> Les Tables 335-336.

<sup>148</sup> Les Tables 336.

language, itself an earthy and imperfect thing, would be to allow God to enter into and slide down the great chain of being into the realm of the finite and material:

Le visage ne parle pas, le visage n'entend pas, le visage ne formule pas; Dieu parlant, c'est dieu langue; Dieu langue, c'est Dieu bouche; Dieu bouche, c'est Dieu corps; Dieu corps, c'est Dieu homme; Dieu homme, c'est Dieu bête; Dieu bête, c'est Dieu plante; Dieu plante, c'est Dieu caillou. Y songes-tu? Dieu caillou! lui qui n'est même pas Dieu étoile! non, la langue céleste n'est pas. Il n'y a pas d'alphabet de l'incrée; il n'y a pas de grammaire du ciel...<sup>149</sup>

All language is material and, therefore, necessarily human. Thus all access to the divine, by living poets or the spirits of the dead, must be imperfect and therefore not divine. In adopting this argument, Galileo not only denies Hugo's visionary claims, he also undermines his own authority. The dead spirit of Galileo also speaks in language, and because of this he must fix his own perspective in a certain location. He speaks from a certain local and therefore non-universal perspective. For this reason Galileo's spirit must admit that, in spite of his being a part of the infinite, he does not understand the divine realm:

Moi, Galilée, je déclare ignorer le contenu de l'infini; j'ignore où cela commence et où cela finit; j'ignore ce qu'il y a devant, derrière, au milieu, à droite, à gauche, à l'est, à l'ouest, au sud, au nord; je ne sais pas l'intérieur, ni l'extérieur; je vois des astres, des astres, des astres; je vois des étoiles, des étoiles, des étoiles; je vois des constellations, des constellations, des constellations; je vois des rayons mêlés à des splendeurs nouées à des flamboiements, des éblouissements perdus dans des contemplations, des contemplations plongées dans des éblouissements; je suis pris dans un prodigieux tournoiement de la roue aux moyeux d'or. Où cela va-t-il? je ne sais rien.<sup>150</sup>

Galileo's response to Hugo's question is therefore based not on his knowledge of the infinite, but on his profound ignorance of it. As a coherent consciousness--"Moi, Galilée, je déclare..."-- he is unable to have a divine perspective on the universe. No great patterns or insights appear to him and he is faced with a blinding confusion. In this sense all insights, all constellations, and all language, including communications from spirits and poems by visionary poets, are

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<sup>149</sup> Les Tables 337.

<sup>150</sup> Les Tables 341-2.

fundamentally human and imperfect. Whether it comes close to the truth or is patently false, all knowledge is human and therefore incomplete.

[Galileo] Est-ce à dire que vous vous trompiez en tout? Non. Vos mains tâtonnent au ciel et touchent parfois des boutons rayonnants des portes divines: tout le faux de l'homme est plein de tout le vrai de Dieu; ...les vrais astronomes ne sont pas plus véridiques que les faux; tous les télescopes humains sont dans un à peu près; ce n'est pas le sens, mais ce n'est pas le contre-sens; tu me dis:--je veux le ciel véritable et non le ciel imaginaire; je veux le firmament réel, les constellations réelles, les soleils réels; je veux l'immensité de Dieu complète, sans lacune, sans solution de continuité; je veux l'abîme sans vide; qu'on m'apporte l'infini, qu'on m'apporte le mystère; je demande la carte du tombeau, l'itinéraire de la résurrection...<sup>151</sup>

Galileo's response to Hugo's question is therefore a challenge to Hugo's own vision of himself as a poet. The impossibility of a pure superhuman language means that Hugo's own poetry cannot have access to the divine. His poetry, like the communications of the spirits, is merely an imperfect approximation of the divine. But Hugo wants more. As the spirit notes, he is convinced that he can have access to "la carte du tombeau, l'itinéraire de la résurrection." The spirit's assertion of the fundamentally mortal nature of language is at the heart of the conflict between cosmogonies. Hugo often repeats the equation "Dieu = Verbe," asserting that a divine language permeates all creation. The poet, attuned to the sounds of nature, can hear the voice of God in the rustling trees and the chattering birds. Galileo's spirit is not here denying that the visionary poet has heard other voices, he is simply questioning the divine nature of these voices. Hugo listens to the birds and the trees, hears a low, earthly difference in this incomprehensible noise, and interprets this difference as partaking of the pure and divine difference of God's language--a difference that is, in the end, unified into a transcendent whole. For Galileo's spirit, this leap from low difference to divine difference is not possible. Man's language and nature's sounds are, in their materiality, unable to transcend this realm.

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<sup>151</sup> Les Tables 341-2.

In Abyss of Reason, Daniel Cottom sees nineteenth century Spiritualism as a movement that borrows the very language of "reason,"--by which he means such discursive traditions as the physical sciences, psychology, positivist history, and realist fiction that rely on enlightenment assumptions of a stable subject and object--and thereby demonstrates the materiality of language and the abyssal foundations of all rational discourse:

[Spiritualism] used the rhetoric of enlightenment in the service of a cause that appeared as the opposite of enlightenment, as superstitious prejudice, to those who claimed to be the spiritual heirs of Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Voltaire. In doing so it exposed reason as an apparatus of institutions, traditions, texts, practices, personal relationships, and common sense that was unified and coherent as long as it was represented as an imperceptible spirit. Spiritualism had to be rejected as an indignity because it would utter, write, rap, or in some other way say "reason." It would show the meaning reason could not bear: the meaning of its own social resistance and power.<sup>152</sup>

By using the tools of rational discourse to arrive at a perfectly irrational results, Spiritualism threatened reason's claims to transcend history, politics and rhetoric. Cottom describes how Spiritualists, by turning their parlors into laboratories, radically democratized the pursuit of knowledge and truth. In their conversations with the dead, everyday people could now share in the "experience" of truth arrived at with the tools of empiricism, and in so doing they put into question the very foundations of reason's claims to truth:<sup>153</sup>

In order to repulse this movement, the various rational discourses did not so much argue against the rational merits of Spiritualism as debase and impugn the social prestige of the movement. How could such a lowly admixture of jumbled voices, emerging from a mere table, they asked, reveal the truths of the universe?

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<sup>152</sup> Daniel Cottom, Abyss of Reason (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991) 37.

<sup>153</sup> "[Spiritualism] showed that the image of reason could not be sustained by the experience of reason alone. It demonstrated that meaningful experience was secondary to the cultural order that it was supposed to originate, so that neither culture nor reason could ever find the experience necessary to ground its pretensions. This is what spiritualist writings said: that persons must struggle to communicate because experience commands reason by speaking in diverse, conflicting, infinitely suggestive tongues" (Cottom 76).



We see in Cottom's description of Spiritualism the very same problem that Hugo ultimately faced in his conversations with the spirits: the low materiality of the communications. When Galileo talks about Hugo's inability to describe the divine, he is able to make an especially effective argument because he is willing to admit his own inability to describe the divine. According to Galileo, language, whether spoken by a spirit or a visionary poet, is fundamentally earthly and material. If this is true, then Hugo's visions, like the truth-telling claims of other rational discourses, are not so much revelation as simple changes in perspective. What if the voices of nature are just that, other voices? What if Hugo has misrecognized the alterity of the universe, seeing divinity in what is really mere alterity? What if Hugo's visionary poetry was simply a more practiced version of the banal rantings of the spirits? Galileo's description of the material nature of language was a radical challenge to Hugo's understanding of his poetic mission.

Spiritualism's great destabilizing power, Cottom argues, lay in its ability to deny (as Galileo has here denied Hugo) the transcendental function of language:

When the tables began to communicate in the middle of the nineteenth century, what they communicated was the indignity of metaphor. They did not make the metaphor of the spirit a literal reality; instead, for all practical purposes they collapsed the distinction between the surface of things and "the other side," between the ground and the representation of meaning.<sup>154</sup>

The voices of the table are not, as Hugo would hope, the mouthpiece of God. They are simply a jumble of lowly, chattering spirits. In the tables, Hugo has encountered a group of familiar, haunting spirits who do more to obstruct his visionary powers than extend them. The language that these spirits use is no nearer to the divine than his own. But Hugo does not take this challenge to his visionary powers lying down. He counters Spiritualism's challenge in two

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<sup>154</sup> Cottom 47.

interesting ways. Instead of confronting his ideas head on, Hugo simply refuses to hear Galileo's confession of ignorance. He argues that the spirits' theories conflict with one another and do not make rational sense. The spirits must therefore be trying to keep the divine realm mysterious by thwarting his penetrating gaze:

Victor Hugo.--J'ai une note à écrire.

Je n'insisterai pas; il devient évident pour moi, par ce que la table a dit ce soir, comme en plusieurs autres occasions, que le monde sublime qui consent à communiquer avec notre monde ténébreux ne veut pas se laisser forcer par lui, même quand la curiosité n'est autre chose qu'adoration devant Dieu et respect devant l'infini. Ce monde sublime veut rester sublime; mais ne veut pas devenir exact, ou moins il veut que son exactitude ne nous apparaisse qu'énorme et confuse dans de prodigieuses échappées d'ombre et de lumière.

<sup>155</sup>

According to Hugo the spirits have intentionally confused matters by denying the possibility of a divine language. This passage opens a long note that Hugo inserted into the record after the December 17th séance in which he employs two rhetorical strategies to counter Galileo's challenge to his cosmology. He first claims that Galileo has not responded in good faith: "Il finit presque par dire Oui et Non."<sup>156</sup> In order to keep the infinite word obscure in human eyes, Galileo has given a contradictory response. He has argued, with the authority of his position in the spirit world, that he knows nothing of this same spirit world. He claims both that the celestial language is inaccessible to humans, and that this language does not exist. These contradictions are analogous to the contradiction that Hugo points out at the end of the final séance in this series. The tables, he argues, have told him both that he should study human constellations and that these constellations are not worth studying at all:

La table me dit (10 novembre) : *étudie à fond l'astronomie humaine*, et (18 décembre) : *que t'importe une miette de ciel de plus ou de moins?* Elle me raille presque de la chose qu'elle m'a conseillée. Je n'insiste pas. Tout en restant droit dans ma conscience, je

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<sup>155</sup> Les Tables 343.

<sup>156</sup> Les Tables 343.

m'incline silencieusement devant l'être sublime qui m'a parlé hier et qui a terminé pas de si hautes et de si douces paroles.<sup>157</sup>

We should first understand that Hugo has taken the second quotation completely out of its context. It is part of a long and ironic passage in which l'Ombre du Sépulcre chastises Hugo for his narrow understanding of the immensity of the divine perspective that he claims to seek:

Puisque tu es en train de demander, pourquoi demander si peu? tu es peu exigeant. Que t'importe une miette de ciel de plus ou moins? quel médiocre appétit d'infini que celui qui demande un supplément d'étoiles et qui se plaint à son geôlier de sa ration d'astres!<sup>158</sup>

But even if Hugo fails to read the irony in the passage, if he were to accept the relativist argument that Galileo has put forward--that any single perspective on the night sky, or any single language or utterance are partial, incomplete and therefore not divine--then the apparently contradictory positions that he reads in the spirit communications would no longer seem at odds with one another. The importance of human astronomy is the very fact of its incompleteness. In searching for the divine, Hugo was told both to embrace and reject the incomplete perspective of human astronomy. This view was restated, on December 18th, by L'Ombre du Sépulcre:

Toutes les petites constellations sont fausses dans le relatif et vraies dans l'absolu, la Grande Ourse et le Verseau et Orion sont des accouplements tout faits pour les yeux et que ne dérange pas l'harmonie céleste''<sup>159</sup>

Human constellations and human language, though they may be provisional and incomplete, are nonetheless part of the divine. While no one individual can simultaneously comprehend all perspectives or potential constellations, the assemblage of these many different perspectives constitutes the infinite. While certain perspectives may conflict and thus be false, all perspectives

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<sup>157</sup> Les Tables 351.

<sup>158</sup> Les Tables 346.

<sup>159</sup> Les Tables 349.

are “vraies dans l’absolu,” in as much as they partake of the infinite. Thus l’Ombre de Sépulcre can argue, in spite of Hugo’s interruption, for a democratic astronomy:

[L’Ombre de Sépulcre]: La nuit c’est la démocratie étoilée; le firmament, c’est la république symbolique qui mêle les astres de tous les rangs et réalise la fraternité par le...

Victor Hugo--J’ai dit:

*L’avenir, c’est l’hymen des hommes sur la terre  
Et des étoiles dans les cieux.*

--...rayonnement.<sup>160</sup>

But Hugo chooses to see the seemingly contradictory advice from the spirits as a plot to keep humans confused and in the dark, and not simply as different views or perspectives on a consistent cosmology. Furthermore, he reads these bits of advice as conflicting in spite of the fact that they were delivered by different spirits.

This brings us to the second rhetorical strategy Hugo employs to defend his own cosmology. In arguing that the spirits are intentionally obscuring their messages, Hugo conflates all the voices into one voice that he names “la table”:

En un mot, il veut que l’homme doute. C’est visiblement la loi, et je me résigne. Chose frappante pour moi: je faisais une question humble et personne ne comprend plus que moi quels atomes nous sommes et quel néant je suis devant Dieu, et cette question paraît à la table une accusation! Je demandais à la table (je dis la table pour abrégé) si elle ne pensait pas que ses grandes révélations sur les fonctions des astres eussent eu, sinon plus d’autorité pour nous, du moins plus de solidité devant ceux qui nient, en se plaçant dans les données mêmes de notre astronomie, en la répudiant comme inexacte fatalement, en disant, pas exemple: <<Je ne parle point des constellations apparentes composées par les illusions de votre œil ; mais des constellations réelles groupées par Dieu. Je veux parler de ce que vous ne voyez pas et de ce que vous ne savez pas.>> Eh bien! l’être qui me répond en langage splendide dit: je me nomme Galilée. Et Galilée, qui a lutté et souffert pour détruire sur terre l’illusion! Galilée, qui pourrait s’appeler Réalité, prend le parti d’apparence! il qualifie, avec quelque ironie, la haute pensée, lui qui est la pensée et la hauteur!<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Les Tables 349.

<sup>161</sup> Les Tables 343.

The parenthetical note--"(je dis la table pour abrégé)"--demonstrates a contradiction in Hugo's own approach to the *tables tournantes*. Hugo insists on hearing the table speak in a unified, singular voice. But the different spirits seem instead to speak with different voices and from different perspectives. Hugo hopes to refine the many voices of the séances into a singular, and therefore divine, voice in which he can read the intention to deceive him with contradictions. In a profoundly anti-democratic gesture, he refuses to differentiate between the voices of the table. He even goes so far as to suggest that this voice that claims to be Galileo is adopting this identity as part of the deception. This abridging or refining of the voices from the table not only helps Hugo to overcome the challenge posed by this alternative cosmology, but is also a defensive move to bolster his own view of the universe. If the tables speak in an opaque, but nonetheless singular voice, then the possibility of a divine language remains viable. And if the divine language exists, Hugo, as visionary poet, can aspire to hear this language and its profound truth.

The *tables tournantes* thus challenge Hugo's vision of the universe by presenting him with a rather sobering perspective on his visionary project. The poet's transcendence of his own realm will only bring him another, equally fallible and incomplete perspective. His voice, like the many voices that emanate from the table, does not come from a singularly privileged and visionary position, but is simply another of the many voices from other realms. The voices from beyond the grave are just that, a scattered cacophony of many spirits, and their communications are not a confirmation of Hugo's ideas but a threat to them.

Hugo is threatened by the possibility of a de-centered, polyvocal *au-delà*. He has found a murmuring crowd where he expected the divine and singular voice of God. In this alternative, relativistic cosmology, what Hugo has been assuming was his visionary and transcendent experience turns out to be nothing more than a change of perspective. He has given up the flawed

perspective of earth not for the universal and divine perspective of God, but for another flawed perspective. In the words of l'Ombre de Sépulchre, "veut-tu le mirage de la planète à gauche au lieu du feu follet de la planète à droite?"<sup>162</sup> Returning to the question that inspired much of this debate, we can now see that, as poet or a prophet, Hugo's soul would not, according to the spirits, enjoy the ideal visionary position: "l'intuition divine mêlée à la création humaine."<sup>163</sup> In the spirits' view, Hugo has confused difference with divinity and assumed that by accessing other voices and other worlds he has tapped into the infinite. Thus the spirit voices emerging from the *tables tournantes* both explain and demonstrate the diversity of the universe's alterity.

These chattering spirits also, to anticipate later chapters, hint at the emergence of a hybrid, Creolized cultural paradigm that discovers a middling, polluting difference within the essentializing projects of Western identitarianism. Hugo's skittish rejection of these voices and their muddled transcendence is a defense of the imperial nature of his own genius and the imperial nature of Western concepts of cultural identity. In both cases he has failed, for his voice has escaped his control.

#### "His Soul Is Marching On"

John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave,  
 John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave,  
 John Brown's body lies a-moldering in the grave,  
 His soul is marching on.

"John Brown's Body"<sup>164</sup>

We began this consideration of Hugo's struggle with Spiritualism by tracing Hugo's own monumental presence in the world that he left behind. While the living Hugo sought to dominate

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<sup>162</sup> Les Tables 346.

<sup>163</sup> Les Tables 326.

<sup>164</sup> Franny Nudelman. "'The Blood of Millions': John Brown's Body, Public Violence, and Political Community." American Literary History. 13.4 (2001) 639-640.

the voices of the *au-delà*, at his death his genius spun out of his individual control and spread itself around the world. Hugo's voice traveled far and wide, but we shall be most interested in tracing its path as it made its way across the Atlantic to Louisiana and Haiti, where it was emulated and occupied by Creole writers as they forged a new mimetic literature. This literature embraced the very same destabilizing possibilities opened up by Spiritualist literary production that Hugo had sought to close and contain.

In keeping with his long-standing public opposition to the death penalty, Hugo took a public stance against John Brown's execution, and in December of 1859 wrote an influential letter pleading for John Brown's pardon. Brown, who had been found guilty by a Virginia jury, was scheduled to die that very month. For Hugo, the American republic was blessed with the ghostly presence of its great founding hero: "Quand on pense aux États-Unis d'Amérique, une figure majestueuse se lève dans l'esprit, Washington."<sup>165</sup> But this ideal vision was threatened by John Brown's conviction and imminent execution, to be replaced by the disturbing image of "Washington tuant Spartacus."<sup>166</sup> Hugo's letter was reprinted in papers around the world and became an important tool for abolitionist forces. William Lloyd Garrison reprinted the letter in the Liberator, as did the American Anti-Slavery Society in its annual report for 1860.<sup>167</sup>

But perhaps the most ringing endorsement of Hugo's opinion on the John Brown issue came 13 years later from John Brown himself. In February of 1872, John Brown's spirit visited a Spiritualist circle in New Orleans and bore witness to the great struggle for which he had given up his life:

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<sup>165</sup> Victor Hugo, "John Brown" Ouvres Complètes de Victor Hugo. Actes et Paroles II. Pendant L'Exil 1852-1870 (Paris: J. Hetzel, A. Quantin, 1883) 235.

<sup>166</sup> Victor Hugo, "John Brown" 239.

<sup>167</sup> Seymour Drescher, "Servile Insurrection and John Brown's Body in Europe" The Journal of American History. 80.2 (1993) 499-500. Garrison himself was an active proponent of Spiritualism. See: Cox 163.

La république marche a pas de géants vers l'Union des Races !

Cette corde que vous avez attachée au corps du Brown a servi de lanière pour vous fouetter! Brown a vu Sumter et Manassas; mais il a vu aussi Lee devant Grant!...

Il a vu le Noir, l'épée au côté; à la Tribune, la plume en main pour se défendre; et au loin il l'a vu dans la Patrie Universelle, revêtu de la Robe de L'Élu, tendre la main à Lee, lui montrant le chemin de la progression et lui disant : " Frère! tu m'as flagellé; mais moi, je n'ai pas de haine pour toi! Viens! je te pardonne: Caillou est un grand coeur, et, aujourd'hui, sa Grande âme demandent pour toi le Pardon! Viens!"

John Brown [Spirit] <sup>168</sup>

Brown's spirit adopts a conciliatory tone in this message. He describes a black warrior for justice who, by forgiving General Lee's recently arrived spirit, demonstrates the transcendent truth of racial equality. Brown also seems to be well informed about Louisiana's recent history. The message mentions La Tribune, the important New Orleans newspaper and organ of the Afro-Creole intelligentsia in New Orleans, and describes the spirit of André Caillou, the free black hero of the battle of Port Hudson, who personally forgives Robert E. Lee and welcomes him into the beyond.<sup>169</sup>

This message, like many Spiritualist messages, emanates from a complex enunciatory situation. The medium channels John Brown's spirit, but the voice that emerges addresses Brown in the third person and quotes him as he addresses Lee. Furthermore, this voice seems to have access to Caillou's spirit. Just as in Hugo's experimentations with Spiritualism, there is a pronounced fluidity of identity in this message: John Brown quotes himself quoting André Caillou.

But what is most interesting about this message is that John Brown's spirit also seems to be imitating Hugo's famous letter. Brown's spirit echoes Hugo's sentiment about racial unity--

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<sup>168</sup> Spiritualist Registers. Vol. 85-38. p. 400. 9 Feb. 1872.

<sup>169</sup> André Caillou's name is conventionally spelled "Cailloux" in scholarship on Louisiana history and culture.



"La république marche a pas de géants vers l'Union des Races !" <sup>170</sup> It also revives Hugo's figurative use of the hangman's noose: "...le faisceau radieux de cette république splendide aurait pour lien le noeud coulant de gibet de John Brown....Ce lien-là tue." <sup>171</sup> Brown's spirit makes a similar claim about the hangman's rope being used to torture those who initially wielded it: "Cette corde que vous avez attachée au corps du Brown a servi de lanière pour vous fouetter!" <sup>172</sup> Among the several voices that Brown's spirit adopts, one can hear the distinct echo of Hugo.

In wider American culture, John Brown remained a divisive figure after his death. While the popular Union Army marching song "John Brown's Body" suggests that the great abolitionist's "body lies a-moldering in the grave," it also insists that his soul, and therefore his voice, continues to interact with this world: "his soul is marching on." <sup>173</sup> But this song, which was later given new words and transformed into the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," offers a hint as to how to understand the condition of John Brown's identity after his death. John Brown's "soul goes marching on" not in spite of, but rather because of, the "moldering" of his body, for to "molder" is not simply to decay or rot, but to dissipate by breaking into pieces, to crumble and break apart. Brown is able to speak in French to Creole Spiritualists of New Orleans because his once unified voice has splintered into a chorus of dusty, ventriloquized voices. These voices speaks in multiple and conflicting ways, and refuse to strictly correspond to a particular personality. And yet Brown remains a coherent historical figure. This tension between spirit identity and spiritual transcendence is emblematic of the type of messages that Louisiana's Spiritualists received.

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<sup>170</sup> Spiritualist Registers Vol. 85-38. p. 400. 9 Feb. 1872.

<sup>171</sup> Spiritualist Registers Vol. 85-38. p. 400. 9 Feb. 1872.

<sup>172</sup> Spiritualist Registers Vol. 85-38. p. 400. 9 Feb. 1872.

<sup>173</sup> Browne, 180.

Brown's message is also, I would argue, very similar to much of Louisiana's Francophone literature of the period in that it is plainly imitative, yet manages to speak its originality and difference in a borrowed voice. The voice that emerges in the message is a blend of voices assembled from various sources and emerging from several identities. It is a voice that speaks from the very unity that it preaches--"L'Union des Races"--but it also serves as the voice of a community.

Yet Brown's voice, like the voices that Hugo encountered during the Jersey séances, is not the fully transcendent voice of God, for it remains attached to an individual spirit. This intermediate, low transcendence, which so disrupted Hugo's vision of poetic genius, is for the Creole medium a useful tool for literary production. Just as in a Spiritualist séance, the Creole poets speak in the voices of their metropolitan models while at the same time forging unique literary monuments. And Hugo's own voice, as we shall see, was to play an inaugural role in the emergence of the Creole literary voice, for whether he likes it or not, "his soul is marching on."

Chapter Four:  
"Frères Déjà Par Le Sang":  
Louisiana Spiritualism and Mimetic Culture

On September 27, 1862, just months after the occupation of New Orleans by Union troops, the first issue of the *gens de couleur* owned and edited newspaper L'Union appeared in the city. This French-language paper and its successor La Tribune would come to occupy the vanguard of radical Afro-Creole politics in New Orleans, and was to have a lasting impact on reconstruction politics in the South.<sup>174</sup> In the first issue the editor Paul Trévigne articulated the cultural space that the paper hoped to occupy. In working towards "une ère nouvelle dans la destinée du sud" the paper would look to both American and French models of liberty and Republicanism. The effort to build a "Temple de la Liberté" would begin upon the foundation of the American Declaration of Independence but would also look to French political philosophy to help structure the edifice. In his first editorial, Trévigne signaled the progressive philosophy of the paper when he claimed that, should the republican agenda of the paper fail to take hold in the country, it would prove that "Lamartine a raison, que Pelletan a tort, et que le monde ne marche pas!"<sup>175</sup>

But these introductory remarks were upstaged by the great voice of Victor Hugo, to whom Trévigne gave the honor of introducing the first issue of the paper. Under the title "Pronostics," the first column was devoted to a reprinted exchange of letters between Victor Hugo and "un *nègre*, M. Eugène Heurtelou," editor of the Port-au-Prince paper Le Progrès.<sup>176</sup> In the letter, which dates from almost three years earlier, Hertelou applauds Hugo for his public

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<sup>174</sup> L'Union added an English Section in July 1863. See Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell. "The Americanizaion of Black New Orleans. 1850-1900." in Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon. (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1992) 221.

<sup>175</sup> L'Union, 27 Sept. 1862.

<sup>176</sup> Victor Hugo. "Pronostics" L'Union, 27 Sept. 1862.

defense of John Brown and for his persistent and eloquent condemnation of slavery.<sup>177</sup> Hertelou also imagines a scene in which he, a Haitian who has never traveled to France to see the "grands foyers de la civilization," is able to meet Hugo to personally thank him, on behalf of his entire race, for his efforts to end slavery. For Hertelou, Hugo is the "plus grand génie du dix-neuvième siècle, l'âme la plus élevée de l'humanité," and the inheritor of the great ideals set forth during the French Revolution. Hugo responds by praising Hertelou and the Haitian republic, and he assures Hertelou that all humans are equal: "Il n'y a sur la terre ni blancs ni noirs: Il y a des esprits; vous en êtes un. Devant Dieu, toutes les âmes sont blanches." Hugo also predicts the eventual break-up of the United States over the issue of slavery: "Entre Nord et Sud il y a le gibet de Brown."<sup>178</sup>

In Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana 1718-1868, historian Caryn Cossé Bell describes the importance that Hugo's letter held for the Afro-Creole leadership of New Orleans. Not only did Hugo's great prestige confer legitimacy upon the paper, but it also served as a model for the paper's political tone: "the radical views of the two writers [Hugo and Hertelou] resonated in the pages of the new journal as contributors defined their antislavery/republican stance."<sup>179</sup>

In its original context Hugo's letter served a similar purpose. Eugène Hertelou's Le Progrès was launched on January 1st 1860, the year after General Fabre Geffrard's overthrow of Haiti's "Second Empire" under Faustin Soulouque. Geffrard inaugurated a "republican"

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<sup>177</sup> Hugo's "Un Mot sur John Brown" was first published in the Paris paper La Presse on dec. 8, 1859. Hertelou was not the only Haitian to correspond with Hugo during this period. A letter from Hugo to three Haitians who had written him in 1859 appeared in Le Progrès in Feb. 11, 1860. See also: Léon-François Hoffmann. "Victor Hugo, John Brown et Les Haïtiens." Nineteenth-Century French Studies 16:1-2 (1997-8) 47-58.

<sup>178</sup> Victor Hugo. "Pronostics" L'Union. 27 Sept. 1862.

<sup>179</sup> Caryn Cossé Bell, Revolution, Romanticism, and the Afro-Creole Protest Tradition in Louisiana 1718-1868 (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1997) 223.

government, although he never stood for election, and quickly declared himself "president for life."<sup>180</sup> Hertelou's journal echoed the republican rhetoric of Geffrard's administration, declaring itself "libéral, démocratique, mais anti-révolutionnaire." In May of 1860 Hertelou printed his correspondence with Hugo, the great republican enemy of France's Second Empire. Hugo's letter, Hertelou stated in a preface, confirmed that "Haïti est maintenant une lumière," presumably a reference to Geffrard's recent *coup d'état*. Hertelou went on to urge his readers to feel proud of their country, to rise to Hugo's challenge and to more fully embody the ideals that he promoted:

Puison-nous par la pratique des vertus républicaines, par une abnégation complète en faveur du bien public, par une bonne entente de la fraternité, faire resplendir Haïti d'une lumière éclatante et réaliser cette belle et glorieuse parole que dans l'effusion de son amour pour notre pays, pour notre race, a prononcée à notre égard Mr. Victor Hugo.<sup>181</sup>

For the Haitian republicans, Hugo's approbation was divine, and to print his words in a paper conferred a lasting legitimacy on their administration. The breathless pride that Hertelou here expresses approaches religious ecstasy, and it is therefore easy to see why the New Orleans Creoles of color would want to reprint such a letter just after the liberation of the city by Union forces.

While reprinting articles from other newspapers was a common practice in nineteenth-century journalism, Trévigne's decision to begin his paper with this borrowed correspondence is nonetheless a rather complicated mimetic move. The letters are clearly relevant to the paper's agenda, for Heurtelou, like Trévigne, is a black newspaper editor, and Hugo's "pronostics," his correct prediction of the Civil War, would have made the letters quite interesting to L'Union's audience in Union occupied New Orleans.

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<sup>180</sup> David Nicholls. From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 83-85.

<sup>181</sup> Le Progrès. 12 May, 1860.

But there is also something more complicated going on here. In reprinting the letters, Trévigne emphasizes the fact that they have not been altered in any way: " Nous reproduisons ces deux pièces en entier et textuellement: nous considérons comme un sacrilège d'y porter notre main profane." But can Hugo's words, divine as they may be, work the same magic if they are borrowed and copied? By taking the letters out of their original enunciatory context, has Trévigne already touched his profane hand to these sacred texts? The paper begins with the approving voice of Hugo, but it is a borrowed approbation, and the republican ideals that Trévigne hopes will inaugurate his paper are thus doubly borrowed. Trévigne is not only borrowing Hugo's words, he is channeling his voice and authority.

The ceremonial invocation of Hugo's voice at the beginning of the paper established the paper's political trajectory. But it also establishes an authorial fluidity that the paper, and the Creole community in general, drew upon as it sought to build a community. On one level, every newspaper tends to speak with such a communitarian voice. Unsigned articles imply an institutional voice and authority, and articles reprinted from other papers connect this voice to an even larger community.

However L'Union shows evidence of a more specifically Spiritualist mode of literary production. In the second issue of L'Union there appeared an article translated from the New York based Spiritualist newspaper The Herald of Progress entitled "Pronostics Spiritualistes" in which, similar to Hugo's *pronostics*, a Spiritualist circle in New York claims to have been warned of the impending war by their spiritual informers as early as 1850.<sup>182</sup> Two weeks later Trévigne published a Spiritualist communication signed by Napoleon Bonaparte, in which the former Emperor expressed great regret at not having used his power for nobler goals.

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<sup>182</sup> L'Union, 1 October, 1862.

Hugo's borrowed voice is much like the voice of Napoleon's spirit in that it has been appropriated and occupied by the paper. To make Hugo speak in the first issue of L'Union is akin to having Napoleon visit one's darkened parlor. Thus Hugo's voice has been incorporated into Louisiana's literary pantheon, just as it would later be adopted by the Caodai religion in Vietnam.

This first issue of L'Union thus demonstrates the way in which Spiritualist modes of literary production became part of a persistent discursive fluidity in the Creole community of New Orleans. This chapter examines Spiritualism's impact on Louisiana culture in an effort to determine how this literary ventriloquism sheds light on the identity-building habits of Creole New Orleans. The many blended, fluid voices of the spirit séances work towards building a group identity for the New Orleans *gens de couleur libres*, but not the type of rooted ethnic or nationalist identity that had so long been used against them. Rather, what emerges in these séances, and in the other literary efforts of this group, is what Edouard Glissant has called a "relational" identity based on cultural contact and difference.<sup>183</sup> In this way Spiritualism serves as a tool to promote a provisional, non-essentialist, communitarian Creole identity.

### Louisiana Spiritualism

It is hardly surprising to find such an interest in Spiritualism in the first numbers of L'Union given the deep interest that Spiritualism held for Creole New Orleans in general and for the Creoles of color in particular. For Louisiana's free people of color the worldwide Spiritualist movement offered an alternative to the increasingly conservative Catholic Church in New Orleans, and provided a way to express the frustrations of the oppressive racial order in Louisiana.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Edouard Glissant, Poétique de la Relation (Paris: Gallimard, 1990) 158.

<sup>184</sup> Bell ch. 6 *passim*.

Like other slaveholding societies in the Americas, colonial New Orleans was structured around a three-tiered racial system in which the free people of color occupied a middle position between whites and black slaves. While many of these *gens de couleur* traced their heritage to French and Spanish colonial Louisiana, the arrival of free black refugees from the Haitian revolution served to reinforce their numbers. After the Louisiana Purchase, this large population of *gens de couleur libres* made New Orleans unique among American cities. In 1840 there were 15,000 free people of color in New Orleans, and this group played an important cultural and economic role in the life of the city.<sup>185</sup>

But in the decades before the Civil War the ethnic make up of New Orleans began to rapidly change. The Anglophone population eclipsed the Francophone population, and economic and political power shifted away from the old Creole sections of the city. The three-tiered racial hierarchy that had structured New Orleans race relations since colonial times was threatened by the strict color line of Anglophone America. This shift, as historian Caryn Cossé Bell notes, undermined the security of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres*: “As the pattern of a dual racial order spread through the South during the opening decades of the nineteenth century, a three-tiered caste system set New Orleans apart. The city’s unusual racial pattern contrasted sharply with an Anglo-American order that attempted to confine all persons of color—both slave and free—to a separate and inferior caste.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Joseph Logsdon and Caryn Cossé Bell, “The Americanization of Black New Orleans” in Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization ed. Hirsch and Logsdon, (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1992) 206.

<sup>186</sup> Bell 65.



Politicians, soldiers, poets, and playwrights, the free people of color sought to defend their tenuous status between black and white. Yet the American racial order had no place for a third, intermediate racial cast between white and black slave.

During this period the American abolitionist movement also gained strength. For the pro-slavery forces, Creole and American, the *gens de couleur* were seen as a destabilizing presence. Louisiana began to pass laws that restricted the rights that the *gens de couleur* had formerly enjoyed. Furthermore, vigilante committees formed in rural areas of the state and began to persecute free people of color, many of whom moved to New Orleans to escape this persecution.<sup>187</sup> During the years preceding the Civil War many free people of color also emigrated to Mexico and Haiti. Some New Orleans Creoles of color also left the city for successful careers in France. Victor Séjour, a Louisiana *homme de couleur*, wrote twenty-one plays during his career as a French playwright, most of which debuted in Paris. Camille Thierry, another transplanted New Orleans Creole of Color, published his collection of poetry Les Vagabondes, Poésies Américains in Paris. Those who stayed became increasingly isolated in the Francophone sections of New Orleans, where they maintained their schools, church parishes, and other civic and fraternal organizations.<sup>188</sup>

In this atmosphere of isolation and persecution, the New Orleans *gens de couleur* found an outlet for their political, social and religious frustrations in the Spiritualist circles that sprang up in the city in the wake of the worldwide explosion of table turning in the late 1850s. Joseph Barthet, a refugee from Second Empire France and an active mesmerist, organized such a circle in New Orleans that included members of the *gens de couleur* community. In order to promote the activities of his group, Barthet published the journal Le Spiritualiste from 1856-1858, in

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<sup>187</sup> Bell 65.

<sup>188</sup> Bell 192.

which he printed various communications that he and his Spiritualist group received from the spirit world.<sup>189</sup>

In his journal Barthet engaged in a heated public debate with the *abbé* of the St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, Napoléon Perché, who wrote through the official organ of the New Orleans church, Le Propagateur Catholique. Perché publicly accused one of Barthet's collaborators, the well-known Creole of color medium J.B. Valmour, of practicing "Voodoo".<sup>190</sup> In 1858, the church attacked *Le Spiritualiste* and forced it to stop printing. In December 1858, *Le Spiritualiste* appeared for the final time, but the Spiritualist séances continued.<sup>191</sup>

From 1860s to the 1880s, Henry Louis Rey, a free man of color from an influential *gens de couleur* family in New Orleans, presided over a Spiritualist circle in New Orleans.<sup>192</sup> During these gatherings the participants, like most Spiritualist groups of the time, communicated with a wide array of historical and religious figures from Jesus and Mohammed to Jefferson, Lincoln and St. Vincent de Paul. But this group also received messages from dead former New Orleanians including Antonio de Sedilla, the well know Capuchin monk and former *abbé* of the Saint Louis Cathedral who had been a great champion of the rights of the city's *gens de couleur*.<sup>193</sup> Many of the city's free-black intellectuals attended these meetings, among them Nelson Desbrosses and Joanni Questy, poets who had contributed to Armand Lanusse's 1845 collection of poetry, Les Cenelles. Rey's circle kept careful records of their séances in a series of

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<sup>189</sup> Bell Ch. 6 *passim*.

<sup>190</sup> Bell 187.

<sup>191</sup> Bell 214.

<sup>192</sup> Bell 214.

<sup>193</sup> Bell 217.

notebooks, which are today housed in the René Grandjean collection at the University of New Orleans Library, Special Collections.<sup>194</sup>

The transcripts of these Spiritualist séances reveal how Spiritualism, as a mode of cultural transmission, helped these free men of color establish and defend their communal interests. In this way the Spiritualist communications were like Les Cenelles, in that they were tools with which the *gens de couleur* collected their individual voices and asserted a unified communal identity. While in France Spiritualism was used to hide and dissimulate the identifiable speaking voice, here we see quite the opposite. The unity of the spirit voice is based not on its singularity, but on the chorus of voices from which it emerges and into which it blends. This communal voice emerges from and contributes to other literary productions of Louisiana's *gens de couleur*.

### Creole Voices

While the New Orleans *gens de couleur* Spiritualists were part of the worldwide movement and took their theoretical and doctrinal cues from the explosion of Spiritualist publications that circulated in the Atlantic world, they were also uniquely interested in local matters. Rey's group received messages from the departed members of the close-knit Creole community of New Orleans. This interest in news from departed loved ones, as Caryn Cossé Bell notes, "reflected the belief that the spirits of the dead could share their otherworldly intelligence with relatives and friends."<sup>195</sup> The Creole concern for communication with the departed *gens de couleur* was also, I would argue, a model of how Creole New Orleans sought to build its own community in the world of the living. The communications innovations of Spiritualism disrupted the assumed boundaries of self and other and thus created a space in which the hybrid voice of the Creole community might emerge. The communal literary voice of the *gens de couleur* had

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<sup>194</sup> Bell ch. 5 passim.

<sup>195</sup> Bell 217.

existed before the arrival of Spiritualism in New Orleans, but the ceremonial structure that accompanied the Spiritualist séance gave a new life and a renewed purpose to writers of color in New Orleans.

For the New Orleans Spiritualists, the transcripts of spirit communications were sacred texts, pieces of a third testament through which Christianity might renew itself. The texts that emerged from these séances thus played an important role in the life of this religion. Spiritualists felt compelled to collect, preserve and publish the messages that they received from the beyond. Thus the goal of Le Spiritualiste de la Nouvelle-Orléans was to collect the "manifestations spirituelles" of the dead and disseminate them:

Les hommes de bien qui prêchèrent autrefois sur terre, et qui ne sont pas plus *morts* que les vérités qu'ils enseignaient, ont voulu poursuivre de là-haut la noble tâche qu'ils s'étaient imposée. Pendant des siècles, ils ont cherché à établir un télégraphe permanent entre le ciel et la terre, et ils y sont enfin parvenus. Leur but est de régénérer l'humanité, en rectifiant et agrandissant nos connaissances; leur langage est ce qu'on appelle *Manifestations spirituelles*.<sup>196</sup>

This "language" of the dead took many different forms. One finds in the pages of Le Spiritualiste poems, political messages, and sermons. But if Barthet's goal was to disseminate these new ideas, the spirits themselves might have had other plans:

Depuis quelques années ils [les esprits] nous donnent des instructions que nous lisons à nos assemblées hebdomadaires, devant qui veut les écouter; mais ils désirent nous les voir propagé aussi par l'imprimerie, et c'est pourquoi nous commençons aujourd'hui une publication dont ils seront eux-mêmes les principaux rédacteurs.<sup>197</sup>

Barthet published the journal, but the spirits themselves served as editors. In what must necessarily be a collaborative effort, Barthet claims to grant the spirits ultimate control over their own words. This is an important point, for it raises the issue of the relative distance and difference between the medium and the spirit.

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<sup>196</sup> Le Spiritualiste. 1.1 Jan 1857, 3-4.

<sup>197</sup> Le Spiritualiste. 1.1 Jan 1857,.2.

In the first stage of this relationship there is a “‘possession’ par une volonté étrangère.”<sup>198</sup> The will of the medium disappears as the spirit dominates his host personality. But in the actual messages that Barthes published there is little evidence of this “possession.” There was, rather, a more nuanced relationship between spirit and medium in which the wills of both parties were mixed together:

C’est que la machine humaine obéit à ce qu’on nomme *la volonté* et qu’ordinairement cette volonté procède du dedans, c’est-à-dire de l’homme interne; mais qu’il arrive aussi, et peut-être plus souvent qu’on ne le soupçonne, que celui la perd ses droits devant une volonté étrangère, et alors l’homme *visible* devient une sorte d’automate.<sup>199</sup>

To function as this “machine humaine,” the medium must separate herself from her own will and make herself available to another external will. Under the power of the “volonté étrangère” the medium, like a machine, can be guided by the spirit power. But this total possession is rarely complete:

Il y a parmi les médiums, comme parmi les somnambules, une infinité de nuances. On voit des médium-écrivains qui, dans les Communications, qu’ils nous transmettent, ont conscience du travail qui se fait en eux, à mesure qu’il s’opère, et il semble que les mots mêmes sont dictés par l’Esprit qui communique; mais on reconnaît aussi que l’esprit ne fait souvent que suggérer les idées au médium, et c’est à celui-ci de les développer; à peu près comme un écolier fait une composition sur un thème donné; et il le fait pareillement avec d’autant plus de fidélité, qu’il a mieux saisi la pensée. C’est donc le sens qu’il faut étudier, quelque le style, et l’on comprend combien un cœur pur et un esprit droit sont de précieux avantages.<sup>200</sup>

There is, then, a whole range of possible configurations in spirit-medium communication. The medium could be little more than a secretary taking notes from the dictating spirit. Or he might work in collaboration with the spirit to produce the messages. He might even write in his own voice on a topic of the spirit's choosing. For this reason Barthes encourages his readers to pay closer attention to the meaning of the messages than the style: “[c]’est donc le sens qu’il faut

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<sup>198</sup> Le Spiritaliste. 1.1 Jan 1857, 2.

<sup>199</sup> Le Spiritaliste. 1.1 Jan 1857, 6.

<sup>200</sup> Le Spiritaliste. 1.1 Jan 1857, 9.

étudier, quelque le style." Furthermore, readers should focus on the meaning of the words, not on the provenance of the message, for there is an endless range of possible authorial configurations. The good spirit communication will proceed from a pure-hearted medium working in collaboration with a well intentioned spirit or spirits.

For this reason, rather than attributing a message to a single authority, Spiritualists saw spirit communications as a negotiation between the medium and the spirit:

On voit d'autres médiums qui ne savent pas ce qu'ils expriment : (je ne parle point de ceux qui sont entrancés; car pour eux cela va sans dire.) Il y a même qui écrivent malgré eux, et quelquefois des choses bien différentes de ce qu'ils voudraient énoncer: (Je dirai même, de ce qu'ils ont la volonté d'écrire; car il y a des esprits-forts qui font de ces expériences-là.) On voit aussi des médiums chez lesquels la parole et la main servent deux intelligences antagonistes: c'est quelquefois une véritable dispute...il y a donc lieu de croire encore que l'esprit agit quelquefois directement sur la main du médium, quand il veut le faire parler: Les imitations d'écritures et les communications dans des langues inconnues de médium, seraient le résultat d'une extrême docilité organique...<sup>201</sup>

Thus we see that there are mediums who cooperate with the spirits, mediums who argue with them, mediums who referee arguments between spirits, mediums who remain unconscious of all that they say or write, and mediums who speak and write in languages that they do not know.

For the spirits that spoke to the *gens de couleur* of Rey's circle, a parallel situation existed in the spirit realm. When the spirit of Antonio Sedilla, the Spanish monk and former head of St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans, spoke to the group on December 12 1858, he discussed the problem of spirit identity. Sedilla, known as Père Antoine among his adoring followers, had Jansenist leanings, tolerated the many Freemasons in New Orleans, and shielded the *gens de couleur* from persecution.<sup>202</sup> Thus it was an important moment when Rey's group received a message from his spirit that endorsed their Spiritualist project. In his message Sedilla explained that, from the spirit perspective, communications with the realm of the living were also

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<sup>201</sup> Le Spiritualiste. 1.1 Jan 1857, 9-10.

<sup>202</sup> Bell 69.

considered collaborative projects. The voice of a spirit, before it is mixed with the voice of the medium, was already an amalgamation of many spiritual voices:

Dans les séances, nous assistons en grand nombre, nous nous communiquons les uns et les autres nos idées, nos pensées, et un de nous est chargé de transmettre à nos frères, par un médium, ce que nous avons résolu. Nos occupations sont nombreuses ici, car comme ici-bas. Nous ne vivons pas dans l'indolence; mais ce qui nous occupe est différent : la Matière est oubliée, le spirituel seul occupe notre pensées. (sic)

Père Antoine<sup>203</sup>

We thus have a complete model of communication between the spirits and the realm of the living. A community of spirits gathers together, nominates a spokesman, and transmits a message to a medium, who either participates in creating the message or simply acts as an automaton to reproduce the message to a group of Spiritualists gathered to receive it. Because of the endless possible configurations of spirits and mediums, the message itself, and not the identity of the speaking spirit, should be the most important element of these communications.

The type of collaborative message that Sedilla here describes was quite common in Rey's group. Indeed, the main differences between the messages received by *gens de couleur* mediums and those published in Le Spiritualiste is the frequency of mixed, blended and collaborative messages. The mediums of color spoke to the spirits of dead friends and neighbors, and these same friends and neighbors spoke back, often in a communal voice.

Yet in spite of this communal voice, the identity of the spirit remains important in these séances. Indeed, when reading these messages, we see that the name of the spirit is often the key to understanding the message. One might even say that the séance participants, both spirit and living, actively resist the universalization of their particular voice.

This problem is very similar to the tension that we saw between Victor Hugo and the various spirits that visited his circle. Hugo sought to establish and defend his unique genius,

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<sup>203</sup> Spiritualist Registers, Vol 1. 12 December 1858. 72.

while the spirits tended to undermine and pollute this singular voice. In a similar way, Père Antoine's spirit urges the assembled Spiritualists to de-emphasized spirit identity. It is more important to hear the truth of the communication than to worry about the identity of the spirit that sent the message. Yet in most of these spirit communications, the truth of a "manifestation" is highly dependant on the authority of the name that appears at the end of the message. The message seems to be a mere prelude to the revelatory signature that punctuates it.

For example, on December 7th, 1865, the medium F. Paltron, one of the mediums that participated in Rey's Spiritualist circle, received a message that began with a lofty discussion of the new possibilities that the Union victory offered to the long oppressed people of the South: "Mes frères, c'est aujourd'hui le jour de jeune, de prière et de grace pour la paix et la liberté que vous avez dignement acquises au prix de la torture et au prise de votre sang." (sic)<sup>204</sup> The message goes on to celebrate the end of slavery, to predict that the former slaveholders will see the error of their racist ways, and to describe a God-given liberty that would soon sweep over the country. A tension builds in the message as the spirit adds more and more details to his argument. One cannot help but ask, "who might this spirit be?" The end of the message comes as a revelation:

Adieu, mes frères, pensez toujours à moi; je serai toujours là pour vous défendre; car j'ai plus d'empire sur moi-même et sur ces hommes méchants.

Votre frère et ami,  
Abraham Lincoln<sup>205</sup>

It is hard to imagine this message being interesting or effective without Lincoln's name appearing at the end, especially given the fact that Lincoln claims to have "plus d'empire sur moi-même et sur ces hommes méchants." Rather than melt into the communal voice in the

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<sup>204</sup> Spiritualist Registers Vol 85-31.p. 9 December 7, 1865.

<sup>205</sup> Spiritualist Registers Vol 85-31 p. 9. December 7, 1865.



afterlife, Lincoln has become more like himself, and has therefore gathered more authority around his distinct personality.

In the spiritual communications the truth of the message is a function of the individual spirit who uttered it. Yet there remains a countervailing impulse to attribute the message to a loosely defined communal authority. There is thus a tension in the spirit messages between the authority of the singular voice and the communal voice, and by extension the singular identity and the group identity. The individual voice speaks through and from a communal place, but somehow retains his own identity within the group voice.

Barthet seems to understand the delicacy of the spirit identity issue, and he warns his readers to be cautious when inquiring about a spirit's name:

Lorsqu'il nous arrive de demander, nous nous adressons à des Esprits que nous savons avoir été bons quand ils vivaient sur terre; et lorsque ce sont les invisibles qui viennent inopinément nous donner des conseils, si ces esprits ne se font pas connaître; nous pouvons bien demander leurs noms, mais nous ne devons jamais insister.<sup>206</sup>

The spirit's name thus remains at the same time vitally important and irrelevant. This constant tension between individual identity and group authority animates the spirit messages that Rey and his group received.

When, for example, on December 5th 1858 Numa Pompilius, the second King of Rome, spoke to Rey's circle as it met "Chez le frère Adolphe," the group heard a long historical account of the tyranny of religion in general and the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church in particular. For Pompilius the Spiritualist understanding of freedom of religion was so important because "[c]haque homme sera son propre prêtre, chaque maison le temple de la famille."<sup>207</sup> Pompilius the historical figure, who since his death had evidently been paying close attention to events in

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<sup>206</sup> Le Spiritualiste. 1.1 Jan 1857, 156.

<sup>207</sup> Spiritualist Registers Vol 1. p. 55.

the realm of the living, remains a coherent individual in this message, and his spiritual advice promotes the importance of the individual in religion. Such a message without the name Pompilius at the end would lack any moral or historical importance, for the meaning of this message is clearly dependant on this very authority. However, on the same day the group received another message full of various bits of medical advice for the sick. It was signed by the following group of doctors: " Lapeyne[?], Vallery, Valleti, Abbuyé[?], Landreuus, Mesmer, Coma[?], James Anderson, Lampla, Latrape, etc."<sup>208</sup> What is most striking about such a message is the way in which many spirits names are attached to it, as if it were a political manifesto. These doctors dispense advice as a community; they pool their medical authority and write a group opinion. The "etc." further dilutes the singular authority of the message, making the doctors listed mere example of the type of spirit that might agree to this medical advice. Just as in Sedilla description of collaborating spirits, this is a community of spirit voices speaking with a choral authority.

And so there remains a tension in these messages. On the one hand they are animated by the authority of the towering historical figures that visit the *tables tournantes*, but on the other they promote a cooperative communal voice that simultaneously asserts and distributes its own group authority. This tension not only pervades the spirit messages, it also typifies much of the literary output of the New Orleans *gens de couleur*. One might even say that when Spiritualism arrived in New Orleans in the 1850s it found such fertile ground among the New Orleans *gens de couleur* because it was so sympathetic to the already existing modes of individual and cultural identity formation.

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<sup>208</sup> Spiritualist Registers Vol 1. p. 46.

In Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism, Robert S. Cox describes this same tension in the Rey manuscripts. Cox reads the New Orleans Spiritualist records through the lens of the Spiritualist doctrine of "sympathy." According to Cox, antebellum Spiritualists understood the self to be "an open body, a 'self' reflected in the Spiritualist belief that all individuals interpenetrated one another and affected one another's lives." <sup>209</sup> For the Creole Spiritualists of New Orleans this openness of the self corresponded to a radical social and political agenda:

Until at least 1871 the spirits explored the formation of cross-racial alliances to combat racial oppression and restrictions of all kinds, political, religious and social, seeking to maximize the scope of the sympathetic community. Within this Creolized version of the northern fantasy of "universal brotherhood," all would be Creole, and race would disappear as a socially divisive force.<sup>210</sup>

But while the Creole Spiritualists may have held the long term goal of erasing racial difference, they also insisted that "the identity of the individual continued after death, and the individual's identity and position in the struggle for racial justice were critical to interpreting that individual's message."<sup>211</sup> The individual spirit thus asserts his own particular identity, defined by his racial difference, in order to promote the eventual annihilation of race as a category of difference. Thus "[l]ike white Spiritualists, Creoles insisted on the endurance of personal identity after death but implied that all--black and white--would become Creolized 'White men/Black men' and accepting of the divergence of physical identity."<sup>212</sup> Cox goes on to describe how, with the failure of reconstruction in Louisiana, the early ideals of Rey's Spiritualist group decayed into a less universal "apartheid afterlife" in which a separate but equal racial structure replaces racial unity in the afterlife.

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<sup>209</sup> Cox 165.

<sup>210</sup> Cox 181.

<sup>211</sup> Cox 179.

<sup>212</sup> Cox 183.

Following Cox's reading of the séance transcripts, we might say that the tension between the individual voice and group transcendence results from the Spiritualist doctrine of "sympathy" which states that the body and the universe are coextensive and interpenetrating.<sup>213</sup> The individual body is linked through lines of communication to the larger universe, and it is in this way that the spirit world communicates with the individual medium. Individual spirits, without losing their personalities or identities, nonetheless share their being with the rest of the universe. In Cox's reading, the destruction of race as a principal of division emerges from this sympathetic cosmology. The transcendent world, in which all difference is erased, is a Creolized world. But rather than understanding the "Creolized" dead as a group devoid of difference, I would suggest that the New Orleans Spiritualists were working with a more fluid, less essentialist understanding of community and identity.

We might more accurately describe the tension between what we have been calling individual and group identity in the séances by turning to Edouard Glissant's insights into the nature of identity in the Creole world. Glissant sees the Creole world as a space in which the contact between cultures brought about by colonialism has generated an alternative, non-hierarchical pattern of cultural interaction--"La Relation." This system of interrelatedness respects the Other as Other by refusing to reduce or subdue it. "La Relation" is a model of non-colonial cultural exchange that actively subverts colonial domination and the hierarchical assumptions about identity that propel this domination.<sup>214</sup>

Glissant thus rejects the violence inherent in traditional Western conceptions of identity based on racial, ethnic and linguistic heritage, what he calls "L'identité-racine."<sup>215</sup> This type of

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<sup>213</sup> Cox 92.

<sup>214</sup> Edouard Glissant, Poétique de la Relation (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

<sup>215</sup> Glissant, Poétique 157.

identity formation, whether it acts within an individual or within a group, draws its power from a rooted historic or geographic essence. For the transplanted peoples of the Caribbean, and other areas that have experienced the process of cultural mixture he calls "créolization," the trauma and distance of their displacement has destroyed these mythic, essentialist root identities. Glissant, while warning against re-essentializing this resulting hybrid culture, describes a non-essentialist form of identity formation that admits the radical instability and alterity of the subject--

"l'identité-relation." Identities emerge in the fluid mixture of the Creole world only in as much as those seeking an identity, group or an individual, recognize that, because of the relational nature of any identity formation, there is an alien presence at the heart of who they are:

"...la conscience de la Relation s'est généralisée, incluant le collectif et l'individuel. Nous <<savons>> que l'Autre est en nous, qui non seulement retentit sur notre devenir mais aussi sur le gros de nos conceptions et sur le mouvement de notre sensibilité. Le <<Je est un autre>> de Rimbaud est historiquement littéral. Une sorte de <<conscience de la conscience>> nous ouvre malgré nous et fait de chacun l'acteur troublé de la poétique de la Relation."<sup>216</sup>

In this way the identities available to individuals and groups in the Creole world differ dramatically from rooted identities of the Western world that depend on this Other to draw a boundary around the self. In the Creolized world, this other shares the same identitarian space as the self--"[n]ous <<savons>> que l'Autre est en nous"-- and thus threatens the totalizing power of the rooted identity.

We might then say that in the Spiritualist séances of the New Orleans *gens de couleur* the rigid boundaries between self and other that characterize Western identitarianism in general, and romantic subjectivity in particular, seem to decay during these séances. For the medium, "L'Autre" enters into and speaks through the self, thus disrupting the traditional boundary lines between self and other. What emerges from this hybrid selfhood is the same type of messy choral

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<sup>216</sup> Glissant, Poétique 39.

arrangements that so frustrated Hugo. The familiar, low spirits of the *au-delà* do not speak in the transcendent language of God. They are members of a departed community, our neighbors and brothers, sometimes both at the same time.

Spiritualist discourse, as the example of Civil War hero and New Orleans Creole André Caillou will demonstrate, allows for a Creole voice to emerge--a voice that speaks to and from a provisional community built on difference. When Père Antoine spoke to the New Orleans *gens de couleur* Spiritualists, his description of the spirit realm--"[d]ans les séances, nous assistons en grand nombre"--demonstrated the relational nature of spirit identity and community.<sup>217</sup> The spirit message is not the locus of an essential spirit identity but is rather the stage upon which any number of mixed and impure identities can dance. The Spiritualist séance thus enacts a relational Creole community.

#### "Quelques Petites Cailloux"

"Il n'a que mon nom, éternisé je crois par ma mort terrible"  
André Caillou [spirite]<sup>218</sup>

On May 27th 1863, André Caillou, *homme de couleur libre* of New Orleans and Captain in the Louisiana Native Guard, a Creole of Color regiment, was killed by Confederate soldiers on the battlefield at Port Hudson, Louisiana. Caillou, whose name is conventionally spelled "Cailloux," was to become the most important Civil War hero of the New Orleans *gens de couleur*. The New Orleans Spiritualist Henry Louis Rey, a friend of Caillou and himself an officer in the Native Guard and a combatant at Port Hudson, received a message from Caillou on July 17th of the same year, shortly after Caillou's funeral. Caillou began his communication by talking about his death:

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<sup>217</sup> Spiritualist Registers, Vol. 1. p.72.

<sup>218</sup> Spiritualist Registers, Vol. 1. p.156.

J'ai combattu, j'ai succombé. Ils ont cru me tuer mais ils m'ont fait vivre. Mon corps s'est anéanti mais mon âme s'est envolée, a conquis la vraie liberté, la patrie universelle, celle des heureux.<sup>219</sup>

In spite of the fact that he is dead and his voice no longer emerges from his body (which had lain unburied on the battlefield for two months) Caillou speaks with a confidant "je." His body, like John Brown's, has splintered and decayed, but his soul lives on in the *au-delà*. Before his death, Caillou had evidently been skeptical about Spiritualism. But after death he is able to testify that his friend's religion taught the truth:

Oh mon ami. J'ai souri quelque fois devant les célestes vérités que vous me dévoiliez quoique j'y mis par moments. J'y crois car j'ai la preuve maintenant de l'existence des esprits par celle du mien qui n'a pu que ce jour seulement venir à vous. (sic)<sup>220</sup>

Caillou speaks in a coherent, recognizable voice that corresponds to the voice he possessed when he was alive. He has access to the memory of his life, alludes to the events of the recent past, and seems to know his friend Rey.

But when Caillou begins to dictate a message for his young son he predicts the inevitable decay of his own personal authority. His spirit has ascended into the beyond, but his name will remain to be passed on to his son:

Je suis heureux mais mon pauvre fils! Il n'a que mon nom, éternisé je crois par ma mort terrible, pour les materialistes, mais ma naissance laborieuse...[mots illisibles] ...pour les enfants de la vrai croyance. (sic)<sup>221</sup>

Caillou's spirit has moved into the *au-delà*, but in the material realm his son is left with only the silence of a missing father. This spirit goes on to ask that his son be raised by his friend Paul who should "diriger l'enfant, que [son] amitié [de Paul] pour moi se répandre sur lui [l'enfant]; qu'il ne craigne pas d'user de mon nom pour en faire un homme juste..." (sic). Here

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<sup>219</sup> Spiritualist Registers. Vol. 1, 156.

<sup>220</sup> Spiritualist Registers, Vol. 1. 156.

<sup>221</sup> Spiritualist Registers, Vol. 1 p.156.

we see the beginning of a split in Caillou's voice. Caillou's name, all that the boy has left of his father, now has an existence separate from the voice of the spirit. Furthermore, the spirit urges Paul to adopt this voice and authority himself--to speak as André Caillou-- in order to properly raise his boy. Thus like a medium in a séance, Paul will speak in Caillou's absent voice.

Caillou's spirit goes on to predict that the name "Caillou" might also be used in the political arena, and he proceeds to franchise this name to further the cause of civil rights:

Il fallait que Caillou et [mots illisibles] pour démentir la flagrante injustice de ceux qui ne peuvent méconnaître le courage des soldats noirs comme soldats, voudraient nier chez eux les qualités qui font le bon officier. (sic)<sup>222</sup>

Here Caillou speaks of himself in the third person. Or, more precisely, he speaks of a "Caillou" outside of himself, separate from the "je" that he uses in the beginning of the message. As a result, in speaking of his name as "André Caillou," he separates his voice and his name. His personal identity and the voice with which he speaks have become multiple. There are many *cailloux*. It is, then, not surprising to find that at the bottom of the message the medium has changed the spelling of his name: "Capt. André Cailloux". Throughout the message "Caillou" was in the singular, but the signature is in the plural. In death Caillou's voice has become a chorus of voices.

This more than a simple misspelling. When Caillou's spirit signed his name in the plural he was alluding to an already-established play on his name. On July 4th, thirteen days before Rey's July 17th séance, L'Union published the following poem in praise of Caillou:

Le Capitaine  
André Caillou et Ses Compagnons D'Armes

Air: Un Haïtien n'agit pas de la sorte.

Quoi! vous pleurez le brave capitaine,

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<sup>222</sup> Spiritualist Registers, Vol. 1 p.156.



Dont la valeur étonnera Port Hudson!  
 Mais en tombant sans abri dans la plaine  
 Il abattit un indigne soupçon.  
 Consolons-nous, nous, hommes de sa race,  
 Devant Dieu seul il courbait le genou.  
 Que Blancs et Noirs suivent la noble trace  
 Du brave André Caillou. [Bis]

Oui, c'est parmi les boulets, la mitraille  
 Que ce héros, au front noir et si fier,  
 Guide ses pas, conduit dans la bataille,  
 Ses frères noirs, braves comme le fer!  
 C'est au milieu des balles ennemies,  
 Sifflant la mort, et la portant partout,  
 Que ces soldats, possédant mille vies,  
 Suivent André Caillou! [Bis]

Dieu, quelle ardeur! quel sublime courage?  
 Sans nul appui, dans ce sanglant combat,  
 Ils font trembler l'ennemi dans sa rage;  
 Banks reconnaît les sauveurs de l'Etat!!  
 Six fois, ce jour, ils tentent la victoire:  
 Mille canons les écrasent partout....  
 Ces nobles morts, au séjour de la gloire!  
 Suivent toujours Caillou! [Bis]

O Liberté! notre mère, contemple  
 Ce que pourront désormais tes enfants?  
 Le doute a fui; pour eux s'ouvre ton temple,  
 Et l'Union peut compter sur les temps.  
 Vaincus bientôt les indignes rebelles.  
 Hommes de sang, de ta grandeur jaloux,  
 Disparaîtront, ou te seront fidèles  
 Par cent mille Cailloux!!! [Bis]

E. H.<sup>223</sup>

Caillou's body, which lay on the battlefield from May 17th to July 8th, when Port Hudson fell to Union forces, had still not been recovered when this poem was published and thus it remained "sans abri dans la plaine."<sup>224</sup> As the poem progresses, we see a continuous shift in the meaning of the name "Caillou." Caillou transcends his bodily death in the first stanza, becomes a

<sup>223</sup> E.H. " Le Capitaine André Caillou et Ses Compagnons D'Armes" L'Union (17 July 1858).

<sup>224</sup> Bell 240.

hero and leader of his "frères noirs" in the second stanza, earns the respect of the wider world, including General Banks, in the third stanza, and then actually *becomes* the very people he leads in the fourth stanza: "cent mille Cailloux." All those engaged in the noble struggle, whatever their race--"Que Blancs et Noirs suivent la noble trace/ Du brave André Caillou"--adopt "Caillou" not only as a hero but also as an identity; they become "cent mille Cailloux." Thus in the spirit message at Rey's table, Caillou speaks both for his individual spirit and the larger community that his name has come to signify.

When Caillou's body was finally recovered, on July 8th 1858, it was honored in New Orleans with an elaborate funeral. L'Union described the funeral in great detail on the front page of its July 30th edition, two weeks after Caillou's spirit spoke to Rey's group. Caillou--consistently spelled without the pluralizing "x"--was lauded as a great hero:

Dès le matin un vaste concours d'amis entourait la maison mortuaire où était déposé le corps de l'illustre défunt, enseveli sous les plis glorieux du drapeau américain. Son uniforme et son épée ornaient son cercueil et des couronnes de fleurs placées autour du cénotaphe rappelaient à la foule que celui à la mémoire duquel tant d'honneurs étaient rendus, était un brave qui pour réhabiliter sa race aux yeux d'une caste injuste et égoïste avait compris qu'il fallait sacrifier son existence, il l'a fait avec le stoïcisme d'un spartiate. Aujourd'hui il reçoit sa récompense; *son nom restera à jamais gravé dans nos cœurs* et l'historien impartial de cette guerre libératrice s'en emparera n'en doutons pas pour le buriner dans les pages brillantes qui rendront compte des détails du siège héroïque du Gilbralter rebelle. Port Hudson et André Caillou sont deux noms qui rappelleront un souvenir plein de gloire pour les hommes de notre race.<sup>225</sup>

During the ceremony, Caillou's decayed body was represented by "son uniforme et son épée." His mortal remains are covered and hidden, but his name, the article asserts, will forever be engraved in the hearts of his compatriots. The name Caillou, multiplied during this ceremony, serves to unite this group of people: "'Port Hudson et André Caillou sont deux noms qui

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<sup>225</sup> "Funérailles du Capitaine André Caillou, de la Co. E. 1er Regiment de Natives Guards" L'Union, 2.19 (30 juillet 1863) 1 (emphasis mine).

rappelleront un souvenir plein de gloire pour les hommes de notre race.” Caillou's name gives a unity to a group in need of such unity. The identity of the man named André Caillou has been expanded and multiplied to stand for all *gens de couleur*:

On estime à 12,000 le nombre de personnes qui assistaient au convoi du capitaine Caillou. Cet hommage spontané rendu à la mémoire de notre compatriote prouve que notre population, en dépit de nos détracteurs, est capable d’apprécier les grandes choses, et est digne de jouir des bienfaits et des avantages que procure la liberté.<sup>226</sup>

Caillou has here become a monument to the New Orleans *gens de couleur*. Upon ascending to the Creole pantheon, Caillou became Cailloux; he was transformed into something more than his singular voice. Creole New Orleans fixed Caillou's presence in a tomb in order to use his identity as a stage upon which to perform a larger identity. But in as much as his voice and identity have been multiplied and dispersed, they leak out of the monumental edifice built to contain them.

For example, in the very same issue of L'Union there appeared a letter from a "M. Frank F. Barclay, Capitaine au Corps d’Afrique, A.E.U.” [United States Army]. In the letter Barclay refutes the argument that people of color lack the courage to fight in battle. He gives as evidence the names and positions of "*nègres et des hommes de couleur*" who were part of a group of Algerians fighting under Maximilien in Mexico.

...Boudzema-ben-Aouncin, a pris un fanion [drapeau];  
Mohammed-ben-Hassein, tirailleur, a pris un fanion;  
Salem-ben-Guibi, a pris un fanion.  
Mohammed-ben-choumy, tirailleur, a fait mettre bas les armes à cinq Mexicains  
&.,&.,&.,;

Ces quelques petits *cailloux* que volontairement je vous jette si maladroitement à la tête, iront probablement tomber inopinément dans les jardins de quelques-uns de vos voisins.--Hé bien! Tant mieux!<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> “Funérailles” 1.

<sup>227</sup> “Funérailles” 2 [*italics in original*].

These names of great soldiers of color are all "cailloux" now, and to throw these stones about is to announce the bravery of people of color around the world. These "cailloux" are everywhere--Louisiana, Mexico, Algeria--and the signature "Capt. André Cailloux" at the bottom of a Spiritualist message thus signals the presence of both a singular historical personality and a plural voice that speaks to and as *gens de couleur* from around the world. André Caillou has moldered on the battlefield, splintering into many separate "cailloux," and then returning to speak in a plural voice that is at once a monument to a single individual and a figure for all *gens de couleur*.

But far from advocating a rigid Creole nationalism based on his heroic death, Caillou's voice highlights the provisional, fluid nature of any Creole identity. If Caillou stands as the spokesman for the New Orleans Creoles of color, he is just one spirit nominated from among an ever-changing chorus of Creole voices. More than a mere figure for ethnic pride, Caillou's voice has become an emblem of the fluidity of Creole identity, for his voice lingers in the interstices of the self and the other. By moldering on the battlefield, Caillou has become both himself and the many other voices that echo in his utterances. Thus the fact that Caillou's spirit signs his name in the plural signals the impossibility of a singular or essential Caillou. Caillou's speaking voice is so multiplied and fractured in the séance that we hear multiple "cailloux" speaking at once. His *souls* go marching on.

Caillou's spirit returned often to Rey's table to chat with other Creole voices. In this way the Spiritualist community that speaks from the *au-delà* is much the same as the community that the Creole Spiritualists constructed here on earth. Caillou's voice is pluralized because of the borrowing and ventriloquism of the séance. For example, in the summer of 1890, Caillou, whose

name by this time is consistently spelled "Cailloux," spoke as one of a series of voices who gave an opinion on a proposition put forth by John Brown's spirit:

L'Esclavage Humain a disparu des Etats Unis d'Amérique!  
Dieu soit loué!  
La Liberté morale et religieuse marche!  
Dieu soit béni!

John Brown

La Terre tourne, le monde marche (progresse)!  
Le Pape est un fuyard!

Galilée.

Lincoln , le soldat de paix tombe martyr. (sic)  
L'Épée de Grand pèse dans la balance, la Rébellion est morte!

Washington.

L'Homme tombe!  
Le Principe vit!

André Cailloux.

Je ne suis pas mort!  
Je vis.

Valmour.

Napoléon le Grand!  
Napoléon le Petit.  
Napoléon 1er dans le monde visible.  
Napoléon 1er dans le monde invisible.

Napoléon 1er dernier

The Union must and shall be preserved.  
The soul must and shall be saved.

Andrew Jackson<sup>228</sup>

It was not unusual, especially in the post-war séances, for such a community of spirits to speak to Rey's group. These short, somewhat incoherent messages are different from the longer well-organized essays that individual spirits often dictated. They have the quality of an overheard

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<sup>228</sup> Spiritulist Resisters. Vol. 85-64. p. 21-22. 1890.

conversation, and one gets the sense that, in the communications between realms, certain spirits would return as often as possible to insert their voice and name into the Spiritualist notebooks.

These spirit conversations play upon the authority of the individual spirit. Brown, Caillou, George Washington, and other prominent spirits here demonstrate the fluid, relational nature of spirit identity. Rey's Spiritualist circle has invited these spirits to come together at the same moment for a panel discussion on slavery and the Civil War. The authority of these spirit voices has become separated from any essential identity, and instead becomes a tool for the Spiritualists as they construct their Creole community. In this sense the Spiritualist séance both explodes the essential individual identity, and reassembles the fractured bits into new communities. When Galileo, John Brown, Napoleon and Washington can speak in a communal voice with André Caillou and the spirit of the well-known Creole medium Valmour, the Creole community that they form partakes of the authority of all of these great men. Furthermore, the Creole medium is able to enter into the identity of this spirit. His own identity is momentarily disrupted by the community of voices that emerged from the table.

This particular configuration of voices includes some very well known historical figures, but the spirits of Creole New Orleans also sometimes got together in the *au-delà* to talk to their living cousins. For example in 1872, a group of prominent Creole of color spirits, including Caillou, communicated with Rey's circle. But rather than address their living audience, they spoke to one another:

Lorsque vous combattez pour un principe, vous n'êtes pas toujours celui qui récolte par le travail accompli.

Orillon

Où a été laissé mon cadavre?

Il a été promené, c'est vrai!

Mais si je ne possédais pas une âme, où eût été ma récompense?

Cailloux

Travaillez pour Dieu parce que c'est juste que vous fournissiez votre contingent.  
Travaillez pour vos frères, c'est par là que vous récolterez.

Jason

J'ai récolté ici.

Valmour

J'étais spiritualiste, et c'est beaucoup!

N. Débrosses

J'ai beaucoup écrit. Valmour et Débrosses, ont-ils beaucoup écrit? [note in pencil: non!]  
Mais ils ont connu le Spiritualisme.

Joanni <sup>229</sup>

This communication--described as a "[d]ialogue entre quelques esprits familiar" in Rey's *Spiritualist Registers*--is a meeting of well know *gens de couleur*. Caillou is in the company of the spirits of three prominent New Orleans mediums of color: Valmour, Nelson Desbrosses, and Joanni Questy.<sup>230</sup> Valmour, the most famous of all New Orleans mediums, communicated with spirits in his New Orleans blacksmith shop beginning the early 1850s.<sup>231</sup> He had also traveled to Haiti with his protégée and fellow medium Nelson Desbrosses.<sup>232</sup> Desbrosses and Joanni Questy had also been contributors to Les Cenelles, as the message from the spirit "Joanni" indicates rather proudly. Joanni Questy was popularly known as "Monsieur Joanni," and he signed many of his poems with only his first name<sup>233</sup> We see that, just as Père Antoine described, these Creole mediums gathered together in the beyond just as the living Spiritualists gathered together for Rey's séances.

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<sup>229</sup> Spiritualist Registers. Vol 85-36. p 181. 1872.

<sup>230</sup> Bell 215.

<sup>231</sup> Bell 206.

<sup>232</sup> Edward Larocque Tinker, Les Écrits de la Langue Française en Louisiane au XIXe Siècle (Évreux: Imprimerie Hérissey, 1932) 134.

<sup>233</sup> Tinker 384. The identities of the spirits "Jason" and "Orillon" remain obscure.

Like Caillou, the Creole medium spirits speak in splintered and ambiguous voices. They were not asserting or defending their own totalizing, Hugo-like subjectivity. One finds in these conversations a multiplication of identity and of voices, not only on the part of the Spiritualist medium, for the medium is necessarily a plural narrator, but also in the speech of the spirits themselves, for the "je" of the spirit world is highly ambiguous. The voice in the *au-delà* is a function of the very conversation in which it participates. There is a palpable spirit of cooperation and friendly rivalry within this group, as the spirit Jason asserts: "Travaillez pour vos frères, c'est par là que vous récolterez." The spirit names and voices, repeatedly appearing in the séances registers, do this brotherly work. Theirs is a group project. Individual names remain textual monuments to the particular spirit, but they double as communal monuments because they transform the individual's presence into a platform for the collective voice.

We should also remember that these are the spirits of former mediums. Even when alive, these men spoke in the voices of others, and as spirits their voices retain much of this identitarian fluidity. Thus Nelson Desbrosses seems content to let this association with Spiritualism, his *mediumnité*, define the fullness of his presence in the afterlife: "J'étais spiritualiste, et c'est beaucoup!"

But Joanni Questy has the last word, and he brags about his literary achievements: "J'ai beaucoup écrit. Valmour et Débrosses, ont-ils beaucoup écrit?"<sup>234</sup> His poetry and stories are further monuments to a coherent self. As we will see in an examination of Les Cenelles, the collective writing and mimetic identities that emerge during the Spiritualist séances predated the arrival of Spiritualism in New Orleans. Questy and the 16 other *gens de couleur* who contributed to the 1845 Les Cenelles, were engaged in this same relational identity building project. The

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<sup>234</sup> Spiritualist Registers. Vol 85-36. p 181. 1872.



similarities between the Creole Romantic poetry of New Orleans and Rey's spiritualist séances suggest that the Creole spirit, like the Creole poet, does not speak in a *monolithic* voice, for he is so many *cailloux*.

### Les Cenelles and Creole Romanticism

When Spiritualism arrived in New Orleans in the early 1850s it was greeted with great enthusiasm by the *gens de couleur* community because it so readily accommodated identity-building habits that the Creole New Orleans had already developed. To participate in a Spiritualist séance is to embrace the choral quality of every utterance and the alterity at the heart of every identity. But the pattern of relational identity building in Creole New Orleans was not so much a function of Spiritualism as a product of the hybrid cultural and political situation of the Louisiana *gens de couleur*. While Spiritualism liberated these hybrid voices from the oppressive demands of Romantic subjectivity, the *gens de couleur* spoke their identity in plural voices before the first Spiritualist séances in the city.

In 1845 New Orleans educator and poet Armand Lanusse assembled 85 poems written by 17 Creole poets of color and published them in a collection entitled Les Cenelles. Heavily influenced by Alphonse de Lamartine's Méditations Poétiques, Les Cenelles drew on the commonplace Romantic themes of melancholy, death, and individualism. Creole New Orleans had been swept up in the wave of Romanticism that spread across the world, and Lanusse, like many of the other Creole poets of New Orleans, took up a pen in imitation of French models: "Naïvement un jour,/J'ai pris pour un jouet la pure et vive flamme/ Qu'entretient Lamartine avec un saint amour."<sup>235</sup> Like mediums in a séance, these Louisiana writers adopted the voices of their French models, as Lanusse explains:

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<sup>235</sup> Les Cenelles.

Mais ceux pour qui nous éprouvons le plus de sympathie, ce sont ces jeunes hommes dont l'imagination s'est fortement éprise de tout ce qu'il y a de grand et de beau dans la carrière que suivent avec tant de gloire les Hugo et les Dumas ; ceux que nous voudrions défendre de toutes les forces de notre âme contre l'indifférence des uns et la méchanceté des autres, ce sont ces jeunes esprits qui, sans avoir la folle prétention d'atteindre jamais à la hauteur où sont arrivés les grands maîtres en littérature dont nous venons de parler, sont pourtant en butte à toutes les tracasseries que ces génies transcendants éprouvèrent au commencement de leur vie littéraire; tracasseries qui les poursuivront sans doute jusqu'aux portes de leurs tombeaux, si elles n'en franchissent pas les seuils.

The Louisiana poet recognizes that he will not achieve the glory of Hugo and Dumas, but he tries nonetheless to imitate their success. This "affected modesty," a well-established commonplace in Western rhetoric, typically serves to put a reader in a favorable disposition towards the writer or speaker by pointing out his humility.<sup>236</sup> This humility also serves to link these poets with their Romantic brothers in France, for they suffer many of the same "tracasseries" that a more famous poet might expect to face. This shared suffering, Lanusse suggests, linked the lesser Louisiana poets to their French models. The Creole imitators might pale in comparison to their heroes, but if they suffered as a great poet, perhaps they might better write like that poet.

It is no accident that many of the very same Spiritualists who spoke during the Spiritualist séances, either living or dead, had been in previous decades part of the flowering of Romantic literature in Louisiana, for just as the Creole Spiritualists adapted the transcendent promise of Spiritualism to their own particular needs, so too did they modify the subjectivity that they borrowed from Lamartine and Hugo.

Many of the contributors to Les Cenelles were associated with the school that Lanusse directed, l'institution Bernard Couvent, a Catholic school for poor orphans of color. In 1843 Lanusse helped to organize L'Album Littéraire, Journal des Jeunes Gens, Amateurs de la

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<sup>236</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius. European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages. tr. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990) 83.

Littérature, a literary journal that published the work of young New Orleans Creoles. This short-lived project defied the ban on published works by free people of color in Louisiana and led directly to the publication of Les Cenelles in 1845. The publication of this collection of poetry is generally considered a great milestone in the cultural achievements of Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres*. Les Cenelles, as the subtitle indicates -- "Choix de Poésies Indigènes" -- was explicitly part of a larger project to construct and defend an "indigenous" identity among the *gens de couleur* in New Orleans.

As a genre, Romantic poetry, unlike Spiritualist communications, did not yield so readily to such intense Creolization. In fact, it is hard to imagine a worse discourse with which to assemble a polyvocal Creole community, for confronted with the plural Creole voice, the sovereign Romantic subject must necessarily disintegrate. Furthermore, the Romantic movement defined itself by its explicit rejection of imitation as a creative tool. As Hugo's preface to the 1826 edition of Odes et Ballades makes clear, a Romantic poet is simply a poet who refuses to engage in the various modes of *classique* imitation:

L'auteur de ce recueil développera peut-être ailleurs tout ce qui n'est ici qu'indiqué. Qu'il lui soit permis de déclarer, avant de terminer, que l'esprit d'imitation, recommandé par d'autres comme le salut des écoles, lui a toujours paru le fléau de l'art, et il ne condamnerait pas moins l'imitation qui s'attache aux écrivains dits *romantiques* que celle dont on poursuit les auteurs dits *classiques*. Celui qui imite un poète *romantique* devient nécessairement un *classique*, puisqu'il imite. Que vous soyez l'écho de Racine ou le reflet de Shakespeare, vous n'êtes toujours qu'un écho et qu'un reflet. Quand vous viendrez à bout de calquer exactement un homme de génie, il vous manquera toujours son originalité, c'est-à-dire son génie. Admirons les grands maîtres, ne les imitons pas. Faisons autrement. Si nous réussissions, tant mieux; si nous échouons, qu'importe? <sup>237</sup>

If the Creole poets of New Orleans explicitly imitate their models, they have failed in their project from the very outset, for "[c]elui qui imite un poète *romantique* devient nécessairement

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<sup>237</sup> Victor Hugo "Preface (1826 ed. Odes et Ballades)" Odes et Ballades. Oeuvres Complètes. Poésie I (Paris: J. Hetzel et cie; A. Quantin, 1880-1889) 28.

un *classique*, puisqu'il imite." Thus we see a potential conflict in Les Cenelles, for the poems are explicit imitations of a genre that condemns imitation.

This conflict is at the heart of the common critical assertion that the poems in Les Cenelles are politically impotent. While Les Cenelles was the first anthology of African American poetry ever published, its place in the canon of black American literature is ambiguous, for the poems do not explicitly treat the political problems of the *gens de couleur*. The only direct reference to the persecution that the *gens de couleur* of the 1840s experienced is Lanusse's brief mention of *plaçage*--the arranged extra-marital unions between young free women of color and wealthy white men--in his poem "Épigramme."

#### Epigramme

"Vous ne voulez donc pas renoncer à Satan,"  
Disait un bon pasteur à une certaine bigote  
Qui d'assez gros péchés, à chaque nouvel an,  
Venait lui présenter l'interminable note.  
"Je veux y renoncer," dit-elle, "pour jamais;  
Mais avant que la grâce en mon âme scintille,  
Pour m'ôter tout motif de pécher désormais,  
Que ne puis-je, pasteur--Quoi-donc? *placer* ma fille?"<sup>238</sup>

Aside from this brief echo of a political message, the poems have little to say about the particular hardships that the Louisiana *gens de couleur* faced. For critics who find fault with the apparent lack of a political agenda in Les Cenelles, the very fact of the collection's existence often stands in for this silence in the poems, as if the mere act of publishing a book of poems was the extent of the political message in the collection.<sup>239</sup> In the preface to their 1979 English translation of

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<sup>238</sup> Les Cenelles.

<sup>239</sup> Floyd D. Cheung objects to the common critical assertion that the *Les Cenelles* poets were engaged in an escapist project. These poets, Cheung argues, inserted subtle objections to the institution of *plaçage* and the quadroon ball. Cheung uses James C. Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts" to argue that several of the poems, written in the voices of "jealous lovers and protective brothers" interested in defending the honor of free black women, constitute an

Les Cenelles, Régine Latortue and Gleason R.W. Adams typify this critical response to Les Cenelles when they lament their lack of political engagement in the poems. This poetry, they argue, "lacks the subtext of revolution and liberty which existed in the works of the best French Romantics":

The legacy of Rousseau, of the French Revolution, of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and the foils of Classicism and Rationalism which gave substance to the musings of Lamartine and Hugo do not reverberate in the verses of their Louisiana imitators; these verses consequently have a somewhat hollow ring. Trapped between races, between classes, between cultures, the Louisiana Creole could not and would not confront the problems and conflicts that blacks, no matter how elevated, experienced; yet, no matter how much they tried, they could not succeed in completely immersing themselves in that culture which seemingly represented salvation.<sup>240</sup>

The implications of this argument are twofold. First, the Les Cenelles poets have failed to correctly imitate their models because their poetry lacks the political engagement that characterized the work of Lamartine and Hugo. But they have also failed to capture the essence of Creole identity because they do not mention the "problems and conflicts" that are necessarily at the heart of such an identity. These poets, the argument goes, are bad Romantics and bad Creoles.

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"indirect, discreet attack[...] on an insidious threat to the manhood and cultural integrity of free blacks." [Floyd D. Cheung, "Les Cenelles and Quadroon Balls: 'Hidden Transcripts' of Resistance and Domination in New Orleans, 1803-1845" Southern Literary Journal 29:2 (1997).]

Michel Fabre sees the poets' detachment from their political situation as a symptom both of their Romantic disposition and of the persecution that they faced. He suggests that "the feelings of disillusionment that pervades the volume is as much part and parcel of the attitudes of the French Romantic school as an echo of the existential situation of the Creoles of color in the 1840s." [Michel Fabre, "The New Orleans Press and French-Language literature by Creoles of Color." 29-49 in Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: NYU Press, 1998).]

Caryn Cossé Bell reads *Les Cenelles* in the larger context of the *gens de couleur* protest tradition in New Orleans. While overt political activism was largely missing from Les Cenelles, the models that the poets had chosen--Lamartine, Hugo, Dumas, Béranger--nonetheless communicated the political position of the *gens de couleur*, for "literary Romanticism had served as a springboard to other forms of social and political activism in France." [Bell 123].

<sup>240</sup> Régine Latortue and Gleason R. W. Adams. "Preface" Les Cenelles. (Boston: Hall, 1979) xiii.

This failure has at its base the inability of the Creole poet to speak from the position of Romantic subjectivity. To imitate commonplace Romantic themes and language without accessing a profound internal voice is to betray the core of the Romantic project. Latortue and Adams go on to wonder "how much richer might have been Les Cenelles had its authors seen fit to tap, even briefly, the depths of some of their own experiences."<sup>241</sup> By failing to *reproduce* the Romantic subjectivity of the French poet, the Louisiana poet has ultimately failed to *produce* a recognizable self. As imitators, the Creoles are incompetent because their imitated poems are empty. They erect the "husks" of a poetic subjectivity by copying the formal and thematic elements of their poetic models, but these husks do not contain anything of their own essence.

This argument fails to recognize the important difference between Creole and Romantic identity formation, for the Creole poet, like the Spiritualist medium, speaks from a provisional, rootless position. He blends and borrows from a wide variety of sources. His poems are not so much empty as they are overfull. They do not respond to one single controlling consciousness because, just as with the spirits in the *au-delà*, they are choral arrangements. The Creole poet does not speak from a rooted or essential self, but from what we might call a mediumistic subjectivity. He speaks to and with the diverse community of voices of which he is a part. Thus by writing as another, and doing so inaccurately, the Creole poet forges an identity out of borrowed subjectivities.

Poet and future medium Joanni Questy, whose spirit often visited Rey's table after his death, contributed several poems to Les Cenelles. Like many of the poems in the collection, Questy's "Une Larme Sur William Stephen" speaks to and from a community of the living and the dead.

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<sup>241</sup> Latortue and Adams xxii.

## UNE LARME SUR WILLIAM STEPHEN

Muse, un béant sépulcre engloutit un poète :  
Préludons aujourd'hui par un hymne de deuil ;  
Déposons un instant nos parures de fête,  
Allons pleurer sur un cercueil.

Et pourtant que les fronts soient encor sans nuage,  
Oh ! que rien ne révèle une forte douleur !  
Car, si l'ange s'en va vers un autre rivage,  
C'est pour échapper au malheur.

Oui, c'est pour fuir la mort que sème le tonnerre,  
Que l'oiseau qui dormait va planer au zénith ;  
Bientôt un bruit éclate... il voit, couché par terre ,  
L'arbre où se balançait son nid.

Mais quoi ! tu pus mourir, ô Barde ! et ton génie,  
Plante qu'un froid hâtif a tuée en la glaçant,  
Retournera se fondre en sanglots d'harmonie,  
Aux pieds du Tout-Puissant.

Pourtant l'espoir encor rayonnait sur ta rive,  
Et Dieu faisait fleurir tes jours dans leur printemps,  
Sa main t'avait fait don du rameau de l'olive,  
Son esprit te guida vingt ans.

Sans jamais te mêler aux vains bruits de la terre,  
Cherchant dans l'infini l'ombre d'un grand secret,  
Tu passas dans la vie, obscur et solitaire,  
Et vis nos faux plaisirs avec un œil distrait.

Ta renommée un jour vint échauffer ma veine ;  
Jouant avec ton nom dans ma brûlante ardeur,  
O frère ! je voulus te pousser dans l'arène ;  
Mon dessein innocent offensa ta pudeur.

Ta haute intelligence, âtre où brûlait la flamme,  
Devait luire au grand jour pour le besoin de tous ;  
C'est pourquoi j'eus recours aux feux de l'épigramme :  
Je voulus t'attiser,... j'allumai ton courroux.

Mais, Barde, oh ! dis pourquoi t'envoler dès l'aurore ?  
Si tôt a donc sonné l'heure triste du soir ?  
Dis-nous sous quel fardeau que le vulgaire ignore,  
Si jeune nous t'avons vu choir ?

Comme un jonc desséché qu'un vent du nord emporte  
Et broie, en redoublant ses furieux efforts,  
Peut-être, fatigué sous ton âme trop forte,  
Trop faible s'est brisé ton corps.

Ne pouvant exhaler tous tes flots de pensées  
Peut-être que ton cœur, théorbe harmonieux,  
Par leur bouillonnement, eût les fibres cassées,  
Dans ses élans impétueux.

Ou bien comme la foi travaillant dans son âme,  
Pour vous sanctifier par un malheur de plus,  
Peut-être le Seigneur vous le prit, chaste Femme !  
Pour en faire un de ses élus.

Et l'éternel a dit, écoutez, pauvre Mère !  
Que l'homme n'est qu'un souffle, une vaine poussière ;

Et puis, il est si doux après de longs travaux,  
De dormir à l'abri des tempêtes mondaines !  
Puis d'écouter au port, dans un vaste repos,  
Le tonnerre lointain des passions humaines.

Oh ! dors, oui, dors toujours jusqu'au jour solennel !  
Et quand la nuit éteint la grande voix du monde ;  
Que Celui que je sers d'un doux regard m'inonde,  
Je te lègue ces chants, hommage fraternel,  
Étincelle ravie au foyer de mon âme  
Pour dorer ton oubli d'une rapide flamme.

Dors, dors toujours ! que rien ne trouble ton sommeil ;  
Sur ta tombe cachée aux rayons du soleil,  
Qu'un saule tristement épande son ombrage ;  
Qu'un marbre où les regrets auront gravé ton nom,  
Puisse dire au passant : "Il est mort avant l'âge,  
Derrière lui laissant un lumineux sillon."

Joanni.<sup>242</sup>

The first stanza is a call to mourning--"Allons pleurer sur un cercueil"-- that echoes throughout the collection. Many of the Les Cenelles poems speak to and with the dead, as a brief

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<sup>242</sup> Les Cenelles.



survey of poem titles reveals: " La Jeune Fille Mourante," "Un Frère Au Tombeau De Son Frère," "L'Orphelin Des Tombeaux," "Adieux," "L'Ombre D'Eugène B.," "Le Suicide," "Une Mère Mourante." The poets of Les Cenelles are gathered together to mourn the departure of the dead by speaking in their voices. This communal voice is a mortuary monument. Questy mourns his departed friend, but he is confident that his poetic voice will survive in the *au-delà*:

Mais quoi ! tu pus mourir, ô Barde ! et ton génie,  
Plante qu'un froid hâtif a tuée en la glaçant,  
Retournera se fondre en sanglots d'harmonie,  
Aux pieds du Tout-Puissant.

Death partially silences the poet, but his "génie" will survive in the divine harmony of the afterlife. For the poem to memorialize Stephen, it must invoke this very same voice. Thus this poem, like the collection, describes a community of living poets who communicate harmoniously with and as the dead. This is related to the problem of imitation in that the deathly conversation flows in the channels of discourse already established by the dead poet:

Ta renommée un jour vint échauffer ma veine ;  
Jouant avec ton nom dans ma brûlante ardeur,  
O frère ! je voulus te pousser dans l'arène ;  
Mon dessein innocent offensa ta pudeur.

Questy learned to write by imitating William Stephen. Now that Stephen is dead, Questy is free to "play" with his name, or memorialize him, by continuing to speak in his voice. This poem, like the entire collection, speaks in the wake of other poems and poets. These are recycled poems written in borrowed voices:

Dors, dors toujours ! que rien ne trouble ton sommeil ;  
Sur ta tombe cachée aux rayons du soleil,  
Qu'un saule tristement épande son ombrage ;  
Qu'un marbre où les regrets auront gravé ton nom,  
Puisse dire au passant : "Il est mort avant l'âge,  
Derrière lui laissant un lumineux sillon."

Questy here urges his departed friend to rest quietly in his tomb. His voice, liberated by his death--" Derrière lui laissant un lumineux sillon."-- can now circulate freely, and Questy, as a mimetic poet, can speak for and as William Stephen. Questy's poetic mourning fixes Stephen in his tomb, but it does so in Stephen's own borrowed voice. This poem, already borrowing heavily from the commonplace Romantic obsession with death, further hints at its debts to other poetic voices. But because of these layers of imitation, the "lumineux sillon" that the poem re-inscribes is too narrow to accommodate a recognizable Romantic subject. Questy is more of a medium than a poet, herding the various voices of the *au-delà* into his poem. He is, as Latortue and Adams describe, a "husk" of an identity, occasionally filled by borrowed alien voices, but never enclosing an essence.

Armand Lanusse was well aware of the problem of voice and imitation in Les Cenelles. In the introduction to the collection, he explicitly links the community building project of the collection and the tragic life of the poet and acknowledges the hopelessness of the poetic enterprise: " Oh ! nous le savons bien, la profession d'homme de lettres n'est pas souvent à désirer ; car sans compter qu'elle est toujours infructueuse pour qui n'y excelle pas, elle est quelquefois fatale à ceux mêmes que le génie a marqués de son sceau particulier." In spite of these difficulties, Lanusse's Creole poets persisted in their hopeless pursuit, and they took as their models poets who had gone before them:

Sans rappeler ici la fin malheureuse de Gilbert et de Malffilâtre, sans évoquer le souvenir de celle bien plus récente encore d'Hégésippe Moreau et d'Imbert Gallois, nous pouvons rapporter un fait qui est à notre connaissance personnelle, car déjà, sous ce rapport, s'est imprimée une large tache au front jeune encore du pays où nous avons pris naissance.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Les Cenelles.

This catalog of tragic poetic martyrs puts the Les Cenelles poets in famous company. But these poets do not rely exclusively only on French poetic martyrs, for they have models closer to home. Lanusse suggests that the particular group of poets he has assembled in the collection first came together when they happened to witness the funeral procession of the obscure Louisiana poet and playwright Auguste Lussan, a Frenchman who immigrated to New Orleans in the 1830s and wrote several plays set in Louisiana, including the 1839 Les Martyrs de la Louisiane which tells the story of the French colonial revolt against the Spanish government in 1768. Lussan's work was never widely celebrated and he died 1842 in obscurity and poverty.<sup>244</sup> Lanusse recounts how one day, as he and a group of *gens de couleur* were assembled at a house on Bayou Road in New Orleans, Lussan's pitiful hearse passed, escorted by seven or eight ragged artists. This sad parade was headed to a potter's field, where Lussan's remains would be covered with "la même quantité de boue que réclame la dépouille du plus pauvre et du plus obscur particulier de notre ville !..."<sup>245</sup> But this pathetic sight, instead of discouraging Lanusse's Creole poets, inspired in them a greater dedication to their noble but tragic art. Indeed, these poets looked to Lussan and the other Louisiana poets as models for their own poetic production:

Nous publions donc ce recueil dans le but de faire connaître les productions de quelques jeunes amans de la poésie qui ne jalouent point sans doute les beaux succès obtenus sur la scène ou dans le monde littéraire par des poètes louisianais qui ont eu le bonheur de puiser le savoir aux meilleures sources de l'Europe, car ces derniers seront toujours pour les premiers un sujet d'émulation, mais jamais un objet d'envie.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Edward Larocque Tinker. Les Écrits de la Langue Française en Louisiane au XIXe Siècle (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1932) 293-294.

<sup>245</sup> Les Cenelles.

<sup>246</sup> Les Cenelles.

These poets embark on a project not only to imitate French models, but also to imitate Louisiana's white poets who themselves imitate French models. The *gens de couleur* are at a double remove from their Romantic heroes. But in this "position," however much their authentic subjectivity is compromised, they are nonetheless able to group themselves together. The *gens de couleur* can be a proud community of imitation, united in their ability to speak *as* their models. They intentionally gather together in the shadow of other poets, but in this shadow they proudly demonstrate a collective solidarity. Their unity emerges from imitation.

In his poem "Besoin d'écrire", Lanusse further elaborates on the process of mimetic identity formation:

### Besoin D'Écrire

À mon ami Nelson D.

Je puis de tout plaisir braver la douce ivresse ;  
Je puis, sans murmurer, supporter le malheur.  
Peu sensible à la voix d'une belle maîtresse,  
Dans un calme parfait je puis garder mon cœur.  
Mais il est un penchant qui, malgré moi, m'entraîne,  
En vain voudrais-je, ami, le cacher avec soin ;  
Pour rafraîchir le sang qui circule en ma veine,  
D'écrire j'ai besoin.

L'instruction n'a pas, tu le sais, de mon âme  
Approché son flambeau. Naïvement un jour,  
Je pris pour un jouet la pure et vive flamme  
Qu'entretient Lamartine avec un saint amour.  
À cette douce erreur mon esprit se cramponne,  
Et je parcours encor un pénible chemin  
Où, quand à chaque pas la force m'abandonne,  
Nul ne me tend la main !...

Ce besoin me poursuit quand avec l'œil du rêve  
Je vois auprès de moi mes parents morts, heureux.  
Il me poursuit encor quand tristement j'achève  
D'adresser ma prière à l'Éternel pour eux.  
Dans de sombres forêts, sous la nef d'une église,  
Au milieu d'une fête ou parmi des tombeaux

Il agite mes sens comme en un lac la brise  
Fait tressaillir les eaux.

Mais ne va point penser, ami, je t'en supplie,  
Que cette passion dont je suis possédé  
M'absorbe entièrement. Non, jamais je n'oublie  
D'autres devoirs chéris qui m'ont toujours guidé.  
Il est un sentiment bien vif, inaltérable,  
Qui de mon cœur, sans cesse, occupe une moitié ;  
Nul autre à celui-là n'est pour moi préférable ;  
Son nom est l'amitié !...

This poem is a primer in mimetic subjectivity. The need to write, in the first stanza, is an illness that attacks the poet's well-being. He is strong enough to withstand the challenges of life--"ivresse," "malheur," "une belle maîtresse"--and in doing so he situates his voice within a stable self: "garder mon coeur." But this initial stability is disrupted by another desire: "Mais il est un penchant qui malgré moi, m'entraîne." The "besoin d'écrire," is unlike the other "besoins" in that it destabilizes his poetic voice. The need to write drags him away from the comfortable position that he had established for himself, yet it also revivifies him: "pour rafraîchir le sang qui circule en ma veine,/ D'écrire j'ai besoin." The poet is thus alienated from his accustomed self because of this need to write.

The second stanza recounts the birth of this "besoin." It was a "douce erreur" that led him to first imitate Lamartine: "erreur" because of the naive audacity of copying this heroic figure's verse; "douce" because of the effect that this imitation had on his soul, which clung to this poetic project with blind abandon. He was lost, separated from his former self, and isolated in his fear: "Nul ne me tend la main!" But by submitting to this need, he has further separated himself from his previously fixed and stable voice.

Thus liberated, in the third stanza he becomes a medium; he has conversations with the dead, with God and with natural world. In once sense, we can recognize here the commonplace

claims of the visionary poet. The poet transcends the noisy world of his own voice to have a conversation with eternity, the voyage that Hugo described as "commencer à Foule et finir à Solitude"<sup>247</sup> But this poet also seems to be concerned with the particular dead that live close to him: "je vois auprès de moi mes parents morts, heureux." The difference that he feels within himself continually agitates him, making him aware of the sublime all around. His state of transcendence brings him not to solitude but simply to another "foule."

The visionary consciousness that the poet adopts is similar to that of his models, but lacks transcendence. He has looked into the void of the universe and found it filled with people that he knows. Whereas in the third stanza the poet sought individual transcendence, in the fourth he admits to another "besoin" that complicates this desire for individual poetic vision: "son nom est l'amitié!" The final stanza is thus a reversal of the urge for isolation of the first three stanzas. Whereas the visionary poetic consciousness initially separated him from the world, he is not entirely "possédé" by the "besoin d'écrire," for his imitations of visionary consciousness now lead him back to recognize the importance of his community.

The end of the poem is thus a renunciation of the poet's evolving transcendent consciousness. Where once he sought the wilderness of visionary isolation, he has now returned home to his family. This last stanza also reminds us that he is addressing this poem to a friend: "Mais ne va point penser, *ami*..." We might thus re-read the title and dedication together and without a pause: "Besoin d'Écrire à mon ami Nelson D." The need to write, which masqueraded as a "Besoin de soi" was actually a "besoin de l'amitié" all along. Nelson D. is likely Nelson Desbrosses, the *gens de couleur* medium and poet, and a teacher at Lanusse's school. This is not

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<sup>247</sup> Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations 28.

a conversation with eternity; it is a conversation with a friend, and the consciousness that emerges from the poem is less visionary than communal.

From the point of view of Romantic subjectivity, this is a very disappointing ending. The poet's tormented pleas and transcendent visions melt away into a lowly conversation between amateur poets. Authentic pain and isolation are revealed to be merely copied emotions. The pressing need to write does not well up from the deep essence of the poet, but rather from the simple need to respond to a friend in a conversation. The poem is little more than an inside joke between friends. The expectation of self exploration and mastery to which the first three stanza's respond, decays at the end, and the poet's voice in the final stanza melts into a communal chorus.

This, then, is the political project of Les Cenelles. By adopting the structures of Romantic subjectivity and unraveling the promise of subjective mastery, the Les Cenelles poets have challenged the dominant mode of subjectivity. They have disrupted the pernicious and oppressive Romantic identitarian régime, what Glissant calls "la poétique...des profondeurs":

Extension vertigineuse, non pas sur le monde, mais vers les abîmes que l'homme porte en lui. C'est-à-dire, essentiellement, l'homme occidental, qui à ce moment régit et rythme le mouvement de la modernité. L'espace intérieur est aussi infini à explorer que les espaces terrestres.<sup>248</sup>

While Hugo and Lamartine may have been world famous abolitionists, the subjectivity that they helped to popularize reinforced colonialist tendencies. To plumb the depths of the self is to enslave the Other that one inevitably finds on such a voyage. Self-mastery, like global hegemony, results from the violent suppression of difference. But the *gens de couleur* poets adopted the conventions of Romantic lyricism and then polluted this discourse with their hybrid, unstable, and --to use a Deleuzian term by way of Glissant-- "rhizomatic" consciousness. They

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<sup>248</sup> Glissant. Poétique de la relation 204.

reject "possession," whether it be self possession or slavery, in favor of community. The Les  
Cenelles poets *are* bad Romantics, but this is not an accident, and it makes them good Creoles.

In Spiritualism Creole New Orleans found another tool with which to challenge the tyranny of the identitarian régime under which it suffered. The Creole community that Lanusse and his contemporaries built was echoed in the afterlife, as we see here in a communication that Rey's group received in 1871:

Combien serions-nous heureux si nous pouvions voir tous nos parents et amis s'associer à vous pour la poursuite de ce travail si productif cependant pour ceux qui s'en occupent?

Beaucoup d'entre nous sont pleurés, lorsqu'ils sont heureux et joyeux de leur venu dans le monde spirituel.

C'est nous qui devrions plutôt pleurer sur les misères de ceux que nous avis laissés et qui végètent, lorsque nous, nous marchons vers le bien et le bonheur éternel.

Ce ne sont pas ceux qui vous ont laissés qu'il vous faut pleurer; non, au contraire, pleurez plutôt sur vous-mêmes qui souffrez encore.

Nos souffrances aujourd'hui ont celles de la rétribution, mais qui est suivie heureusement de la rédemption qui donne la Paix et la jouissance.

Ne nous pleurez pas, nous n'avons plus la déception amère; parce que nous avons aujourd'hui l'espérance certaine qui s'augmente tous les jours par la réception bienheureuse et la solution de nos maux par le bonheur éternel.

Pleurez sur vous-mêmes, voyageurs ballottés par la tempête et les orages de la vie; mais prenez courage, car, au port sauveur, vous comprendrez pourquoi nous vous disons : "Ne pleurez pas sur nous, mais pleurez sur vous-mêmes."

Armand Lanusse  
Lovell et autres<sup>249</sup>

Lanusse died in 1867, but we see here that the community that he helped to inaugurate survived the death of his individual voice. When Lanusse returns to speak to Rey's group, he is not speaking from a position of profound self-mastery, he is rather speaking with and as others. This is a message from one community to another: "Ne pleurez pas sur nous, mais pleurez sur vous-mêmes." And while Lanusse may sign his name as lead author of the message, he has not enslaved the alterity within his voice. He is not merely the spirit of the man named "Armand

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<sup>249</sup> Spiritualist Registers. Vol 85-35 (1871).



Lanusse," he is " Armand Lanusse, Lovell et autres." He speaks in the voice of the Creole community.

### Creole Louisiana's Haitian Exile(s)

In 1867 the newspaper La Tribune de la Nouvelle-Orléans, the mouthpiece of black New Orleans in the years following the Civil War, published a short story by Joanni Questy entitled "Monsieur Paul."<sup>250</sup> Questy was a prominent poet and educator in the New Orleans Creole community who, as we saw above, contributed to Les Cenelles. He was also a Spiritualist medium and, after his death, a frequent visitor to Rey's Spiritualist circle. In Questy's melodramatic story, which is set in antebellum New Orleans, a white Creole named Monsieur Paul marries a free woman of color and is later killed in a duel by his wife's free black lover. Monsieur Paul reveals in his will that his slave and butler Georges is in fact his nephew. He frees Georges and encourages him to move to Haiti because Georges has "un amour de la liberté à faire trembler."<sup>251</sup> Georges follows his former master's advice, boards the *Laura*, a ship bound for Port-au-Prince, and "[fait ] le serment de ne jamais revenir dans son pays tant que «l'Institution particulière» y subsiste[...]."<sup>252</sup>

Questy's story illustrates the important place that the Haitian republic held in the imagination of antebellum Louisiana's Creole of color community. Haiti was a beacon of liberty and freedom in the New World, an oasis of hope in the slaveholding Caribbean. In as much as they looked to Haiti as a model, the New Orleans Creoles of color were engaged in a struggle for freedom that differed from the abolitionist movement in Anglophone America. While not opposed to Garrisonian abolitionism, New Orleanians of color were also encouraged by the

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<sup>250</sup> Joanni Questy, "Monsieur Paul" La Tribune De La Nouvelle-Orléans Oct. 25, 27, 29,30,31. Nov 1,3, 1867. Bibliothèque Tintamarre. Centenary College. 8 Aug. 2006.

<sup>251</sup> Questy, "Monsieur Paul"

<sup>252</sup> Questy. "Monsieur Paul"

politics of Hugo and Lamartine, the reforms of the Second Republic in France, and the example of the Haitian Revolution--particularly the military role played by Haiti's free people of color and the exploits of revolutionaries Ogé and Chavannes.<sup>253</sup> It was, therefore, towards France, Haiti and other Caribbean countries that Louisiana's *gens de couleur libres* -- or free people of color-- fled to escape the mounting racism and oppression of late 1850s Louisiana. During the three years preceding the Union occupation of New Orleans at least 450 *gens de couleur* left Louisiana for Haiti, most of them on board the *Laura*, the same ship that Questy mentions in his story.<sup>254</sup>

It was more than the promise of freedom that attracted Louisiana refugees to the "Black Republic." Creoles of color in Louisiana felt a strong cultural connection to Haiti and many of them were second or third generation Saint-Domingue immigrants. Louisiana's Caribbean culture owes a great deal to the large-scale immigration of Saint-Domingue refugees in the first decade of the nineteenth-century. This migration, which doubled the population of New Orleans in one year, had an important social and cultural impact on Creole Louisiana. The very fact that New Orleans remained at least a partially Francophone city well into the nineteenth-century can be traced to this massive influx of Creoles from Saint-Domingue. The Saint-Domingue refugees also reinforced Louisiana's free black community, as fully one third of them were free people of color.<sup>255</sup>

The Haitian revolution had caused thousands of people of all classes and races to leave Saint-Domingue, and by 1810, about 10,000 of these refugees had relocated to New Orleans.<sup>256</sup>

The largest wave of refugees came in 1808 and 1809. This group had first relocated to the

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<sup>253</sup> Logsdon and Bell. 209.

<sup>254</sup> Passanger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, 1820-1902. National Archives Microfilm Publications. Microcopy No. 259. Roll 49, March 1-Nov 30, 1860 and Roll 450, 20 March 1861.

<sup>255</sup> Paul F. Lachance. "The 1809 Immigration of Saint-Domingue Refugees to New Orleans: Reception, Integration and Impact. Louisiana History. 24: 1 (1988) 109-141.

<sup>256</sup> Bennett H. Wall, Louisiana: A History, (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1997) 87-88.

eastern end of Cuba, near the towns of Baracoa and Santiago de Cuba, but were expelled by Spanish authorities in 1808, a direct effect of Napoleon's deposition of Ferdinand VII and Spanish fears of French territorial or other ambitions from the refugees stronghold at Santiago.<sup>257</sup>

This large wave of immigrants doubled the population of the city at the time and strengthened the position of the Francophone majority in New Orleans. Not only did these people speak the same language, they also shared similar colonial history, religious and cultural institutions, and the idea of a three-tiered racial hierarchy. Thus the francophone population, once afraid of economic competition from the wave of American migrants into Louisiana, welcomed these newcomers, and intermarriage was frequent.<sup>258</sup>

While these refugees bolstered the sheer number of French speakers in the city, they also made great contributions to the economic and cultural development of the state. Not only were these immigrants largely responsible for the establishment and success of the state's sugar industry, but they also gave New Orleans many of its most notable early institutions including the French Opera, newspapers, schools and colleges. Between eighty and ninety percent of these refugees remained in the city and they were thus able to concentrate their influence and strengthen the Creole and Francophone culture of New Orleans. The Saint-Domingue refugee families and their descendants both reinforced the existing Francophone New Orleans Creole identity and maintained a separate cultural awareness that lasted into the twentieth century.<sup>259</sup>

The immigrants from Saint-Domingue were evenly spread among the three categories of the three-caste racial structure common to Saint-Domingue and Louisiana. Of the 9,059

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<sup>257</sup> Wall 71.

<sup>258</sup> Thomas Fiehrer, "From La Tortue to La Louisiane: An Unfathomed Legacy" The Road to Louisiana: The Saint-Domingue Refugees 1792-1809, ed. Carl A Brasseaux and Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette, La: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1992) 23.

<sup>259</sup> Fiehrer 23.

immigrants that arrived in New Orleans in 1809, 2,731 were white, 3,102 were free people of color, and 3,226 were slaves. Among these three groups were skilled artisans, educated teachers and journalists, and laborers who were able to contribute both the Francophone cultural institutions and to the colonial economic system. Many of the leading free men of color who became prominent in the early and mid Nineteenth Century were refugees from Saint-Domingue.<sup>260</sup>

While the free black refugees from revolutionary Haiti were quickly integrated into Louisiana's existing free black communities, they also maintained connections with, and an affection for, their Creole cousins in Haiti. These connections proved especially useful during the 1859 and 1860 migration of free black Louisianians to Haiti.

In 1862 Joseph Colastin Rousseau, one of the Louisianians who had recently moved to Haiti, published a long serial article of approximately 20,000 words entitled "Souvenirs de la Louisiane" in *L'Opinion Nationale*, a prominent Port-au-Prince newspaper.<sup>261</sup> This article, a rare early example of literary criticism by a Louisiana Creole of color, describes Louisiana's romantic poets, white and black, as an unfortunate and luckless group, united by the persecution and economic hardship they faced. It also traces the history and culture of Louisiana's free people of color as a way to reintroduce the Haitian public to their "blood brothers" from Louisiana.

Rousseau flirts with the early pan-African ideas that were circulating in the Atlantic world at the

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<sup>260</sup> Fiehrer, 23.

<sup>261</sup> In *L'Opinion Nationale*, "Souvenirs de la Louisiane" is attributed to "Anna Rousseau." When the article was reprinted a few months later in *L'Union*, it was prefaced by an introduction that attributes the article to "Joseph Rousseau." In his book about the New Orleans *gens de couleur*, Rodolphe L. Desdunes claims that Joseph Colstin Rousseau was married to a woman from the prominent Populus family, the granddaughter of Joseph Savary. Savary, a former Haitian revolutionary, led a battalion of *gens de couleur* during the Battle of New Orleans. I have been unable to determine if Anna Rousseau is this former Anna Populus, and I am unsure as to why the article was signed by Anna in Haiti and Joseph in New Orleans.

time, but he also argues for a more particular Creole solidarity, a unity among a far-flung people united by a common cultural, historical and literary heritage. Rousseau, himself the son of a Saint-Domingue refugee, claims that he wrote the article "afin de renseigner tous les membres de la grande communauté aussi bien que nos frères les Haïtiens--lesquels nous touchent de si près--sur l'existence de nos frères louisianais: parce que là-bas quand on dit: Louisianais, c'est comme si l'on disait Haïtiens."<sup>262</sup> By describing the Francophone literature of Louisiana, Rousseau hopes to revive lost cultural ties between Haiti and Louisiana. Rousseau's article demonstrates how the links between these two Creole regions--which persisted through the antebellum years--was based on a shared understanding of the hybrid, relational nature of Creole identity. As we have seen, Louisiana's Spiritualists spoke in a hybrid communal voice. In the same way, Rousseau understands the Haiti/Louisiana Creole community as a choir of voices that cohere in their very difference and transience.

Rousseau's article is divided into two major sections. The first part introduces four white poets of Louisiana: Adrien Rouquette, Alexandre Latil, and Oscar Dugué, and Tullius St. Cérans (who as a child came to Louisiana from Saint-Domingue). Rousseau describes the unique Creole Romanticism that these poets practice. He also anticipates charges of literary "bovarism" that, to this day, haunt the Francophone literature of nineteenth-century Louisiana, by describing the original voice with which these poets write:

Ils sont restés eux quand même, et un cachet d'originalité indélébile semble sceller leurs productions. Soit qu'ils parlent de la France, soit qu'ils parlent de leur pays, l'idée de la patrie ne les abandonne jamais: Elle est toujours restée pour eux un fond sur lequel ils brodaient leurs plus riches tableaux....Des enfants du sol, exilé en France pour travailler aux soins de leur éducation, chantèrent aussi leurs cyprières, leurs *bayous*, leurs lacs et

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<sup>262</sup> Rousseau. *l'Opinion Nationale*. 27 Déc 1862

On Rousseau's Saint-Domingue heritage, see: Rodolphe L. Desdunes, *Nos Hommes et Notre Histoire. Notices biographiques accompagnées de réflexions et de souvenirs personnels* (Montréal: Arbour et Dupont, 1911) 111-112.

leurs pinières; mille descriptions variées et précises du sauvage errant dans ses courses vagabondes...<sup>263</sup>

But in spite of their persistent originality, these poets suffer great indignities at the hands of Louisiana's bloodthirsty capitalists. Rousseau makes an explicit comparison between the obscurity and poverty of the poet and the plight of Louisiana's free people of color. Both struggle nobly against the prevailing social and economic order, and both, in the end, suffer obscurity and death: "Par un effort inouï, elles rompirent leurs chaînes, s'échappèrent des boutiques d'argent, et allèrent se loger sous le chaume d'habitants plus pauvres, pour n'y vivre que de poésie et d'amour!"<sup>264</sup>

It is possible to read a coded ethnic tension in Rousseau's distaste for commerce and capitalism. By the 1850s economic power in New Orleans had shifted from the Creole to the American sectors of the town. In an effort to amplify the remaining power of Creole New Orleans, the city had been divided into three municipalities in 1830. But in 1852, the city was reunited and the formerly isolated enclaves of free black New Orleanians began to face increasing political and economic persecution.<sup>265</sup> Rousseau suggests that the social standing of a Francophone Creole poet in a bustling port city filled with Anglophone merchants and businessmen can be compared to the social standing of the increasingly isolated and persecuted free Creole of color. The tragic poet and the doomed *homme de couleur* shared a similar fate.

In Rousseau's view, Louisiana's Creole poets, black and white, were united in a community of suffering and persecution. It is for this reason that the 1845 publication of Les Cenelles was so important for Louisiana's Creoles of color. This collection of poems did more than showcase a group of poets; it quickly became the cultural cornerstone upon which the

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<sup>263</sup> Rousseau. l'Opinion Nationale. 25 Octobre 1862.

<sup>264</sup> Rousseau. l'Opinion Nationale. 25 Octobre 1862.

<sup>265</sup> Desdunes 147-152.

Creoles of color built their community. According to Rousseau, these poets were engaged in a collaborative effort to write their community into existence:

Après avoir vu se succéder plusieurs autres volumes de poésie qu'on publia après ceux de St. Céran, Rouquette, Latil et Dugué, dont nous avons déjà parlé plus haut, ces jeunes gens, pleins d'une admiration sincère et respectueuse pour tout ce qui pouvait concourir à l'instruction de leur race, se sont décidés à braver les orages de la publicité, en lançant aussi leur volume de poésie indigènes. Ils se réunirent et décidèrent que chacun d'eux porterait son contingent à l'oeuvre proposée.

En moins de quinze jours, dix-sept d'entr'eux donnèrent 86 pièces de vers, fruit de leur labour. Chacun donna sa quote part pour l'impression et, un mois après, parut un volume de poésies,... composé de 200 et tant de pages, intitulé: *Les Cenelles*.<sup>266</sup>

Rousseau sees Les Cenelles as a borrowed or calqued literary production in which Louisiana's poets of color mimic the tragic plight of the white poet. But the poets of color, unlike their white models, suffer insults and obscurity as a community. The *gens de couleur* are unified by their marginalized social status. The scorn that the crass capitalists heap upon them, both for being poets and for being people of color, forges a bond between them. This bond is similar, as we shall see, to the bond that links Louisiana's Creoles of color to their cousins in the Haiti.

Rousseau moves on to discuss the poetry of the *gens de couleur* by giving an extended history and description of the "African race" [*la race africaine*] in Louisiana.<sup>267</sup> He also emphasizes the importance of the Saint-Domingue immigration to Louisiana, especially the last and largest wave of immigrants who were expelled from their asylum in eastern Cuba in 1809. The 2,300 free black Creoles who were living in Louisiana at that time welcomed more than 3,000 free black refugees from Saint-Domingue, and together this group constituted a quarter of the New Orleans population in 1809.<sup>268</sup> When discussing the history of the free people of color,

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<sup>266</sup> Rousseau L'Union No 87, 1863

<sup>267</sup> Rousseau. L'Union 9 Avril 1863

<sup>268</sup> Lachance 112.

Rousseau adopts a very fluid definition of "*gens de couleur*." He makes no attempt to exclude other black Louisianians from the *gens de couleur* identity, and he embraces and celebrates this group's African heritage. The Saint-Domingue refugees were quickly integrated into the civic and commercial life of free black New Orleans, and families soon intermarried. According to Rousseau, the common prejudice that the Creoles of color faced in New Orleans further strengthened their community:

En 1809 un débris d'exilés haïtiens expulsés de l'île de Cuba, furent jeté sur les plages de la Louisiane, comme envoyés de Dieu pour venir grossir le petit nombre de familles dont j'ai parlé plus haut [les gens de couleur libres]. Frères déjà par le sang, enserrés dans le cercle de fer d'un inconséquent préjugé, ce malheur commun, les sacrant en les réunissant, leur inspira de pures et franches sympathies; leurs enfans grandirent sous le même toit, de nouveau liens de fraternité, naissant de la situation, se resserrèrent chaque jour plus étroitement et, confondus dans le même sort, ils ne firent bientôt qu'une seule et même famille....(sic) <sup>269</sup>

Rousseau here posits a primal connection between Haitians and Louisianians--"blood brothers from the start"--and he goes on to describe how these two estranged branches of the same family soon became one.

Soon after their arrival in Louisiana, the Haitian refugees were given the opportunity to prove their allegiance to their new home by fighting in the Battle of New Orleans. Rousseau himself was married to the granddaughter of the free black colonel Joseph Savary, a former soldier in the Haitian revolution and a hero of the Battle of New Orleans who organized one of the two battalions of free black soldiers. 430 of the 3,600 soldiers who fought on the American side of this battle were *gens de couleur*, and many of these were recent Haitian exiles.<sup>270</sup> But Rousseau is quick to point out that while the recent immigrants fought bravely, they had never received the reward that they deserved:

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<sup>269</sup> Rousseau. L'Opinion Nationale. 29 Novembre 1862.

<sup>270</sup> Bell chapter 2 *passim*.



Maintenant nous le demandons, qu'a-t-on fait pour récompenser ces hommes si dévoués et si désintéressés, des services qu'ils ont rendus au pays? rien! On leur a dit d'attendre, et ils ont attendu sans murmurer, et depuis ce temps, une seconde génération qui touche déjà au méridien de la vie, après avoir vécu sous l'empire d'une vertu austère et d'une pureté de mœurs remarquable, attend toujours, et l'on semble ne vouloir rien faire pour eux.<sup>271</sup>

This unpaid debt remained a sore point in relations between the *gens de couleur* and the larger Louisiana community, but it was only a taste of the persecution that was to come. Perhaps because of their marginal status within Louisiana society, the Saint-Domingue refugees maintained contact with their cousins in Haiti. Some evidence of this contact can be found in the Francophone press of antebellum Louisiana, as news from Haiti was often reprinted in New Orleans newspapers. But the newspapers of Haiti are a much richer source of information on the persistent connection between these two Creole communities. Haitian papers often reprinted and commented upon articles from New Orleans papers, and they paid special attention to news of racist persecution in Louisiana. For example, on August 5th, 1821, Le Télégraphe of Port-au-Prince responded to a racist article about Haiti that had appeared in a New Orleans paper that was full of "...les faits les plus faux, les plus calomnieux que puissent inventer des colons ou des animaux de la même race qui avient intérêt au renouvellement du système despotique que l'on venait de détruire."<sup>272</sup> In June 1834, Le Télégraphe also carried the shocking news of the Lalaurie affair. The white Creole Delphine Lalaurie, who had brutally tortured and murdered her slaves, was chased out of the city by a mob, what Le Télégraphe called "un exemple frappant de la vengeance du peuple."<sup>273</sup>

As abolitionist tensions mounted before the Civil War, the Haitian press paid special attention to the plight of the *gens de couleur* in Louisiana. In August of 1860 Le Progrès related

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<sup>271</sup> Rousseau, L'Opinion Nationale. 29 Novembre 1862.

<sup>272</sup> Le Télégraphe. Gazette Officielle. [Port-au-Prince]. 30. 5 Août 1821.

<sup>273</sup> Le Télégraphe. Gazette Officielle. [Port-au-Prince]. 23. 8 Juin 1834.

the news that "[l]es noirs et les gens de couleur souffraient toujours des plus grandes humiliations."<sup>274</sup> The article describes the case of the New Orleans musician Thomas J. Martin, *homme de couleur*, who was accused of trying to seduce a white music student during a piano lesson. Using both published reports and private correspondence from New Orleans as sources, Le Progrès describes how Martin narrowly avoided being lynched by a mob and how this case "...avait excité les colons et de vils mercenaires contre toute notre classe."<sup>275</sup>

When an insulting article that appeared in the New Orleans paper The Daily Crescent reached Haiti, the Haitian press quickly responded. Haitians had followed the news of John Brown with great interest, and when he was arrested and executed they organized a collection to benefit John Brown's widow, and set a fund raising goal of \$25,000. The Daily Crescent heard about this effort and said that "...il semble peu probable qu'une société de nègres indolents et paresseux puisse contribuer pour une telle somme..."<sup>276</sup> E. Heurtelou responded angrily in the pages of Le Progrès:

Les stipendiés des colons pour river les fers de nos frères encore sous le joug de l'esclavage, proclament que la République haïtienne composée de nègres indolents et paresseux ne peut pas de son propre mouvement contribuer pour une somme raisonnable dans le but d'honorer la mémoire d'un martyr de la cause africaine....A une telle calomnie, à une telle invective, à une telle insolence, il n'y qu'une seule réponse à faire: la réalisation du fait déclaré au-dessus de la vigueur et de la grandeur de notre âme.<sup>277</sup>

As the racist attitude of The Daily Crescent suggests, the antebellum New Orleans press was not eager to give a voice to the city's *gens de couleur*. However, Haitian newspapers also show how the Louisiana *gens de couleur* maintained a great sympathy for their Creole cousins who remained in Haiti, a feeling that, because of their marginal social status in Louisiana, the

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<sup>274</sup> Le Progrès. Journal Politique. [Port-au-Prince]. 25 Août 1860.

<sup>275</sup> Le Progrès. Journal Politique. [Port-au-Prince]. 25 Août 1860.

<sup>276</sup> E. Heurtelou. Le Progrès. Journal Politique. [Port-au-Prince.] 26 Mai 1860.

<sup>277</sup> E. Heurtelou. Le Progrès. Journal Politique. [Port-au-Prince.] 26 Mai 1860.

*gens de couleur* could not publicize at home. For example, in August 1831, a hurricane struck the towns of Les Cayes and Jérémie on Haiti's southern peninsula. When news of this disaster reached New Orleans, the city's *gens de couleur* organized a committee, "*Les jeunes gens de la Nouvelle-Orléans*," to collect money for a relief effort.<sup>278</sup> In March 1832, the poet and educator Numa Lanusse, brother to Armand Lanusse and president of the committee, sent a letter to Haitian authorities with the equivalent of 11,050 Haitian Gourdes and a list of 180 donors. Almost all of Louisiana's prominent Creole of color families are represented on this list. The young Victor Séjour, destined to become a popular playwright in France (and the uncle of the well know Haitian novelist Frédéric Marcelin), gave five dollars to the cause. François Boisdoré, who later became an important figure in the reconstruction governments of Louisiana, gave four dollars. The Snaër, Macarty, Lambert, Rillieux, Dubreuil et Toussaint families also appear on the list.<sup>279</sup>

In thanking these Louisianans for their generosity, Haitian authorities were quick to point out the links that persisted between Louisianians of color and Haiti. Le Télégraphe reprinted the following response to the donation:

Quels que soient les obstacles qui les séparent, les âmes sensibles s'entendent et se comprennent; et nous nous rappelons avec plaisir que la plupart d'entre vous ont pris naissance dans notre pays, ou sont originaires de la belle et malheureuse Haïti.<sup>280</sup>

We see here evidence of a well-organized community of *gens de couleur libres* in New Orleans. These people were proud of their connections to Haiti and united in their efforts to help their Creole cousins in the Caribbean.

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<sup>278</sup> "*Les jeunes gens de la Nouvelle-Orléans*" was also the name of the literary circle that organized the journal l'album littéraire in 1843 and Les Cenelles, in 1845.

<sup>279</sup> Le Télégraphe. [Port-au-Prince.] 8 Avril 1832. Vol. 2. No. XV.

<sup>280</sup> Le Télégraphe. [Port-au-Prince.] 8 Avril 1832. Vol. 2. No. XV

As the Anglophone population of New Orleans grew and the special status of the free black community was threatened by restrictive legislation, New Orleanians of color faced increased persecution. Rousseau claims that the community was further united by efforts to resist this persecution, and he gives the following example of how Creoles of color rallied around their most cherished cultural institutions:

En 1837, ces messieurs poussèrent leur barbare méchanceté jusqu'à faire retirer aux familles de couleur la place qu'elles avaient au théâtre d'Orléans, parce qu'elles étaient trop de luxe, lisaient-ils, lorsqu'elles y allaient avec leur filles; mais, dans les entretiens des familles blanches, nous savions tout ce qui se passait!...La chronique disait, qu'elles s'étaient trouvées blessées de la beauté et de l'élégance des jeunes filles de la race africaine et, qu'à force de plaintes, elles étaient parvenues à éloigner d'elles ces jeunes beautés qui les offusquaient. Mais ces pères de familles auxquels on faisait un tel affront, tous hommes d'intelligence, et qui avaient déjà reconnu que le théâtre est le flambeau civilisateur des nations, se résignèrent sans murmurer et, dans la même année le théâtre Marigny fut ouvert pour eux et de leurs propres deniers. Ils nommèrent une administration composée par eux-mêmes. Tous les sujets qui montèrent sur cette scène furent pris dans les rangs de leur tribu, à l'exception de quelques comparses, figurants, ou domestiques qui furent des blancs.<sup>281</sup>

The outrage that Rousseau expresses here demonstrates why this article could never have appeared in the racist press of antebellum New Orleans. It was not until New Orleans fell to Union troops that L'Union, the city's first black newspaper, reprinted Rousseau's article.

In the 1850s Louisiana's Free People of Color began to feel added racial persecution. The growth of abolitionist sentiments in the North caused whites, both Creole and American, to fear and distrust free people of color, and new laws were passed that restricted the freedom to travel, assemble and inherit property that *gens de couleur* had formerly enjoyed in Louisiana. This mounting persecution caused many Creole Louisianians to seek exile in France, Haiti and Mexico. In 1858, the Haitian president Soulouque sent Emile Desdunes, a Louisianian of color who had lived for a number of years in Haiti, back to New Orleans to act as an immigration

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<sup>281</sup> Rousseau, L'Opinion Nationale, 6 décembre, 1862.

agent in the city. When Soulouque's regime fell a short time later, efforts to attract Louisianians to Haiti continued under President Geffrard.<sup>282</sup> At least 450 free black Louisianians left New Orleans for Haiti in the years before the Civil War. Most were to return soon after the fall of the city to Union forces. But some, like Rousseau, made Haiti their permanent home.

While most of these immigrants seem to have been rural *gens de couleur* from Opelousas and the prairie regions of southwest Louisiana, some New Orleanians of color moved to Haiti as well. In June 1860 two readers of Le Progrès wrote letters to the paper in support of Sidney Lambert, a newly arrived New Orleanian and "un homme de notre race," who was trying to get a position as a church organist in Haiti.<sup>283</sup> Lambert claimed to have been the organist and musical director of Saint Mary's parish in New Orleans and the personal organist to Archbishop Antoine Blanc. But there was some doubt in Port-au-Prince as to whether or not Lambert's impressive résumé, given the oppressive racial climate in Louisiana, could be true. A letter signed by a "P.R." insists that "...qu'importe le préjugé qui existe en Louisiane contre les gens de couleur et qui les annihile du contact des blancs..." Lambert had indeed held these posts in New Orleans.<sup>284</sup>

In the Haitian press, the Louisiana refugees were welcomed with open arms. Le Progrès announced the news that on July 25th 1860, another 250 emigrants had left New Orleans for Haiti on board the *Laura*:

Nous nous félicitons de la prochaine arrivée de ces nouveaux frères. Puisse leur exemple être imité par tous ceux dans les veines desquels coule le sang africain et qui souffrent dans toute l'Amérique des vils préjugés de couleur. Que tous viennent se joindre à nous pour jouir de la liberté, de l'égalité sous le palmier d'Haïti, et nous aider à faire de notre beau pays, fertilisé par le sang généreux de nos pères, la métropole de la race noire dans le monde civilisé.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Desdunes 147-152.

<sup>283</sup> Le Progrès. Journal Politique. [Port-au-Prince]. 15 Sept. 1860.

<sup>284</sup> Le Progrès. Journal Politique. [Port-au-Prince]. 8 Sept. 1860.

<sup>285</sup> P.R. Le Progrès. Journal Politique. [Port-au-Prince]. 8 Sept. 1860.

Unfortunately this idealistic view of the migration did not translate into practical success; the immigrants faced many difficulties in their new home and most soon returned to Louisiana.<sup>286</sup> Le Progrès published an article on September 8th, 1860, signed by this same "P.R.," that refutes the negative claims made by many of the refugees who left Haiti after only a brief stay, especially one Edouard Fusillié of Opelousas. Fusillié returned home to Louisiana after fifty-five days, apparently frustrated with the state of Haitian agriculture. These returning Louisianians were making it difficult for Capitan Pierce to recruit more passengers to take to Haiti on his ship, the *Laura*. The article goes on to praise Captain Pierce for having found immigrants that are "...essentiellement sympathiques par les liens du sang" and to suggest that the Haitian government compensate him for his efforts.<sup>287</sup> A similar article that appeared the following week, again signed "P.R.," gives a brief history of the Haiti-Louisiana connection and tells two remarkable stories of families being reunited by this migration:

Nous ferons remarquer que de 1802 à 1809, 22,000 esclaves ont quitté ce pays-ci avec leurs maîtres joints à 9,000 personnes libres du sang africain qui se sont émigrés en Louisiane. Eh bien! ne nous étonnons point; ce sont les affranchis des descendants de ces gens-là qui s'en retournent au bercail, au pays de leurs ancêtres: ce sont des oncles, des frères, des cousins, des alliés, et pour preuve de ce que nous avançons, une respectable vieille dame de 90 ans, arrivée par la *Laura*, ce voyage-ci, se trouve la propre tante de notre estimable ami Thoby, administrateur des finances à St.-Marc. Un ami particulier de la Nouvelle-Orléans nous affirme que notre Président aurait une soeur d'un âge très avancé; cette respectable personne réside dans la haute du fleuve, dans un des quartiers très retiré de la paroisse Plaquemine.<sup>288</sup>

Given these strong familial and cultural connections, one might expect that for free black Louisianians, traveling to Haiti would seem less of an exile than a return to the land of their ancestors, to a country that shared their language and culture, a country that was the beacon of

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<sup>286</sup> Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, 1820-1902. National Archives Microfilm Publications. Microcopy No. 259. Roll 49, March 1-Nov 30, 1860 and Roll 450, 20 March 1861.

<sup>287</sup> P.R. Le Progrès. Journal Politique. [Port-au-Prince]. 8 Sept. 1860.

<sup>288</sup> P.R. Le Progrès. Journal Politique. [Port-au-Prince]. 8 Sept. 1860.

liberty for the entire African Diaspora in the New World, a country in which they might regain the freedoms that were rapidly being stripped from them in Louisiana. But Rousseau's article does not describe the exile in these terms. He seems more interested in showing that the common culture and history that Louisianians and Haitians share is a function of a shared difference. Rousseau describes Louisianians as "*nos frères d'outre-golfe*"--"Our brothers on the other side of the gulf" or "our gulf-coast brothers"--an expression that demonstrates the relational nature of Rousseau's conception of Creole identity. His voyage to Haiti is not a rupture with his birthplace, nor is it a return to his native land. Rather, it is another in a repeating series of relational links across the "gulf" that separates these two peoples. He is interested in forming a community based not on roots but on persistent connections. Just as Les Cenelles was a communal attempt to imitate white Creole poetry, so too will the act of community formation be an act of imitation. The *gens de couleur* would build their community not on a deep-rooted sense of identity, but on a tenuous unity that they derive from their interconnectedness with others:

L'histoire de la race africaine, qui habite la vallée de la Louisiane, est sans contredit une des plus intéressantes mêlée comme elle est aux affaires de toutes sortes de ce pays. Cette race a vécu plus près des blancs, nous osons dire même qu'elle a vécu dans l'intimité avec la plupart d'entr'eux, et au milieu d'un préjugé impossible, dans ce pays, par ses anomalies: avec ses amours, ses haines, ses dévouemens, ses ingraturités, ses naïvetés, ses ruses, ses raisonnemens, ses aberrations, ses actes d'humanité ridicules quelquefois et ses préjugés toujours insensés. (sic)<sup>289</sup>

Neither white nor slave in an increasingly bipolar racial order, Louisiana's free people of color transformed their proximity to others into a collective identity. Being situated between other more rooted and stable identities, they have created links between their position and those of these other communities. Their identity is a relational one, based not on mythic roots but on a kinship of transience. They are not white, but, as Rousseau says, they live in "intimacy" with

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<sup>289</sup> Rousseau, l'Opinion Nationale. 27 Déc 1862.

whites. Rousseau describes the suffering and prejudice that the *gens de couleur* as face, but he also emphasized that they are "mixed up" in Louisiana's affairs. The pride that the Creoles of color showed in forming their own theater company, in collecting relief funds for Haitian hurricane victims, and in publishing a collection of poetry, serves to unify the community. But this pride should not be confused with an essential identity. Rousseau mentions the "African race" several times, but never in an attempt to demarcate a racial identity for the *gens de couleur*. It is, Rousseau suggests, through intimacy and contact with different peoples that the *gens de couleur* assemble a provisional identity. There is no essence to the Creole community, save the condition of contact and difference.

Rousseau's article is thus an invitation to the people of Haiti to share in this intimacy and further build Louisiana's *gens de couleur* community. The literary accomplishments of this community are a bridge across the "gulf." Louisiana's Haitian exiles, some of whom, like Rousseau, returned to Haiti again in a state of exile, traced and retraced the connections across the Creole world. In this way Rousseau's journey to Haiti is less exile than "errance," to use Edouard Glissant's term.<sup>290</sup> For to be a "*frère d'outre golfe*" is to be in a state of relation with others. The fact that Haitians and Louisianians are "blood brothers," is less important than the fact that they are "*mêlée aux affaires de toutes sortes*" or mixed up in a web of alterity. The connections that link them to one another allow them to build a community. The Creole solidarity that persisted between Haiti and Louisiana was just that, Creole, not a displaced diaspora but a multiple and transient community bound together by its very transience.

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<sup>290</sup> Glissant *Poétique* 23.



## Louisiana Voodoo and Haitian Spiritualism

This study examines Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Spiritualism, but in nineteenth-century Louisiana there were active Voodooists and in nineteenth-century Haiti there were Spiritualist circles. Extensive research in the archives of Haiti and Louisiana has not revealed explicit connections between these two religious practices in either place, however this does not prevent us from recognizing that each of these modes of spiritual communication provided its adherents with remarkably similar narrative tools to speak in the voices of others, and in so doing to construct Creole communities.

While the existing scholarship does not address the question of Spiritualism's influence on on Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo<sup>291</sup> in the nineteenth century, the example of neighboring Creole cultures in Cuba and Puerto Rico demonstrate that the worldwide Spiritualist movement did have adherents in the Caribbean, and that these adherents found ways to "Creolize" the *table tournantes* craze of the 1850s by blending it with existing folk-Catholic and African religious practices.<sup>292</sup> In Cuba, *Espiritismo* splintered into three distinct variants that broke largely along class lines. The first of these, "Scientific" or "Table" *Espiritismo*, tended to be a purer form of Kardecian Spiritualism popular with the urban bourgeoisie, while two other variants, *Espiritismo de Cordón* and *El Espiritism Cruzao*, syncretized spiritualist practices like the *table tournante* with Afro-Cuban *Santería*. Spiritualism was sympathetic to the surviving West African traditions of ancestor worship and communication with gods that characterized *Santería*, and the spiritualist medium quickly found a place in folk-religious practice.

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<sup>291</sup> Current scholarly conventions demand that the Haitian religion be spelled "Vodou" and that the Louisiana variant be spelled "Voodoo."

<sup>292</sup> Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo (New York: NYU Press, 2003) Ch.7 *passim*.

Class distinctions played an important part in the religious syncretism in Puerto Rico, for, according to Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, "[n]ineteenth-century upper-class Puerto Ricans turned to French Spiritism to 'whitewash' the African and *jíbaro* folk elements of their society with a European practice."<sup>293</sup> But while purer French Spiritualism might have prevailed among the educated urban elite, the adherents of syncretistic African folk religions also found in the *tables tournantes* a model of spiritual communication that they integrated into their existing ways of speaking to the gods. In *Santerismo*, a religious tradition that further blends *Espiritismo* and *Santería*, and that is popular today among Cuban and Puerto Rican communities in the mainland United States, the Spiritualist practice of channeling the voices of the dead and the *Santería* practice of being possessed by the *orishas* or gods are conflated into one continuum of spiritual communication. During *Santerismo* ceremonies "[t]he Godfather [or ceremonial leader] prays at the altar and later sits with the mediums at a table where a collective spirit possession session takes place in the midst of music playing, from traditional conservative religious music to Afro-Cuban chants praising the orishas."<sup>294</sup> Today these ceremonial practices coexist within the same tradition and thus demonstrate the potential for syncretism between Vodou and Spiritualism.

While it is often difficult to untangle the history of Louisiana Voodoo from the sensationalism that surrounds it, we can nonetheless see that nineteenth-century Louisiana supported a strong Voodoo community. In her study *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall points to the importance of Fon and Yoruba cultural influences in the formation of Louisiana Voodoo: "Fon and Yoruba women were present in significant numbers, and they tended to be clustered on estates. Unlike Haitian voodoo, Louisiana voodoo was dominated by

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<sup>293</sup> Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 188.

<sup>294</sup> Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 194.

women."<sup>295</sup> This early cultural pattern of a woman-dominated Voodoo tradition persisted into the nineteenth century, a fact that puts into question the assumption that Zora Neal Hurston made in her anthropological study of "Hoodoo in America" regarding the importance of the Saint-Domingue immigration to New Orleans Voodoo:

Shreds of hoodoo beliefs and practices are found wherever any number of Negroes are found in America, but conjure has had its highest development along the Gulf coast, particularly in the city of New Orleans and in the surrounding country. It was these regions that were settled by the Haytian emigres at the time of the overthrow of French rule in Hayti by L'Ouverture. Thousands of mulattoes and blacks, along with their white ex-masters were driven out, and the nearest French refuge was the province of Louisiana. They brought with them their hoodoo rituals, modified of course by contact with white civilization and the Catholic church, but predominately African<sup>296</sup>

It is difficult to know what influence the massive influx of Saint-Domingue refugees to Louisiana had on the Voodoo traditions that existed in the city before their arrival, but Hall's scholarship on this and other African cultural traits suggests that the African influence on Louisiana's Creole culture was firmly in place by the time of the immigration. The Saint-Domingue refugees must have had some influence on the Voodoo traditions in New Orleans, but in keeping with Hall's argument, we find that most accounts of nineteenth-century voodoo in New Orleans describe a religion led by women, foremost among them the well-known Marie Laveau.

There is no direct evidence of African religious influence in the records of the nineteenth-century Louisiana Spiritualist circles. This is not to deny that there was a connection between Spiritualism and Voodoo, but simply to say that the explicit blending between these two religions that happened in early twentieth-century New Orleans had not yet taken place.

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<sup>295</sup> Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1992) 302.

<sup>296</sup> Zora Neal Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *The Journal of American Folklore* 44.174 (1931): 317-417.

However there was some confusion on this point among the opponents of Spiritualism in Louisiana. In 1859, as they sought to suppress Spiritualist activity, the New Orleans Catholic clergy accused the city's most famous Spiritualist medium and healer, J.B. Valmour, of practicing Voodoo.<sup>297</sup> This denunciation was part of a larger pattern of police suppression of Voodoo in the city in the decade before the Civil War.

Between 1850 and 1861 the New Orleans police disrupted many Voodoo ceremonies in the city and the surrounding area. The details of these arrests were often recounted in sensational articles in the city's papers.<sup>298</sup> In "Defiant African Sisterhoods: The Voodoo Arrests of the 1850s and 1860s in New Orleans" Ina Fandrich suggests that this increase in the persecution of New Orleans Voodooists was part of the city's cultural shift of the 1850s. Because the increasingly powerful Anglophone community in the city did not share the Creole "inhibitions that had protected the Voodoo clergy," there was an increased attempt to eliminate such activity in the city.<sup>299</sup> In this way, the attack on the New Orleans Voodoo priestesses was part of the larger pattern of persecution that inspired the New Orleans *gens de couleur* to initiate defensive, identity-building projects like Les Cenelles. Furthermore, the accounts of these arrests demonstrate that there were simultaneous Voodoo and Spiritualist circles in the same *gens de couleur* neighborhoods of the city. There are several tantalizing clues about possible interaction between these two religious traditions, such as the existence of a "Doctor G.S. Alexander" who

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<sup>297</sup> Bell 187.

<sup>298</sup> Ina Johanna Fandrich, "Defiant African Sisterhoods: The Voodoo Arrests of the 1850s and 1860s in New Orleans" 187-207 Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World, ed. Patrick Bellegarde-Smith (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>299</sup> Fandrich 190.

had a shop on Royal Street and was reportedly both a Voodoo priest and a Spiritualist.<sup>300</sup>

However the extent to which these traditions interacted remains unclear.

However much Spiritualism and Voodoo interacted in the nineteenth century, the voodoo-influenced "Spiritual Churches" that survive to this day in New Orleans are the result of a mingling of these and other spiritual practices. The New Orleans "Spiritual" religion, a blend of Spiritualism, Voodoo, Catholicism and Pentacostalism, is unique among African-American "Spiritual" religions in its use of "Spirit Guides" in worship service and in the forms of ritual possession that its adherents practice.<sup>301</sup> Members of these churches hold two views on the birth of their religion. Some say that it is an outgrowth of Marie Laveau's Voodoo tradition in the city. Others claim that the religion began when Mother Leafy Anderson of Chicago came to the Anglophone Uptown area of New Orleans in 1920 to organize the "Eternal Life Christian Spiritualist Association." As we have seen, Spiritualists circles existed in New Orleans prior to Mother Anderson's arrival, but there is no evidence of a link between the Creole Spiritualism of nineteenth-century New Orleans and the American Spiritual Church traditions. Members of these surviving "spiritual" churches were, as late as 1991, unaware of the existence of Spiritualism in New Orleans before the arrival of Mother Anderson.<sup>302</sup> Nonetheless, the ease with which these two religious practices were fused into one demonstrates the ritual similarity between them, especially with regards to the possession and communication with the dead that are an important part of this religion's ceremonies.

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<sup>300</sup> Claude F. Jacobs and Andrew J Kaslow, The Spiritual Churches of New Orleans: Origins, Beliefs, and Rituals of an African-American Religion (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991) 88.

<sup>301</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow 91.

<sup>302</sup> Jacobs and Kaslow 31.

Zora Neal Hurston's investigations make clear the link between this later Spiritualism and the "hoodoo" or voodoo traditions in New Orleans:

At the present time there is another influence which is evident in Negro hoodoo in certain districts. This is spiritualism. The dead, and communication with the dead, play traditionally a large part in Negro religions. Wherever West African beliefs have survived in the New World, this place of the dead has been maintained. In Hayti and the Bahamas there are all the beliefs and practices centering about the Zines, and among the Negros of the North American continent the power of the dead to help or harm is common tenet even among those who have discarded hoodoo. Spiritualism, as a technique for communication with the dead, has a ready appeal to the black, and is often closely combined with hoodoo practices. There are many advantages to a hoodoo doctor in embracing spiritualism. Hoodooism is in disrepute, and certain of its practices forbidden by law. A spiritualistic name protects the congregation, and is a useful device of protective coloration.<sup>303</sup>

This assertion, that there is an inherent affinity in African-American culture for speaking with the dead, raises the further possibility that the Creole Spiritualists of nineteenth-century New Orleans were initially attracted to Spiritualism because of African cultural survivals in New Orleans Creole culture.

For Hurston, the later blending of Spiritualism and Voodoo occurred because of Spiritualism's technical similarities to Voodoo possession. Spiritualism, "as a technique for communication with the dead," was not very different from the forms of ritual possession that she encountered during her anthropological investigations in 1920s New Orleans. Hurston recorded a long series of formalized dialogues between a "supplicant" and a "god" that were thought to have originated with Marie Laveau. These formulaic "Laveau routines," widely known among the New Orleans Voodoo community, were to be recited in specific cases of need. For example "The Man Whose Wife Has Left Home" would recite "Oh, good mother, look into your son's upturned face and bear with him until he has told you of his troubles and

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<sup>303</sup> Hurston 319.

sorrow....Dear mother, the woman of my heart has left my roof and my place of rest." The supplicant would then receive a long message from "The God" detailing the specific steps that he should take to bring his wife home, including advice to "scrub the floor of your room on Saturday with the essence of Rosemary and with the essence of Verbena mixed together in equal portions," and to "put the extract of Hasno-Hanna close to your body and you will speak to her with sweet words and many promises that she will believe and hearken unto you."<sup>304</sup> The dialogic form of these prayers is quite similar to the Spiritualist messages that Rey and his group received from the spirit realm, even if the advice that the spirit dispenses is quite different.

Hurston's investigations go on to suggest the possibility that there was some earlier sympathy, if not syncretism, between these two ways of talking to the dead. Hurston became a disciple of Samuel Thompson, "a Catholic hoodoo doctor of New Orleans," and the informant who gave her the Laveau petitions and responses. During her ritual initiation she heard Thompson communicate with spirits:

I became conscious after a while of a minute rhythmic tremor that communicated itself to me through his hands on my head. He murmured in low syllables in some language very rapidly. A violent retching of his body all but threw me from the chair. He held still and stood silent for a minute listening. Then he answered : 'Yeah, I goin' tell her. Yeah, I tell her all you say--yeah, unhunh, yeah.' To me he said, 'Sit there before the altar. The spirits says be here on Thursday at eleven o'clock. Sit there until you feel to move, then go without saying a word.'<sup>305</sup>

We can see in this ritual the contributions of both Voodoo and Spiritualism. Thompson is both in the position of a medium and a possessed initiate. Like a participant in a Spiritualist circle he speaks with the "spirits," and like a Voodooist he is possessed by the spirit: "A violent retching of his body all but threw me from the chair." The ceremony that Hurston here describes preserves the ambiguous narrative position of the Spiritualist medium, and demonstrates how

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<sup>304</sup> Hurston 351.

<sup>305</sup> Hurston 358.

the possessed Voodoo initiate shares in this indeterminacy. Thompson speaks *as* the "spirits"--interestingly described as both plural and singular: "the spirits says"--and also speaks *to* them. Like the mimetic Creole poets of the previous century, he is speaking with a communal, plural voice.

The Haitian bourgeoisie, like most of the Atlantic world, was exposed to the mid-century explosion of Spiritualism, although scant evidence of Spiritualist activity in Haiti remains in the libraries and archives of Port-au-Prince. There appears to have been no Spiritualist journal published in Haiti, however mid-century newspapers do mention some Spiritualist activity.

The most comprehensive and tantalizing description of Haitian Spiritualism comes from the Haitian novelist Frédéric Marcelin. In his 1913 memoir *Au Gré du Souvenir*, Marcelin relates childhood memories of his maternal uncle, one Bell Guillobel, a well know medium and Spiritualist adept:

Très grand, très olivâtre, très beau, il était constamment vêtu de noir. Il s'occupait de sciences occultes, et surtout de magnétisme. Allain Kardec n'avait pas de secrets pour lui. Lui et son médium Célion étaient renommés non seulement à Port-au-Prince, mais dans l'île entière. On racontait des choses merveilleuses, des guérisons surprenantes de leur fait. Ils faisaient tourner et parler les tables. On écrivait sous leur dictée des ordonnances pour les malades abandonnés par leurs médecins, et qui guérissaient... Tout le monde voulait être traité par le magnétiseur Bell et son médium Célion. Ce fut une mode.<sup>306</sup>

Marcelin was born in or around 1848, which dates this childhood memory to the late 1850s or early 1860s, the heyday of Spiritualism.<sup>307</sup> If the example of Marcelin's uncle is emblematic of a larger Spiritualist movement among the Haitian bourgeoisie, then the state of Spiritualism in mid-century Haiti seems to be quite similar that of Louisiana at the same time. In nineteenth-

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<sup>306</sup> Frédéric Marcelin, *Au Gré du Souvenir* (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1913) 54-55. In his will Guillobel left the records and archives of this Spiritualist activity to Marcelin "pour le jour où je pourrais comprendre." Tragically, these papers were lost in a fire before Marcelin took possession of them (Marcelin 58).

<sup>307</sup> F. Raphaël Berrou and Pradel Pompilus, *Histoire de la Littérature Haïtienne, Illustrée Par Les Textes, Tome II* (Port-au-Prince: Éditions Caraïbes, 1975) 516.



century Haiti, as in Louisiana, the early Spiritualist movement seems to have resisted the voracious Creolizing appetite of Vodou, for the blending of Spiritualist *mediumnité* and folk-religious possession that occurred in early twentieth-century New Orleans and throughout the Caribbean (and likely occurred to some extent in Haiti) had not yet fully emerged.

While these Spiritualist activities piqued his curiosity, Marcelin was forbidden by his mother from visiting this uncle. However his mother's disdain for Spiritualism seems to have been based on religious objections not class considerations. As he reflects back on his childhood, Marcelin comments on Haiti's more well-known religious tradition, Vodou, and rejects it as outright fraud:

Je connais bien mon pays, j'y ai beaucoup voyagé. Eh! bien! j'affirme que, à part quelques exceptions, le fétichisme n'est autre chose qu'une exploitation à l'usage du voyageur crédule. Ce n'est plus une croyance. C'est une spéculation de bas étage. Nos papas-lois sont des saltimbanques, des montreurs d'ours ouvrant leur baraque, où il n'y a pas grande chose, pour quelques gourdes.<sup>308</sup>

Marcelin does not explicitly connect the two traditions, Spiritualism and Vodou, yet we see that they existed side by side in mid-century Haiti. While there was certainly class-based antipathy towards Vodou that might not have existed for the more cosmopolitan bourgeois religion Spiritualism, we might nonetheless see that Haiti was very fertile ground for the Spiritualist movement. On a ritual level, the practice of contacting the spirits through a medium and the practice of ritual "possession" are very similar. Haitian Vodou is voraciously syncretistic, and it seems likely that the great enthusiasm for Spiritualism, like the Catholic and Masonic traditions that preceded it, was quickly absorbed into the West African Vodou religious practices.

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<sup>308</sup> Berrou and Pompilus 15. On his father's side, Marcelin had connections to revolutionary heroes: "La mère de mon père...était, dit-on, la soeur ou une des proches parentes de ce fameux Boisrond-Tonnerre qui mit dans la bouche de Dessalines" (Berrou and Pompilus 22).

As we examine the literature of nineteenth-century Haiti and its treatment of Vodou, we will thus be able to examine the ways that Vodou possession, like Spiritualist *mediumnité* in Louisiana, provides mimetic tools to Haitian literature. The mimetic Haitian writer, like the Spiritualist medium and the possessed Vodou initiate, speaks in a hybrid, communal voice that at once compromises his own subject position and builds a larger relational Creole community.

To write in a borrowed idiom and speak in a borrowed voice, as we saw in Louisiana's Afro-Creole poets and Spiritualists, is to dance on the slippery edges of identity. The Creole literature of nineteenth-century Louisiana and Haiti are similar in that they operate within the same mimetic paradigm. These writers became, like the bustling seaports they lived in, *entrepôts* of heterogeneous voices, living and dead. Using the conventions of monolithic Romantic subjectivity as cover, they gathered within themselves the disparate voices of the Atlantic world to speak as a communal chorus, and to articulate a relational, Creole identity.

Chapter Five:  
Creole Bovarism:  
Jean Price-Mars, Vodou, and Mimetic Culture

Parler, c'est être à même d'employer une certaine syntaxe, posséder la morphologie de telle ou telle langue, mais c'est surtout assumer une culture, supporter le poids d'une civilisation.

Franz Fanon. Peau noire, Masques Blancs (1952) <sup>309</sup>

The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself. If it is not, then all art must fall by the blow that strikes it down...He mimics for the love of it. The group of Negroes who slavishly imitate is small. The average Negro glories in his ways. The highly educated Negro the same. The self-despisement lies in the middle class who scorns to do or be anything Negro.

Zora Neale Hurston. "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) <sup>310</sup>

Frédéric Marcelin, who encountered both Spiritualism and Vodou in his native Haiti, was part of the larger pan-Caribbean Creole community that Rousseau described in the 1860s. Like many young bourgeois Creoles he traveled to Paris as a young man for a metropolitan education. In Paris, Marcelin made the acquaintance of another maternal uncle, the most famous writer of the New Orleans Creoles of Color:

Ma mère était française d'origine, son père était né à la Nouvelle-Orléans et avait conservé sa qualité de français. Un de ses frères fut Victor Séjour...Je ne le connus que plus tard, après la chute de Napoléon III. Il était à ce moment très vieilli, très las et très désabusé...Je dînais parfois avec Victor Séjour chez Brébant, alors le restaurateur des gens de lettres...Eh bien! de voir que les gens de lettres pouvaient avoir besoin au sens littéral du mot, à cette époque-là bien entendu, d'un restaurateur, me fit faire de grandes réflexions. Je considérai que j'étais sans talent aucun et je jetai résolument mes manuscrits au feu. Je revins dans ma petite île faire ma vie et vivre celle de mes concitoyens. J'eus des joies, j'eus des douleurs sans doute, mais les unes ou les autres moins factices, plus réelles, que celles d'un écrivain raté que j'aurais pu être. J'en remercie Victor Séjour. <sup>311</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Frantz Fanon, Peau noiree, masques blancs (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971) 13.

<sup>310</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," qtd in Henry Louis Gates, The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Criticism (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) 113.

<sup>311</sup> Marcelin 35-36.

However low his opinion of his uncle, there was nonetheless a certain awareness of his role as a Creole writer in exile from his home. Séjour's mediocrity was no doubt a function of the distance that he put between himself and his home. Marcelin, unlike his uncle, embraced his difference from metropolitan France and wrote in the Haitian idiom: "Je revins dans ma petite île faire ma vie et vivre celle de mes concitoyens." Séjour's plays were largely devoid of outward signs of his Creole origins, and his miserable state as a forgotten exile made him a cautionary tale for Marcelin, for Séjour was divorced from the source of his Creole difference and therefore doomed to obscurity.

Yet Marcelin's subsequent disavowal of Vodou seems to contradict his rejection of his uncle's exile in Paris. Marcelin's ambivalence about Haitian culture is symptomatic of a larger tension in Haitian letters: how can Haitians reject the empty imitation of French culture--what Jean-Price Mars called *Bovarysme Collectif*--without inadvertently recopying that very culture? To what extent can Haitians write in a purely indigenist idiom without being "saltimbanques" in a sideshow? Furthermore, does Vodou offer any narrative possibilities for complicating the mimetic dominance that French culture holds over Haiti's writers?

In New Orleans we saw how Spiritualist narrative techniques created a space for a Creole voice in the city. Yet Haiti's Romantic poets wrote under somewhat different conditions. Whereas in New Orleans free men of color sought to establish and maintain their social standing in an increasingly Anglophone-dominated city, Haitians were more concerned with maintaining their freedom from colonial rule. For two hundred years intellectuals in Haiti have zealously sought to establish an original Haitian voice and to preserve it from the persistent presence of metropolitan French influence in the country. In this way Haitians hope to avoid the insidious

identity-destroying urge to copy--famously described by Franz Fanon-- that often afflicts colonized countries.

In *Peau noire, Masques Blanc*, Fanon analyses the vicious mimetic circle that compels the colonized subject to imitate metropolitan culture. Not only do black men suffer the indignity of being looked down upon by the white world, they are also obliged to "démontrer aux Blancs coûte que coûte la richesse de leur pensée, l'égale puissance de leur esprit."<sup>312</sup> To be as good as the *Blanc*, the black man must become *Blanc*, at the expense of his own identity. On the level of language, for example, the ability to speak perfect Parisian French in Martinique confers a great amount of prestige upon whomever is speaking: "il faut faire attention à lui, c'est un quasi-Blanc. En France, on dit: parler comme un livre. En Martinique : parler comme un Blanc."<sup>313</sup> The urge to copy metropolitan culture corrupts the colonized psyche and results in a hollow and ultimately self-destructive cultural production.

Fanon's powerful analysis of colonial imitation emerges from a long tradition of writing about the mimetic tendencies of black literature in the Atlantic world. Eighteenth and nineteenth-century racisms often saw black literary production as unthinking, unoriginal imitation--as in David Hume's conclusion that the early black poet Francis Williams was nothing but "a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly."<sup>314</sup> Black writers themselves have long struggled over how to write with an original voice in a borrowed (or imposed) idiom. From W.E.B. DuBois's description of a black "double consciousness," to the negritude movement's quest for a positive identity and its disavowal of previous generations of black writing, and to recent examinations of the ways in which colonial power structures create (and are undermined by) their own imitators,

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<sup>312</sup> Fanon 7.

<sup>313</sup> Fanon 16.

<sup>314</sup> David Hume. "Of National Characters" qtd in Gates 113.

the uneasy link between imitation and identity has been a dominant theoretical and practical issue in black letters.

Haiti is no exception to this trend. Indeed, one way to read Haitian literary history is to trace each generation's denunciations of what it saw as the previous generation's shamefully imitative poems, plays, and novels. Each new group of Haitian writers calls for a revolutionary, anti-mimetic, purely Haitian literature, a pattern that Léon-François Hoffmann describes as follows:

Nous verrons que les générations successives d'écrivains haïtiens s'accusant de n'être que des imitateurs de leurs confrères métropolitains, ont proclamé la nécessité de forger une littérature <<authentiquement nationale,>> mais ont eu les plus grandes difficultés à en préciser concrètement les paramètres.<sup>315</sup>

In the guise of a revolutionary break with tradition, Haitian writers continually rejected what they saw as copied literature by purging the work of their literary forebearers from the Haitian canon. Each generation sees itself as uniquely positioned to finally cast off the shackles of French culture and to found a purely Haitian literature.<sup>316</sup> Yet these radical rejections of Haiti's literary past tend, more than anything, to bind this literary tradition together. There is a curious continuity in this persistent discontinuity. Each generation's rejection of Haitian literature is an homage to previous generations' rejections, and the most famous rejection of all--the preface to Jean Price-Mars's *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle*--provides the model and name for understanding the dynamics of this contentious tradition of contention: "bovarysme collectif." Price-Mars's purge of Haiti's literary history, I would argue, reveals the fault lines in the "indigenous" Haitian

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<sup>315</sup> Léon-François Hoffmann, *Littérature d'Haiti* (Vanves: EDICEF, 1995) 47.

<sup>316</sup> The intergenerational conflicts in Haiti, and other parts of the post-colonial world, do not necessarily conform to the intergenerational dynamics at play in European or American literary history. For example, Fanon's claim that to speak in the colonial world is to "assumer une culture, supporter le poids d'une civilisation" can indeed be understood as an anxiety of influence, but it is an anxiety that responds less to the influence of the Oedipal nuclear family than to the power structures of colonial discourse. (Fanon 13)

identity that he proposes and thus provides a model for reading Haiti's neglected nineteenth-century literature. Haiti's "copybook" poems, plays and novels, like those of nineteenth-century Louisiana, allowed writers to speak from their particular place in the Creole world with a syncretistic Creole voice.

### Haitian Bovarism

Fanon's examination of the mimetic colonized psyche was anticipated by the Haitian anthropologist Jean Price-Mars whose work analyzed the psychological and cultural pathology associated with colonial mimesis. As early as 1919 Price-Mars had diagnosed the Haitian elite as having "une manière de psychose plus ou moins avérée--la verbomanie."<sup>317</sup> Years of mindless recitation and memorization in Haitian schools had created an educated class of people unable to think for themselves and only capable of producing absurdly flowery prose and empty imitated verse. But it was in his 1929 *Ainsi parla l'oncle* that Price-Mars articulated his most famous denunciation of Haitian Francophilia. In the preface to his book-- an essay that became the manifesto for Haiti's twentieth-century indigenist movement and is a key text in Haitian literary history-- Price-Mars loudly declares a break with previous generations of Haitian writers, criticizing them for failing to create an independent Haitian consciousness in their work. In this way Price-Mars presaged the radical call for a black identity rooted in Africa that characterized the Negritude movement of Césaire, Senghor, and Damas.<sup>318</sup> Writing during the first American occupation of Haiti, Price-Mars looks to the African origins of Haitian folk culture and religion to provide a rooted understanding of the Haitian soul and a foundation for national independence. In spite of Haiti's successful revolution and its violent break with its slave-

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<sup>317</sup> Jean Price-Mars, La Vocation de L'Élite (Port-au-Prince: Imp. Edmond Chenet, 1919) 69.

<sup>318</sup> For more on Price-Mars as the founder of the Negritude movement, see: Ghislain Gouraige, "Haïti, source de la négritude." Littératures ultramarines de langue française (Naa'am: Sherbrooke, PQ, 1974) 58-67

holding, colonialist enemies, Haitians turned back to Europe, "le seul modèle qui s'offrit à leur intelligence," as they created the cultural and institutional life of their nation.<sup>319</sup> Haitians had yet to forge a separate national identity, Price-Mars argued, and successive generations of Haitian intellectuals remained dependant on the *metropole* for models of how to think and write. This copied culture left a void at the center of the nation's being and made it vulnerable to the growing hegemonic tendencies of Haiti's self-confident neighbor to the north:

Mais c'est bien cette curieuse démarche que la métaphysique de M. de Gaultier appelle un bovarysme collectif, c'est-à-dire la faculté que s'attribue une société de se concevoir autre qu'elle n'est. Attitude étrangement féconde si cette société trouve en elle-même les ressorts d'une activité créatrice qui la hausse au-dessus d'elle-même parce qu'alors la faculté de se concevoir autre qu'elle n'est devient un aiguillon, un moteur puissant qui la presse à culbuter les obstacles dans sa voie agressive et ascensionnelle. Démarche singulièrement dangereuse si cette société alourdie d'impedimenta, trébuche dans les ornières des imitations plates et serviles, parce qu'alors elle ne paraît pas apporter aucun tribut dans le jeu complexe des progrès humains et servira tôt ou tard du plus sûr prétexte aux nations impatientes d'extension territoriale, ambitieuses d'hégémonie pour la rayer de la carte du monde.<sup>320</sup>

In this passage Price-Mars levels his well-known and often-repeated criticism of Haitian culture's mimetic habits, calling it "bovarysme collectif," a term coined by French philosopher Jules de Gaultier in his 1902 book Le Bovarysme, essai sur le pouvoir d'imaginer. For Gaultier, *bovarysme* describes the ability to construct a sense of self from borrowed materials: "la faculté déparée à l'homme de se concevoir autrement qu'il n'est."<sup>321</sup> Gaultier reads the tendency of Emma Bovary and other Flaubertian characters to imitate certain idealized models (pulp romance for Emma Bovary; Romantic notions of love for Frédéric in L'Education Sentimentale) as examples of individuals who invent an identity out of material calqued from other sources. This counterfeit self-image plays a destructive role in the psychological life of the individual because

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<sup>319</sup> Jean Price-Mars, Ainsi parla l'oncle. (Port-au-Prince: Imprimeur II, 1998) xxxvii.

<sup>320</sup> Price-Mars, Ainsi parla, xxxvii-xxxviii.

<sup>321</sup> Jules de Gaultier, Bovarysm, tr. Gerald M. Spring (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970)4.



it draws him or her away from "hereditary tendency, natural disposition, gift or endowment, everything that natively determines the direction of an energy."<sup>322</sup> Gaultier then expands on this diagnosis of the individual bovarist, showing how larger social groups can be stricken by a "bovarysme collectif," the copying of one culture by another. This large scale imitation so deviates from the collective's natural, "hereditary" identity that it brings about in the culture "a lesser yield of the general activity, a depreciation of the collective energy, a less perfect production, an impotence and even a complete disintegration."<sup>323</sup>

Price-Mars recognized in Gaultier's "bovarysme collectif" the malady afflicting Haitian culture and threatening the very integrity and existence of the nation. According to Price-Mars, decades of mindless Francophilia on the part of the country's elite had suppressed Haiti's true cultural heritage. By trying to build a culture out of "des imitations plates et serviles," Haiti's writers and intellectuals had succeeded only in creating the hollow shell of a culture, a situation that left the Haitian people ignorant of their true roots and powerless to think of themselves as unique and separate from the rest of the world.<sup>324</sup> In Chapter VII of Ainsi Parla L'Oncle, Price-Mars surveys Haitian literature, looking for any redeeming non-bovarist moments. He sees the seeds of a folklore-based literary tradition in the turn of the century flowering of the Haitian novel, but for Price-Mars, nineteenth-century Haitian literary production remains a largely irredeemable non-tradition infected with the cancer of mimetic Francophilia.

To found a truly indigenous tradition, Price-Mars argues for a purging of the Haitian cannon. For example, he praises the writer Georges Sylvan's 1901 collection of Creole-language folktales Cric-Crac, for having accurately captured the rhythms of Haitian speech, but he does

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<sup>322</sup> Gaultier, 5.

<sup>323</sup> Gaultier, 51.

<sup>324</sup> Price-Mars, Ainsi parla, xxxviii.

not understand why Sylvain decided to translate La Fontaine's fables, when he might have relied solely on the rich Haitian folktale tradition.<sup>325</sup> For Price-Mars, the psychological and cultural problems brought on by this "bovarysme" are most visible in the country's literary production, but they also tend to accrue to the Haitian people as a whole, disrupting and displacing both individual and collective identities, and making Haiti "une société...autre qu'elle n'est."<sup>326</sup>

But in his essay Price-Mars only borrows half of the definition of the term bovarism. While Gaultier initially focuses on the potentially destructive side of bovarism, the later part of his book inverts this argument and exposes the positive potential of imitation, both for the individual and the collectivity. Linking imitation with the biological processes of evolution and natural selection, Gaultier concludes that bovarism is not a psychological and social defect but "the human faculty par excellence."<sup>327</sup> On the individual level, bovarism is simply another name for education and socialization, and it is an essential part of the development of any psyche. On the level of the collectivity, bovaric imitation allows a culture to fruitfully absorb foreign influences. Japan, for example, whose "extraordinary power of assimilation" has led it to great achievements, is contrasted with what Gaultier describes as the rigid, inflexible culture of China.<sup>328</sup> In Europe, the French imitation of the Italian Renaissance can be seen as another example of a positive "bovaric" transformation. However it is in the New World that the most striking examples of failed and successful cultural imitation are to be found:

America also offers us a similar and more significant example by the crushing of one race by another. The Indians, representatives of a primitive civilization, which has evolved very little and may be considered very close to the primordial state of every civilization, prove to be incapable of adaptation to the new modalities with which they come into contact. Owing to the fact of having remained for a long time under the yoke of

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<sup>325</sup> Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla*, 176.

<sup>326</sup> Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla*, xxxvii.

<sup>327</sup> Gaultier 136.

<sup>328</sup> Gaultier 135.

immutable customs, they have lost the power to vary. Contrariwise the Anglo-Saxons, Teutons, Latins and Celts who founded their dominion in these regions and who institute new experiences in them, all belong to a European group of an advanced civilization, but which have not ceased constantly transforming themselves.<sup>329</sup>

Gautier has here developed a theory of cultural and social hybridity or Creolization--albeit one that privileges the West--according to which a society's success can be judged by how well it accommodates the superiority of the invading European culture. We can thus begin to understand why Price-Mars misread Gautier, that is, why he stopped his own act of borrowing at the preliminary stage of Gautier's argument. Price-Mars considers only the pathological effects of bovarism and ignores Gautier's theory of successful mimesis because this theory is itself part of the European culture he hopes to shed. Said another way, bovarism seems to be a tendency native to the European mind, and while from a certain perspective it may have beneficial side effects, Price-Mars wants no part of it. Herein lies the power of Price-Mars's critique of Haitian culture, for in using Gautier's theory he is not only accusing Haiti of imitating France, he is also suggesting that it has imitated the very act of imitation. Inscribed within French culture is a model for imitation that Haitians have imitated, and the only way out of this vicious circle is the wholesale replacement of all things French with a resurrected indigenous culture.

And so Price-Mars offers a positive alternative, a rich and important study of Haiti's folk culture and religion. By examining his neglected African roots the Haitian writer might find an authentic voice, and the Haitian people might discover a national identity. But by so quickly asserting a rooted, positive basis for identity, Price-Mars has glossed over a problem implicit in the doubled nature of Haitian bovarism. For generations the Haitian writer has copied French modes of copying and is thus in the tricky position of being once removed from the European bovaryist. To modify Fanon's phrase, we might say that the Haitian bovaryist wants to "parler

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<sup>329</sup> Gautier 135-136.

comme un Blanc qui parle comme un livre"; in the mouth of the colonial imitator, the already mediated, copied language of the *Blanc*--"comme un livre"--is copied yet again. Price-Mars wants to lift the veil from the eyes of his fellow Haitians and show them the false nature of their Francophilia. But because the Haitian writer is outside the system of copying native to the *metropole*, because his is a doubled bovarism and his writing is doubly mediated, this lifted veil will reveal but another veil.

And so in his adoption of Gaultier's theory Price-Mars comes close to revealing the abyssal structure of all identities, for if Haitians have copied their inclination to copy, then certainly they have also copied their desire for an independent national identity. But Price-Mars backs away from this abyss. Instead of "decolonizing" Gaultier's entire argument by demonstrating how useful a theory of cultural hybridity and alterity might be in a post colonial setting (once it is stripped of its racist overtones), he chooses to engage only those ideas that admit the possibility, even the desirability, of rooted personal and collective identities. Price-Mars, it turns out, has engaged in a bovaric act himself. He, like the negritude movement that followed in his wake, copied the essentialist notion of cultural identity from the very European culture it was seeking to throw off. If Haitian culture is doubly indebted to French culture, then Price-Mars has re-doubled this debt with his project for an indigenous Haitian identity. In this way Haiti's bovarism and Price-Mars's anti-bovarism are similar strategies, and Price-Mars's attempt to resurrect an authentic, indigenous Haitian voice turns out to be modeled on the very European structures that he hopes to shed.

#### Bovarism and Cultural Hybridity

Price-Mars was not the first critic to describe the precarious nature of the Haitian writer's identity. In the 1850s Maxime Raybaud, a former French council to Haiti, wrote extensively

about the country to a French audience using the pen-name Gustave d'Alaux. In 1852 d'Alaux published a series of essays on Haitian literature in the Parisian Revue Des Deux Mondes entitled La Littérature des Nègres and La Littérature des Jaunes. The essays describe the literary achievements of Haiti's two castes with the strident racist paternalism typical of the era. D'Alaux's essays can be read as a positive, prescriptive description of the very same mimetic tendencies in Haitian literature that Price-Mars denounced 80 years later. When he writes about the "littérature des mœurs" that often appeared in Haitian newspapers, D'Alaux addresses the limits of this copying and reveals the precarious narrative poses that the Haitian bovarist must strike in regards to his audience, to his subject, and to himself:

Cette littérature a de nombreux obstacles à vaincre pour se faire jour en Haïti, et le principal de tous, c'est la proximité et l'abondance même des matériaux qui lui sont offerts. Dans ce pénible travail de fusion qui met, depuis un demi-siècle, aux prises la minorité presque française des sang-mêlés avec la prépondérance numérique des Africains, et les réminiscences nègres de ceux-ci avec d'incessantes et naïves contrefaçons de la civilisation européenne, tout doit être excentrique et fortement accentué; mais par cela seul que l'excentricité est ici la règle, le fait normal, elle frappe difficilement l'attention des écrivains qui vivent dans ce milieu, et surtout d'un public qui ne comprend pas de manière d'être différente de la sienne.<sup>330</sup>

At first glance this seems to be a rather simple argument: the elite *jaune* writer is "presque française," almost fully assimilated to French culture, but he is living in Haiti and is therefore confronted on a daily basis by such strong African cultural remnants--"les réminiscences nègres"--that he risks losing his valuable European voice. This is especially true when he must write about his own surroundings, for the stark difference inherent in Haiti's African culture has, in spite of his efforts to distance himself from it, remained part of his everyday experience.

D'Alaux expects the Haitian writer to behave like a European writer--to take advantage of his proximity to Haiti's culture by describing and policing its exotic difference. But the Haitian

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<sup>330</sup> Gustave d'Alaux, "La littérature jaune. II." Revue des Deux Mondes, 16 (1852) 1048.

*jaune* has only been able to engineer his own difference from his black neighbors because of his split or doubled nature. What he shares with the European and what allows him to speak with a borrowed European voice--and, indeed, what allows the European to cohere in himself-- is not an arsenal of positive cultural traits but rather a common difference from the African. Without "contrefaçons de la civilisation européenne," there would be no recognizable "civilization européenne" for the Haitian writer to copy. And so for d'Alaux, the Haitian writer's borrowed hunger for the exotic--which, in as much as he is writing as a European, he is trying to feed-- becomes satiated by a steady diet of folk-culture Africanisms. The sharp lines of his own difference become blurred in his mind. He has become too much like himself.

This problem of perspective is further complicated by the writer's audience--"un public qui ne comprend pas de manière d'être différente de la sienne." The Haitian reading public is, simply put, too Haitian. It has not been able to follow the bovarist writer who adopts a borrowed perspective to appreciate his own exoticism. The problem of his audience's alterity is especially acute when the Haitian writer talks about Vodou:

Dans le champ si fécond et si accidenté des croyances africaines, la moisson semble, au premier abord, beaucoup plus facile; la minorité lettrée, qui ne les partage que peu ou point, se trouve en effet placée, pour les observer, dans les mêmes conditions de perspective que le serait un voyageur d'Europe; mais ici autre empêchement. Bienveillant, l'écrivain craindrait d'encourir le soupçon de crédulité et par suite les railleries de ses lecteurs; car les lettrés du pays se croient tenus d'afficher entre eux des allures d'esprit fort. Sceptique, l'écrivain s'exposerait à un danger beaucoup plus sérieux, celui d'être tôt ou tard dénoncé aux susceptibilités des vaudoux, des *ghions* et des *saints*. Aussi les rares attaques que le feuilleton s'est permises de ce côté se sont-elles presque toujours limitées aux superstitions bourgeoises, à celles qui ne se lient pas intimement aux rites africains, et encore fait-il patte de velours. Tel journal, le plus hardi cependant des journaux haïtiens, devra recouvrir, par exemple, aux précautions oratoires de l'apologue pour insinuer que le vieux fer à cheval cloué à la porte de presque toutes les boutiques de Port-au-Prince n'est pas un talisman infailible.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> d'Alaux 1049.

Here we see the destructive side of cultural imitation that Price-Mars will later condemn. For d'Alaux, the only possible "perspective" is the European one, and the Haitian must perfect his bovarism so that he can be as startled by Haitian culture as a European traveler might be. The less he seems to know about his own culture, the better his description of it will be. Even when he can lay claim to such a voice, the Haitian writer finds himself in front of a hostile audience, further needing to establish and defend his own difference from that which he is describing. For d'Alaux, there is no question as to whether or not the writer will disavow Vodou; there is only the question of timing. Should he be an instant "tôt ou tard" in distancing himself from what he is writing about, his own relationship of difference with these Africanisms would be put into question, and his narrative position would crumble. And so the Haitian writer tends to steer clear of the dangerous topic and write only about bourgeois *moeurs* so as not to draw attention to the fragility of his borrowed European voice.

This avoidance of Africanisms in Haitian literature is at the heart of Price-Mars's critique, and he argues for a national identity rooted in Haiti's folk culture to stand in opposition to this bovarism. Thus in banishing the bovarist, Price-Mars has enacted a reversal of d'Alaux's argument. The exotic Africanisms from which d'Alaux's Haitian writer shrinks will become for Price-Mars the center of an identity. But Price-Mars's position turns out to be a close cousin to d'Alaux's, for they both share "les réminiscences nègres" as a tool of identity, negative or positive. The violence of d'Alaux's racist views turns round on Price-Mars as he tries to separate himself from it, for to "not copy" turns out to be much the same as copying.

In Peau noire, masques blancs, Fanon, like Price-Mars, struggles against this destructive colonial order by proposing a black consciousness to oppose the white dominance of the colonized psyche. For Fanon, the battle against the colonial situation will bring an end to the

destructive mimetic desire to become white by establishing a solid black pole to oppose the white world--to be as black as the white world is white. Fanon ends his book on a hopeful note, imagining a situation in which each side, black and white, from positions of equality, can engage in a Hegelian act of recognition: "Pourquoi tout simplement ne pas essayer de toucher l'autre, de sentir l'autre, de me révéler l'autre?"<sup>332</sup>

Thus Fanon and Price-Mars arrive at largely the same conclusion: in order to neutralize the destructive power of colonial mimesis, the black cultures of the world must establish their own identity and culture as a counterweight to the powerful mimetic pull of European culture. But in opposing colonial mimesis with a strident anti-mimesis, has Price-Mars truly escaped the bovarism that he so detests? How can the Haitian writer know that he is not copying French culture if he does not remain constantly aware of his difference from this culture? Furthermore, in establishing his own authentically indigenous culture, how can the Haitian writer be sure that he is not still in the service of the European tradition of exoticism? In other words, how can he be sure that his difference from European culture is not the very difference that defines that culture?

In his reading of Peau noire, masques blancs, Homi Bhabha de-emphasizes, even apologizes for Fanon's humanist turn at the end of the book. For Bhabha, the positive cultural and political program that Fanon advocates is a last-minute retreat from the complex interrelations of identity and difference that animate the book. Fanon's staging of a transcendent Hegelian recognition between equals represses his previous description of the related problems of mimesis and identity in the colonial world, problems that Bhabha describes as "post-Enlightenment man tethered to, *not* confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a

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<sup>332</sup> Fanon 188.



distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being."<sup>333</sup> Fanon conjures a black identity based on the model of European identity, but in the colonial world, as Fanon himself has demonstrated, neither of these categories remain intact: "Not Self and Other but the otherness of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity." <sup>334</sup>

Bhabha's reading of Fanon describes colonial identification as a process that continually splits any identity that it produces. Identity is not discovered by looking deep within, but is based on multiple and conflicting relations in a fluid field of difference. Identification is also a mimetic process in that it is founded on the "dream of the inversion of roles," the assumption that the place of the Other is available as a site to establish the self. But in moving to occupy the space of the Other, the colonial subject also hopes to keep one foot in the place where he began (or, rather, the place that emerges as a place of beginning vis-à-vis the mimetic move), and he is thus split in two by conflicting desires:

'Black skin, white masks' is not a neat division; it is a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once that makes it impossible for the devalued, insatiable *évolué*...to accept the colonizer's invitation to identity: 'You're a doctor, a writer, a student, you're *different*, you're one of *us*.' It is precisely in that ambivalent use of 'different' --to be different from those that are different makes you the same--that the Unconscious speaks of the form of otherness, the tethered shadow of deferral and displacement. <sup>335</sup>

Furthermore, in this economy of imitating self and other, exchange can only take place on the level of representation: "The demand of identification--that is to be *for* an Other--entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness."<sup>336</sup> Not only does the colonizer's invitation to identity split the colonized subject at the seams, but it is a invitation to partake of an image of identity that is itself split, that "bears the mark of splitting in the Other

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<sup>333</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 44.

<sup>334</sup> Bhabha 44.

<sup>335</sup> Bhabha 44-45.

<sup>336</sup> Bhabha 45.

place from which it comes."<sup>337</sup> For Fanon, who as a psychologist found himself tending to individual colonized egos, and as a political activist found himself speaking for various colonized collectives, the splitting of the colonial subject is the root cause of a wide variety of individual and societal pathologies. But Bhabha is less interested in mending split psyches than in discovering how this colonized psyche ever came to be recognized as whole to begin with. The colonial situation lays bare not only the constructed nature of the self, but also the power relations involved in all acts of identification.

Returning to Price-Mars' s and d'Alaux's similar descriptions of the imitating Haitian writer, we can see that Bhabha's (and Fanon's) understanding of the split colonial self gives us a vocabulary to better understand the complex and doubled relations of self and other at work in Haitian bovarism. D'Alaux extends his hand to the Haitian writer, inviting him to step over to the European perspective, to be united in the "difference from those who are different." Yet the Haitian writer cannot fully occupy this European voice, as evidenced by his inability to describe himself and his country--his bovarism. The writer is both split and doubled; keeping a foot in both worlds, he is unable to perform the acrobatic feat of looking at himself as the very Other that makes him different from himself. Rather than describe the "exotic" aspects of his own culture, the Haitian writer will prefer to write about bourgeois banalities. It is at this point of intense difference that we see the split in the bovarist's position, for he is able to enjoy what d'Alaux called "*les mêmes conditions de perspective que le serait un voyageur d'Europe* " only until he confronts the colonial Other in himself. To describe a Vodou ceremony would be to fully split apart the bovarist's already cracked subjectivity; his writing therefore demonstrates the fear of this splitting in its silences. And yet it is in avoiding any discussion of this difference that he

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<sup>337</sup> Bhabha 45.

betrays just how close he is to Haitian culture, and how far he remains from the metropolitan perspective.

Price-Mars recognizes the impossibility of this narrative position, and sees in such bovarism a paralyzing and destructive force. He would prefer that the Haitian writer abandon his mimetic outpost in the European voice and return to speak in the fullness and presence of his indigenous self. But, as Bhabha suggests, this indigenous self is also split and doubled. Price-Mars has extended a counter-invitation. He has suggested that the Haitian return to a full identification with his own people. But this self, in as much as it is born of the original desire to copy the *Blanc*, is unavailable as a space in which to stage a unified presence. As Bhabha suggests, all identification must partake of the "differentiating order of otherness." All identities in the colonial situation, whether colonist or colonized, are transient and irreducible, and can only be provisionally located by the trace that they leave behind.

Towards the end of his essay Price-Mars hints at the ultimate impossibility of the pure indigenous narrative position when he is forced to describe Haitian culture *in relief*, as the trace of its presence:

Nous nous permettrons d'objecter cependant que ni l'exiguïté de notre territoire, ni la faiblesse numérique de notre peuple ne sont motifs suffisants pour que les problèmes qui mettent en cause le comportement d'un groupe d'hommes soient indifférents au reste de l'humanité. En outre, notre présence sur un point de cet archipel américain que nous avons "humanisé," la trouée que nous avons faite dans le processus des événements historiques pour agripper notre place parmi les hommes, *notre façon d'utiliser les lois de l'imitation pour essayer de nous faire une âme d'emprunt, la déviation pathologique que nous avons infligée au bovarysme des collectivités en nous concevant autres que nous ne sommes*, l'incertitude tragique qu'une telle démarche imprime à notre évolution au moment où les impérialismes de tous ordres camouflent leur convoitises sous des dehors de philanthropie, *tout cela donne un certain relief à l'existence de la communauté haïtienne* et, devant que la nuit vienne, il n'est pas inutile de recueillir les faits de notre vie sociale, de fixer les gestes, les attitudes de notre peuple, si humble soit-il, de les comparer à ceux d'autres peuples, de scruter leurs origines et de les situer dans la vie

générale de l'homme sur la planète. Ils sont des témoins dont la déposition ne peut-être négligeable pour juger la valeur d'une partie de l'espèce humaine.<sup>338</sup>

In spite of the fact that he has denounced Haiti's "bovarysme collectif," this cultural trait turns out to be useful to Price-Mars, for in as much as it is "collectif" it has suggested the outlines of what a "communauté haïtienne" could be. Similarly the "âme d'emprunt" that Haiti has manufactured for itself can serve as a model for how Haitians might now create an indigenous soul. Price-Mars does not, as we might expect, posit a self-evident, fully-formed and natural Haitian identity that will emerge from the shadows when Haitian writers stop their incessant Francophilic copying, for it is only in relation to the copied culture that he can even begin to imagine an independent Haitian cultural identity.

And so Price-Mars's revolutionary manifesto ends with a rather modest proposal. He calls for the writer to do the work of salvaging an identity from this copied culture--"recueillir... fixer... comparer... scruter... situer". The Haitian writer must not simply renounce his bovarism--his ability to conceive of himself other than he is--he must actively create another identity out of this persistent alterity. The indigenist position is, like all identifications, based on its difference from an Other, and the fact that Price-Mars has chosen for this Other the already split and slippery figure of the bovarist further confirms Bhabha's observation about the continual splitting and doubling involved in colonial identification. The indigenist will know himself by his anti-bovarism, his difference from the model of copying that he is no longer copying. This is not to say he cannot mine the rich material of Haitian folk-culture to invent new ways of expressing himself, but in the end the criteria for his authenticity will be how little he behaves like Emma Bovary.

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<sup>338</sup> Price-Mars, Ainsi parla, 1 [Emphasis mine].

And so at the end of his manifesto, Price-Mars finds himself backed into a corner by his own belief in the possibility of an indigenist identity, for any attempt to found an independent rooted culture will inevitably discover that it is, on some level, calquing the very culture that it intends to escape. Price-Mars has mounted a resistance that is native to the very system it intends to resist. He has been seduced by what Edouard Glissant calls "le pire des avatars," the sterilized model of resistance that the dominant colonial discourse covertly offers to those that it dominates. In Le Discours Antillais, Glissant analyses the Caribbean "pulsion mimétique," starting, like Bhabha, from Fanon's description of mimesis as a violent force at work in the colonial space. For Glissant, the dominant culture not only works towards the destruction and denigration of ancient cultural structures--"le rituel, la vérité de son être"-- it also slyly offers itself as a model for both emulation and resistance to emulation:

Ensuite...le mode du changement (la domination d'un Autre) favorise quelquefois la pratique d'approximation ou la tendance à la dérision, en introduisant dans les rapports nouveaux l'insidieuse promesse de se constituer en l'Autre, l'illusion d'une mimésis réussie. Par quoi la seule pulsion d'universel prévaudra de manière vide. Enfin parce que la domination (favorisée par la dispersion et le transborde) enfante le pire des avatars, qui est qu'elle fournit elle-même des modèles de résistance à la mainmise qu'elle-même met en oeuvre, court-circuitant ainsi la résistance tout en favorisant. Par quoi des techniques évidées entretiendront l'illusion d'un universel dépassant. Le peuple transbordé lutte contre tout cela.<sup>339</sup>

Glissant here acknowledges a debt to Price-Mars's "bovarysme collectif" when he echoes Gaultier's definition of mimetic culture: "l'insidieuse promesse de se constituer en l'Autre." Yet in Glissant formulation both the mimetic impulse, and the strident anti-mimetic reaction against this impulse, are part of the same destructive colonialist imperative. The harder he tries, the more Price-Mars's anti-bovarism will fail to effect a separation from France, for to oppose the mimetic with its opposite is to participate in the violence that the mimetic gesture itself has initiated:

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<sup>339</sup> Edouard Glissant, Le Discours Antillais (Paris: Seuil, 1981) 28-29.

"L'extrême violence antimimétique provient de la même poussée qui imposa le viol mimétissant."<sup>340</sup> Anti-bovarism, in that it is the pure opposite of bovarism and therefore partakes of the same essentialist, identitarian paradigm, turns out to lead right back to the violent bovarist discourse that it originally sought to escape.

Although they have developed different vocabularies to describe the structures of colonial discourse, Glissant and Bhabha both see colonial mimesis and the anti-mimetic reaction against it as two sides of the same coin. Glissant describes a three-fold colonial mechanism: destroy, offer models for imitation, and secretly offer defective models for resistance. This system derives its power from its ability to short circuit any meaningful resistance, for the mechanism itself furnishes a prototype for direct resistance that, once enacted, malfunctions and leads back to the hierarchical identitarian metaphysics of presence that favors the *Blanc*. The way out of this identitarian trap, according to Glissant, is to affirm the hybridity of the colonial situation and to embrace the provisional, rootless nature of any colonial identity: "la parade la plus sûre à la néantisation mimétique est l'entrée en *Relation*."<sup>341</sup> Resistance to bovarism in Haiti might begin not with a violent attack against Francophilic culture, but by fighting around it, ridiculing it, polluting it, mispronouncing it, and transforming it--strategies of resistance that Glissant names "détour."

Bhabha's understanding of colonial mimesis follows from his description of the split colonial subject. In order to spread and maintain its dominance, the colonial discourse produces colonial subjects filled with the desire to imitate metropolitan culture. Yet this imitation is not designed to succeed, for in as much as colonial authority is based on difference, the copying colonial subject must continue to carry the mark of this difference. Bhabha names this failed

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<sup>340</sup> Glissant, *Le Discours*, 64, n22.

<sup>341</sup> Glissant, *Le Discours*, 64, n22.

colonial copying "mimicry,"<sup>342</sup> a "complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power."<sup>343</sup> Colonial discourse produces mimics to represent and police the lines of difference that enable this discourse to maintain its position of power. Mimicry also works to defuse the danger inherent in the Other by encouraging this Other to translate itself into the dominant discourse: "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*."<sup>344</sup>

But Bhabha also recognizes the subversive potential of this colonialist mechanism; "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace," for the mimic can work to undermine the very colonial order that he was produced to reinforce.<sup>345</sup> When this familiar Other turns round on the colonial discourse that produced him, he does not see a unified, monolithic subjectivity, but a figure that is as split and partial as he is. By speaking from a place of ambiguous and doubled subjectivity, the mimic reveals the split nature of all subjectivity, "[for] the look of surveillance returns as the displacing gaze of the disciplined."<sup>346</sup> For Bhabha the mimetic and the anti-mimetic are different aspects of the same gesture, and resistance to the colonial order lies not in erecting another alternative presence or identity (*négritude*), but in pointing out the abyss over which all identitarian structures are built:

Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask: it is not what Césaire describes as 'colonization-thingification' behind which there stands the essence of the

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<sup>342</sup> It is a "failed" copy only in as much as it constitutes a refusal to conform to the colonialist structures that commissioned the copy to begin with: "What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a *writing*, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable." (Bhabha 87-88).

<sup>343</sup> Bhabha 86.

<sup>344</sup> Bhabha 86.

<sup>345</sup> Bhabha 86.

<sup>346</sup> Bhabha 89.

*présence Africaine*. The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority."<sup>347</sup>

Thus for Bhabha the removal of the "masque blanc" does not reveal a suppressed essential identity, it reveals another mask, which in turn leads to the revelation that all identification is a play of masks. The mimic's power lies in his own split subjectivity, for in speaking as both self and other (speaking with what Bhabha calls the "forked-tongue" of colonial discourse) he threatens the entire colonial structure of identity and alterity.<sup>348</sup>

We can recognize in the figure of Bhabha's "mimic" a strategic similarity to Glissant's *détour* in that they both resist the colonial order indirectly. Glissant's *détour* is a devious strategy of resistance that does not push back against the violence of colonial discourse but rather undermines the very conditions that give it its power. For Bhabha and Glissant, mimetic discourse can be subversive, not in its overt agenda to replace the *Blanc* as the model to be copied, but rather in its hidden ability to reveal the impossibility of, and the power relations inherent in, the promise of a "successful" imitation. The copy resists only in as much as it fails, only in as much as it remains the "almost the same but not quite," for if the goal is the *Blanc's* powerful illusion of full ontological presence, then the "not quite" of the faulty copy reveals the cracks and fissures in the *Blanc's* presence. The unstable, doubled voice of the colonial imitator undermines the singular presence of the model by mis-copying it, a trope that Bhabha names "the metonymy of presence"--"a strategic confusion of the metaphoric and metonymic axes of the cultural production of meaning."<sup>349</sup> Like Glissant's *détour*, this is a sly, disruptive move on the part of the imitator that undermines the structures of colonial representation.

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<sup>347</sup> Bhabha 88.

<sup>348</sup> Bhabha 85.

<sup>349</sup> Bhabha 90.



Returning to the long passage from *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle* quoted above, we see that Price-Mars finds himself at the end of his essay invoking the very bovarist culture that he hopes to escape. His stated purpose is to found an indigenous culture, but he can only begin by situating such a culture in its negative *relation* to that which he has just disavowed. Haiti's copied culture at least demonstrates that the country can act in a collective manner. But in a final, puzzling description of bovarism, Price-Mars's stumbles upon a way out of the identitarian corner into which he has painted himself. For Price-Mars, as I noted above, the possibility of an indigenous cultural renaissance is revealed in the very fact of Haiti's cultural Bovarism, which he describes as follows: "notre façon d'utiliser les lois de l'imitation pour essayer de nous faire une âme d'emprunt, la déviation pathologique que nous avons infligée au bovarism des collectivités en nous concevant autres que nous ne sommes." <sup>350</sup>

What, exactly, has this convoluted clause described? Although we have a general idea of what Price-Mars's argument requires at this moment, there is no satisfactory way to read this passage in the context of his argument. Is Price-Mars really saying that Haitians have diverged in some pathological way from their own bovarism? In conceiving of themselves other than they are--bovarism-- have Haitians become different from their own bovarist selves? And who is the "nous" in this circular definition? The famous opening line of the essay begins with an authorial "nous" --"Nous avons longtemps nourri l'ambition de reveler aux yeux du peuple haïtien la valeur de son folk-lore"---and here in the final paragraph Price-Mars returns to this same *nous*. But he quickly expands his voice to speak for Haiti as a collective, a "notre" of the Haitian people: "Nous nous permettrons d'objecter...notre territoire...notre peuple...notre présence...notre place...notre façon." Yet in the final description of bovarism there seems to be a

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<sup>350</sup> Price-Mars, Ainsi parla, 1.

separation of the "nous" and the Haitian "collectivités," as if the collective identity that Price-Mars is proposing has suddenly come unglued. There is an abundance of difference in this passage--"déviation pathologique," "autres," "bovarysme"-- but there is nothing to be different *from*, nothing to give this difference any conceptual traction.

Coming at the end of a rather straightforward and transparently argued essay, this passage stands out because it fails to conform to the rhetorical and linguistic conventions that Price-Mars has engaged in the essay. The passage is opaque, to use Glissant's term, in as much as it clouds over at the very instant it is describing the corruption of self and other. For Glissant, the "opacité" found in Caribbean discourse is an ethically indispensable folk-remedy for the contagion of cultural imperialism. To demand transparent communication is to perpetuate the violent colonial distillation of difference to acceptable forms already inscribed within the very structures of dominance: "Pour pouvoir te <<comprendre>> et donc t'accepter, il me faut ramener ton épaisseur à ce barème idéal qui me fournit motif à comparaisons et peut-être à jugements. Il me faut réduire."<sup>351</sup> To read the Other's difference as difference, on the other hand, is not to reduce that Other to your own frame of reference but rather to see and accept this difference as a sign of the ultimate irreducibility of the Other:

Accepter les différences, c'est bien sûr bouleverser la hiérarchie du barème. Je <<comprends>> ta différence, c'est-à-dire que je le mets en rapport, sans hiérarchiser, avec ma norme. Je t'admets à existence, dans mon système. Je te crée une nouvelle fois.-- Mais peut-être nous faut-il en finir avec l'idée même du barème. Commuer toute réduction.<sup>352</sup>

More than simple tolerance, this reading of the Other founds a relational community. To understand the Other's difference is to allow the Other's alterity to live unmolested within one's self and to admit one's own ultimate irreducibility. Self and Other still remain operative

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<sup>351</sup> Edouard Glissant, Poétique de la Relation (Paris, Gallimard, 1990) 204.

<sup>352</sup> Glissant, Poétique, 204.

categories, but their roots have been cut and their power diminished: "Pensée de soi et pensée de l'autre y deviennent caduques dans leur dualité"<sup>353</sup> Identity and alterity become provisional, interpenetrating states of becoming, not foundational categories of being.

In this way the opacity of Price-Mars's utterance ends up threatening the rigid categories of self and other that he is describing: "la déviation pathologique que nous avons infligée au bovarysme des collectivités en nous concevant autres que nous ne sommes." This is a prescription for a double dose of deviation, one to help read the difference of the other, a second to see the difference in the self. Whatever else it might mean, this opaque passage also suggests that the way to escape the identitarian trap is to confront the promises of mimesis (bovarism) and the promises of its opposite and twin (anti-bovarism), with the menacing, disrupting assertion of a middling, impure alterity. To read the bovarism of the other is to admit the bovarism of the self.

This strategy disrupts the self-effacing violence of bovarism with further self-effacement: "en nous concevant autres que nous ne sommes." Rather than a strict anti-bovarist indigenism, the Haitian writer might enact a failed bovarism, a copied culture that misses the mark in important ways, an imitation that plays on the slippery border between Self and Other and thereby reveals the false identitarian promise of both the copy and the anti-copy. By embracing opacity as a cultural tool, the Haitian writer can disrupt the power relations at play in both d'Alaux's mimetic invitation and Price-Mars's anti-mimetic manifesto. In this way bovarism turns round on its author, the incidious mimetic promise of metropolitan culture; it becomes a pathological agent, a copy that effects a certain surface resemblance (metonymy) but refuses to reproduce the essence of its model (metaphor). Such resistance reveals the decadence

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<sup>353</sup> Glissant, *Poétique*, 204.

("caducité") not only of the indigenist Haitian identity but also of the structures of full presence and identity that the colonialist discourse so nimbly deploys to its own advantage. He who can conceive of himself other than he is can better navigate a world of difference and relation.

And so perhaps Gaultier was on to something when he saw in the phenomenon of bovarism a promising cultural tool. As I mentioned above, in the second part of Bovarysme, Gaultier repeals his initial insistence on the viability of the rooted identity, claiming that it was merely a provisional position. He then builds on Nietzsche's critique of individuation, claiming that the very conditions necessary for a human to perceive the world, and the self in the world, necessitate a separation from that very self and world: "Therefore it is true that, under this hypothesis, each one of the attitudes of the self subsists and allows some reality to subsist with it, only in so far as it does not attain to an absolute reign, only in so far as it remains limited and defined by the existence of its contrary."<sup>354</sup> Identity is possible only in its relation to non-identity, and for an identity to exist it must remain in constant dialogue with that which it is not: "Now it is evident that each of these attitudes of the self, objective attitude, subjective attitude, as it perfects itself, idealizes itself and seeks to prevail, risks, by abolishing the contrary attitude, suppressing itself."<sup>355</sup> Therefore to establish and maintain an identity, one must identify an Other and fix or reduce this Other to a state of pure alterity. Gaultier does not propose subverting this arrangement, but rather suggests that by recognizing its structures the bovarist might better position himself in this play of Self and Other. For Gaultier, to produce a self by copying the Other is to have mastered the dynamics of the identitarian system.

With his word "la Relation," Glissant proposes to complicate the identitarian paradigm that we see in Gaultier's work. What if, he asks, given that self and other are in a relationship of

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<sup>354</sup> Gaultier 147.

<sup>355</sup> Gaultier 146.

mutual dependence, this relationship were to be based not on the usurpation of the one by the other, or the violent policing of the line between the two, but instead on a reciprocal recognition of the interpenetration of self and other:

Tout Autre est un citoyen, non plus un barbare. Ce qui est ici est ouvert, autant que ce là. Je ne saurais projeter de l'un à l'autre. L'ici-là est la trame, qui ne trame pas frontières. Le droit à l'opacité n'établirait pas l'autisme, il fonderait réellement la Relation, en libertés."<sup>356</sup>

This is not to be confused with Hegelian synthesis, for in Glissant's *Relation*, differences are not brought together but rather remain manifestly different. To engage in the *Relation* is to recognize the Other (and the Other in oneself) as being unavailable for assimilation or synthesis. It is to accept the radical openness of both Self and Other. If, as Gautier has suggested, Bovarism is a tool for the creation of a Self out of the Other, then I would propose to read Haitian bovarism and its Other, anti-bovarism, not for its slavish imitation, or its rejection thereof, but rather for the way that it tends to subvert the violence of this binary system. I shall be interested in discovering if Haitian bovarism points towards Glissant's *Relation*, if it allows the Other into the Self, while at the same time resisting the colonialist urge to reduce and destroy the threatening, middling alterity of this Other. I shall read for the moment when the act of copying-- "parler comme un Blanc..."-- becomes an act of mimicry, a copying that undermines the possibility of reduction and synthesis.

From this perspective, bovaric ventriloquism can be understood as an acknowledgement of one's own native alterity. To write as someone else, to import their language and their genres and make this difference part of yourself, is to dramatize the interpenetration of self and other that Glissant describes as "L'identité-relation". I would also suggest that Bhabha's description of the trope of mimetic resistance--"the metonymy of presence"-- turns on the very *opacity* of the

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<sup>356</sup> Glissant, *Poétique*, 204.

copy: "These instances of metonymy are the non-repressive productions of contradictory and multiple belief."<sup>357</sup> Thus the inability (or refusal) of the copy to produce itself as its model leaves both copy and model in a state of interpenetrating ontological instability--*la Relation*. The bovarist does not simply speak *like* his metropolitan model (metaphor), he speaks in a threatening, supplementary way that resists any efforts to assimilate the difference of either copier or model. And so while at first glance Bovarism seems to be a grave threat to Haitian identity, it might also work towards the accretion of a relational identity that further disarms the colonial identitarian régime.

This is not to say that all instances of bovarism work towards a relational identity. Indeed, the greatest threat to this rather fragile composite identity is the continued lack of good will on the part metropolitan culture--its persistent promising of a successful mimesis: "Lorsqu'une culture expressément composite, comme la martiniquaise, est touché par une autre (la française) qui <<entrait>> dans sa composition et continue de la déterminer, non pas avec radicalité mais par une érosion assimilatrice, la violence de la réaction est discontinue, incertaine d'elle-même."<sup>358</sup> To completely empty oneself in favor of a metropolitan selfhood is, to anticipate the next section, to be a soulless zombie. But there are other, less totalitarian models for allowing other voices to speak in one's own. There are other ways of copying that more closely resemble the relational patterns that Glissant and Bhabha have described. Bovarism can indeed be a way to enter into a community of difference, and to ritually rehearse the syncretistic nature of colonial identity.

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<sup>357</sup> Bhabha 51.

<sup>358</sup> Glissant, *Poétique*, 158.

## "[L]es agrégats de notre moi": Vodou Identity and the Hybrid Self

If he is to rediscover Haiti's lost African roots, Price-Mars must listen for the ancestral voices that have been drowned out by incessant bovarist chatter:

Et s'il est vrai que l'humanité est formée de plus de morts que de vivants, si les morts ne nous imposent pas seulement leur constitution physique, mais aussi le moule de notre pensée, voir *les agrégats de notre moi*, par quelle absurde gageure essaierait-on de dégager notre société haïtienne de ses origines raciales d'il y a quatre à cinq siècles.<sup>359</sup>

The indigenist Haitian writer must search deep within his soul to speak with the long-forgotten dead that he finds there. When Price-Mars throws out 120 years of Haitian literary history, he is purging the voices of his literary forebears to make room for other, suppressed forebearers. His anti-bovarist crusade is therefore a rather complicated two-part act of exorcism and conjuration; he must rid his people of their corrupt, copied literary heritage in order to clear the stage for more authentic ancestral voices. Price-Mars must be both an exorcist and a medium, and this proves to be a rather difficult task.

We have seen how Price-Mars's "indigenism," in as much as it is defined by its difference from bovarism, is indebted to that which it has expelled. Yet even when he operates within the borders of Haiti's folk-culture, Price-Mars is unable to listen to the many voices that together might make up Haiti's collective folk-identity--the "agrégats de notre moi." He cannot make the shift from exorcist to medium and he continues to silence the voices that that he hears. Price-Mars does not, for example, place much value in Haiti's Creole language. But we see this trend most clearly when he describes the Vodou initiate's crisis of possession.

Price-Mars's return to Haitian folk culture inevitably turned to Vodou, a tradition that, as Alfred Métraux's classic anthropological study Le Vaudou haïtien explains, itself provides a

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<sup>359</sup> Price-Mars, Ainsi parla, 102 [Emphasis mine].

model for the syncretistic accumulation of alterity within the individual. In Haitian Vodou, possession--and here one must remain aware of the value judgments and political overtones that haunt this term--is a form of ritual identity play:

...[S]on comportement lui est rigoureusement dicté par la tradition et, loin de chercher à s'exprimer lui-même, le possédé s'efforce de personnifier un être mythologique dont le caractère lui est, somme toute, étranger.<sup>360</sup>

The possessed Vodou initiate does not speak from a deep inner source, for the possessed individual "a cessé d'exister en tant que personne."<sup>361</sup> She opens her selfhood up as a stage upon which the traditional voices of gods appear and speak.

Métraux emphasizes the theatrical nature of Vodou possession, describing how the individual initiate can be better or worse at representing a particular diety:

Il peut, [l'adepte possédé] s'il le veut, se montrer bienveillant ou, au contraire, courroucé envers certaines personnes; mais il ne peut modifier les traits de caractère ou la physionomie du personnage divin qu'il incarne. D'aucuns réussissent mieux que d'autres à représenter tel ou tel dieu aux yeux de l'assistance. C'est pourquoi on entend dans les milieux vaudou des phrases de ce genre: <<Vous devriez la voir lorsqu'elle a Ezili en tête.>><sup>362</sup>

In this way, Haitian Vodou might be seen as a form of folk theater that draws on important cultural traditions. By speaking as a god, the possessed initiate is rehearsing the suppressed African traditions that Price-Mars seeks.

But instead of listening to the voices of the Vodou gods, Price-Mars analyses the psychopathology of possession:

Et le mécanisme de ce délire s'explicite par une exagération pathologique du langage intérieur, ce que M. Delacroix appelle une hyperendophasie. Dans son instabilité mentale, l'individu en proie d'une hallucination auditrice croit entendre une voix interne qui se substitue à ses propres facultés verbo-motrices.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Alfred Métraux, Le Vaudou haïtien (Paris: Gallimard, 1958) 119-120.

<sup>361</sup> Métraux 117.

<sup>362</sup> Métraux 113.

<sup>363</sup> Price-Mars, Ainsi parla, 123.



There is a striking similarity between this diagnosis and the earlier diagnosis of the Haitian elite's bovarism; both are forms of verbal delirium that undermine the narrative integrity of the speaking subject--"ses propres facultés verbo-motrice." This is not to say that Price-Mars values Vodou on the same level as Haiti's bovaric literature, for in as much as Vodou ceremonies are "manifestations de la conscience populaire," there can be little doubt as to their authenticity as a folk phenomena.<sup>364</sup> However Price-Mars has not shed the habits of the exorcist. Just as he defends Haiti from the tyranny of French culture, so too does he ward off the many voices of the Vodou pantheon with his rigorous psychological examination. Price-Mars's cultural analysis is a form of narrative exorcism, and the unified ego is a sacred icon that he raises to silence both the babble of bourgeois poets and the voices of the Vodou gods. He is proposing a return to African roots, yet his intolerance of these very African voices means that this return will simply repeat (or copy) the very same violence that purged the Africanisms in the first place.

If the Vodou initiate suffers from an "instabilité mentale," he is certainly not alone in his suffering. Indeed, as Bhabha has suggested, being split and unstable is a necessary condition of colonial subjectivity, and the fluid, unstable space of this split becomes the locus of a radical and

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<sup>364</sup> Price-Mars, *Ainsi parla*, 170. I am interested here in how Price-Mars fixes Vodou possession as a singular psychological phenomenon by distilling the many heterogeneous voices of Vodou possession into a single, observable object. But this should not be taken as negative judgment of his groundbreaking work. I want to be careful not to misrepresent the role that Price-Mars played in promoting the study of Haitian Vodou and of opening up a radically new way of thinking about culture in Haiti. In *Haiti: Couleurs, Croyance, Créole*, Léon-François Hoffmann describes the great risk that Price-Mars took in writing about Vodou and the profound effect that *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle* had on the intellectual and political scene in Haiti. Hoffmann describes how the Catholic Church's draconian <<campagne anti-superstitieuse>> of 1939-1942 was likely a reactionary backlash against the Haitian elite's growing nationalistic pride in Vodou. François Duvalier's Vodou-flavored totalitarianism may have also led Price-Mars, later in his career, to maintain that he never intended to valorize or promote Vodou, so much as make it a legitimate object of scientific study. (Léon-François Hoffmann *Haiti: Couleurs, Croyances, Créole* (Montréal et Port-au-Prince: CIDIHCA et Henri Deschamps, 1990) 183-197.

menacing alterity. For Price-Mars, who expects unity and presence in his speaking subjects, the Vodou initiate and the bovarist writer both seem to be suffering from a dangerous and destructive verbal delirium. Yet, in as much as the mimetic writer and the possessed initiate open themselves outward, allowing other voices to emerge from their mouths, they are engaged in a similar activity; they are both repositories of alterity engaged in a ritual performance of their own identity as difference.

From the perspective of Western metaphysics, the possessed individual is emptied out, only to be refilled with an invading identity. But this is not at all what happens in the Vodou ceremony. The Vodou initiate commonly understands the experience of possession as being "mounted" or "ridden" like a horse, an arrangement by which both the spirit and the initiate share the same physical and psychological space. Joan Dayan describes the phenomenon as a "ritual of knowing," the simultaneous rehearsal of an established role and loss of conscious control of the self within the role. The possessed individual imitates the familiar characteristics of the spirit--from her favorite foods and cigarettes to her physical tics and habits-- and is at the same time taken over by these very characteristics. Thus the relationship between spirit and host is fraught with an ambiguity that recalls and rehearses the violence of slavery and thereby subverts the colonialist dichotomy of possessor and possessed: "Whereas the zombi is the husk of the human emptied of substance--nothing more than a thing--the human "possessed" can satisfy needs and impulses, can open up to a plenitude possible only because of the ultimate nonidentity of the spirit and the spirit-possessed."<sup>365</sup>

And so while Vodou possession might indeed be incompatible with the requirements of a unified ego, Price-Mars has fundamentally misread the way that this disruption of the self

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<sup>365</sup> Joan Dayan, Haiti, History and the Gods. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 72.

happens: the voice of the spirit does not emerge from the initiate's "language intérieur," but rather forms part of a shared language and cultural heritage:

To conceive the image of the god in oneself is to be possessed. It is a deed of the most serious conception. Thought realizes itself in the imaging of the gods. A recurrent formation of consciousness and a conception realized within the limits of religious study, the experience of possession localizes and materializes what, for the uninitiated might remain abstract or vague. The discipline of mind and task of imagination are too often ignored in Western accounts of vodou.<sup>366</sup>

The Vodou initiate does not just accidentally become possessed; he works very hard at it. Price-Mars, like many other students of Haitian culture, has focused so closely on the integrity of the initiate's psychological integrity that he is blind to the active role that the initiate takes in first studying and then enacting the *lwa's* particular personality. He is consequently unable to see possession as a rehearsal of the long-remembered cultural unity that is the Vodou *lwa*. In this way the discontinuity of the individual ego opens up a space for the continuity of a collective memory. In Vodou ritual possession--and, I would argue, in bovarist literature--we find a particular form of ceremonial identity: a way of provisionally assembling within the individual a variety of heterogeneous elements, a chorus of voices that speak through one mouth. The mimetic work of writing in the voice of Lamartine or Victor Hugo, or of giving voice to Dambala or Erzulie, is possible because the split nature of colonial identification opens up a space for a plural identity. The Haitian bovarist stages a folkloric revue in his selfhood, and a succession of invited guests take center stage. We thus see in this literature an accretion of non-essential identitarian traits--Parisian French, Romantic sensibilities-- that cohere (often incongruously) within the voice of a single host personality. Bovaric subjectivity is a syncretistic subjectivity, and in spite of Price-Mars's exorcism, I would assert that the Haitian bovarist is not an empty zombie, but is filled, overfilled even, with a host of borrowed selves.

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<sup>366</sup> Dayan 72.

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It is at this point that we might see a connection between the Creole bovarism of Haiti and the larger cultural pattern that this study describes. We can see a strategic similarity between Price-Mars and Hugo in their identitarian ambitions, for they both invoke the powerful voices of the spirits only to silence these very voices the moment they threaten their monumental aspirations. Price-Mars wants to build a monumental Haitian identity out of the country's neglected folk-culture. Yet in order to found such an identity for his people, he must winnow the diverse elements of Haiti's Creole culture, an imperative that Derrida has called "l'hétérogénéité radicale et nécessaire d'un héritage, la différence sans opposition qui doit le marquer"<sup>367</sup> The identity that Price-Mars hopes to build must rise uninterrupted from the ruins of Haiti's history, and in doing so it must cohere strictly to itself and conform to the demands of its own full ontological presence. Thus we can see that when Hugo shifts from being an active Spiritualist to espousing loosely anti-Spiritualist positions, he has submitted to the same monumental identitarian agenda that Price-Mars advocates.

I would also point out that Price-Mars's critique of Haitian bovarism could just as easily apply to most of the Francophone literature of Louisiana. The copybook literature of Louisiana is a staging of the self in the space of the other, and vice versa. In this way the Spiritualist circles of Creole New Orleans were engaged in the same mimetic identitarian work as the city's literary circles, for they both provided a ceremonial framework in which the individual might use a borrowed voice and to cobble together a relational identity. The writer and the medium filled themselves up with imitated language and were thus able to insinuate themselves into the structures that their society denied them, while at the same time undermining these very

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<sup>367</sup> Derrida 40.

identitarian structures. In the role of a *surrogate*<sup>368</sup> of his absent or dead literary forebear, the Louisiana writer and medium allowed these dead to speak, and in doing so gave himself a voice as well.

We can thus recognize a similarity between the Spiritualist séance and the Vodou ceremony. Both allow the individual to upset the integrity of Self and Other by simultaneously occupying both of these positions. In this way the Vodou initiate and the Spiritualist medium share with the bovarist poet the ability to perform Self as Other. This mimetic subjectivity, like Spiritualist *meduimnit  * and Vodou possession, is part of a complex imitative mode of expression that emerged in the mid-century Atlantic world. In this way, Haiti and Louisiana share a similar, ritualized tradition of Creole copying.

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<sup>368</sup> Joseph Roach's performance-studies based model for cultural hybridity understands the continuity of certain popular cultural forms in the Atlantic world, specifically in Louisiana and London, as being a part of a cultural *surrogation*, in which certain roles live on after the cultural players that inaugurated them are dead. Like the understudy who steps in to replace the fallen actor. Revived in a different setting, sometimes in new places, these performances are inevitably different yet retain a ghostly, often forgotten, link to the original. (Joseph Roach. Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance (New York: Columbia UP, 1996).

Chapter Six:  
"Couté la libèrte": Haiti's Possessed Literature

Couté la libèrte li palé coeurs nous tous.  
Boukman<sup>369</sup>

The great irony of Price-Mars's rejection of Haitian bovarism comes into focus when we examine just what he has thrown out in his violent purge of one hundred years of Haitian culture. In one fell swoop he has eliminated a rich and varied body of literature, including a long tradition of doing exactly what he has done in Ainsi parla l'oncle: denouncing Haiti's copied culture and calling for an anti-mimetic, indigenous Haitian identity. To read Haiti's bovarist literature, or for that matter, its anti-bovarist literature, is to keep an account of the failure of the copy. The work of creating a Haitian literary tradition is done on the literary scrap heap, and each generation's revolution, in as much as it adds to the heap the previous generation's attempt to escape from the mimetic trap, creates a cultural continuity.

There is a danger in making this argument, for I am conferring the same legitimacy on Haiti's "copybook" literature and Haiti's folk-culture. This return to Haiti's bovarist literature should not be seen as a back-door way of re-imposing the colonial order on Haitian culture--an argument that might go something along the lines of this: "Haiti's culture is already a mixture of so many different traditions, why not just let the familiar aspects of French culture reemerge as the dominant flavor in the mix?"

Furthermore, because this reading focuses on the narrative complications of Vodou in the nineteenth-century literature of Haiti, it must heed the warning against re-imposing a colonial order on the various texts that we read. This inquiry into the interaction between Vodou ritual

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<sup>369</sup> quoted in Léon-François Hoffmann. "Histoire, Mythe et Idéologie: La Cérémonie Du Bois-Caiman" Études créoles: culture, langue, société. 13.1 (1990) 18.

practice and literary mimesis must remain as indeterminate as the rituals it seeks to examine, as Joan Dayan makes a similar warning in her interrogation of Haitian history and culture:

In thinking about Vodoun we must inhabit--even if risking that fashionable postmodern device--an indeterminate place, not vague so much as very particularized in its many conversations. We must move to a middle ground where local and sometimes erratic gods summon and urge an insistent ideology or world of reference.<sup>370</sup>

The power relations of the colonial situation have everything to do with the way Haiti's hybrid culture has emerged, and my examination of Haitian hybridity will necessarily be centered on these power relations. Haiti's *bovarysme collectif* resists the urge to burn and destroy the past, an urge that is, in and of itself, part of the colonialist imperative. To avoid reading Haiti's nineteenth-century literature because it was unduly influenced by French culture is to unduly reinforce that same cultural imperialism. Haiti's pre-indigenist literature suffers from bovarism, but so does everything else, and if we prevent ourselves from reading this literary tradition then how can we ever determine if and when mimesis became mimicry, if and when the copy and the copier turned round on the model to show it just how imperfect and impure it really is?

Price-Mars's indigenist manifesto is but one in a long series of such manifestos which stretches back to the eve of the revolution and reaches forward to the recent "Creolist" manifesto "Éloge de la créolité," all of which echo Price-Mars's condemnation of bovarism in Haitian letters. In this way Price-Mars's revolutionary break with Haitian literary history is no less than a mimetic homage to this very history. I would thus propose a return to Haiti's bovarist literature that examines these texts not for their adherence to French models, nor for their rejections of these models, but rather both and neither. While I pay attention to the persistent "rhythmic" or

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<sup>370</sup> Joan Dayan. "Vodoun, or the Voice of the Gods," Sacred Possessions: Voodoo, Santeria, Obeah and the Caribbean, ed. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gibert (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1997) 16.

strategic similarity between these select moments in Haiti's rich literary history, this is in no way a totalizing attempt to reorganize this tradition. Furthermore, I choose here to focus on the treatment of Vodou in the nineteenth-century literature of Haiti, and I read for the multiple and irreducible identitarian ventriloquism in this work--a Creole reading for a Creole literature.

### Boukman's Repossessed *Serment*

In 1791 Boukman Dutty, a Vodou priest and one of the leaders of the first wave of slave uprisings in the North of Haiti, led a ceremony in the now-famous Bois-Caïman that launched the revolution and inspired slave revolutionaries to begin destroying plantations. Tradition holds that Boukman uttered the following Creole prayer at the culmination of the ceremony:

Bondié qui fait soleil, qui clairé nous en haut,  
Qui soulevé la mer, qui fait grondé l'orage,  
Bon dié la, zot tandé? caché dans youn nuage,  
Et la li gadé nous, li vouai tout ça blancs faits!  
Bon dié blancs mandé crime, et par nous vlé bienfêts  
Mais dié la qui si bon, ordonn nous vengeance;  
Li va conduit bras nous, li ba nous assistance,  
Jetté portrait dié blancs qui soif dlo dans gié nous,  
Couté la liberté li palé coeurs nous tous.<sup>371</sup>

This poem was first printed in Herard Dumesle's 1824 Voyage dans le nord d'Haïti. Dumesle, a Haitian who was eager to promote the cause of Haiti's continued independence, also included the following French version of the *serment*:

Ce Dieu qui du soleil alluma le flambeau,  
Qui soulève les mers et fait gronder l'orage  
Ce Dieu, n'en doutez pas, caché dans un nuage,  
Contemple ce pays, voit des blancs les forfaits;  
Leur culte engage au crime, et le nôtre aux bienfaits.  
Mais la bonté suprême ordonne la vengeance  
Et guidera nos bras; forts de son assistance,  
Foulons aux pieds l'idole avide de nos pleurs.  
Puissante Liberté viens...parle à tous les coeurs.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> quoted in Hoffmann, "Histoire, Mythe" 18.



In a 1990 article, the French scholar of Haitian literature Léon-François Hoffmann calls into question the historical accuracy of the Bois-Caïman ceremony. Hoffmann locates the origin of the story in Antoine Dalmas's anti-Haitian Histoire de la révolution de Saint-Domingue, published in 1814. He then traces the different manifestations of this myth as it was transformed from an ugly story meant to degrade the revolutionary slaves into an important foundation myth of the Haitian republic. Boukman's Creole *serment*, which remains an integral part of this myth, was most likely composed in French by Dumesle, and then translated into Creole, making this "le premier exemple de traduction en créole d'un poème français, et la première composition sérieuse dans cette langue"<sup>373</sup>

Hoffmann's controversial article, which has inspired a great deal of debate among Haitian scholars, raises important questions about the nature of Haitian copying.<sup>374</sup> As Hoffmann makes clear, even if the ceremony did not actually take place, the retelling of this story transmits an important historical truth. The story, which seems to capture the essence of the Revolution, has been liberated from its original racist context and incorporated into the Haitian national consciousness, for, as Joan Dayan asserts, "what matters is how necessary the story remains to Haitians who continue to construct their identity not only by turning to the revolution of 1791 but by seeking its origins in a service quite possibly imagined by those who disdain it."<sup>375</sup>

Dumesle's *serment*, which as Hoffmann points out is written in rather suspiciously French "alexandrins néo-classique," has also been folded into the myth, and has been widely understood to be the founding moment of the Revolution. The Creole version has been translated into several

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<sup>372</sup> Hoffmann "Histoire, Mythe" 18.

<sup>373</sup> Hoffmann "Histoire, Mythe" 19.

<sup>374</sup> See: "The Bois Caiman Ceremony: Fact or Myth." Bob Corbett's Haiti List. 3/2002, 6/23/2006. <http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/history/revolution/caiman.htm>.

<sup>375</sup> Dayan 29.

languages, and the most widely read version of the poem has been changed to reflect modern Haitian Creole orthography. Even if, as Hoffmann claims, Dumesle wrote the poem in French and then translated it into Creole, this Creole poem has taken possession of itself. Thus we can see in the muddled origins of this myth, and in the language of the poem itself, how the Haitian revolution began under the sign of possession.

The prayer begins by invoking a familiar god of creation: he who made the sun and causes the seas to rise and the storms to rumble. This god waits, hiding in the clouds, surveying all of humanity and taking special note of what the *Blancs* are doing. But the identity of this god is muddled in the ambiguous fifth line of the prayer: "Bon dié blancs mandé crime, et par nous vlé bienfêts" which can be variously translated as "God directs the whites to commit atrocities, while he asks us to do good works," or, more suggestively, "The god of the whites demands atrocities, while ours wants good works." The second of these translations conforms to Dumesle's French version--"Leur culte engage au crime, et le nôtre aux bienfaits"-- and assumes that the "Bon dié blancs" is different from the god of the Haitians. In this way Boukman is proposing not a different relationship with the god of the whites, but a different god altogether. But to choose either of these options is to close down the very possibilities that this god "speaks." Much more suggestive is the possibility that the "Bon dié blancs" is another aspect of the god that Boukman urges those at the ceremony to follow. There is more than one god here *and* there is a god that speaks in several different ways.

The last line launches the revolution by giving voice to this god: "Couté la liberté li palé coeurs nous tous." This too is a highly ambiguous line. Who or what is the antecedent to the singular, neuter pronoun "li," and how does this "li" speak? Dumesle's French version severely limits the rich ambiguity of the Creole: "Puissante Liberté viens...parle à tous les coeurs." Here

we are introduced to yet another diety, the allegorical "Liberté." But in the Creole version it makes more sense to read the "li" as referring to the god or gods of the previous lines: "Listen to the Liberty he [god] speaks [in/ through] all of our hearts." The absence of a preposition makes this a highly ambiguous divine utterance. The most literal reading makes god's speech constitutive of the human heart: "he speaks our hearts." In another sense, the god speaks *in* the hearts of these slaves, so that they need only listen to the divine call of liberty that naturally resides there. This liberty is reminiscent of the natural liberty of Rousseau and the French Revolutionaries who, no doubt, inspired at least in part the beginnings of the revolution.<sup>376</sup>

Finally, god speaks *through* their hearts, possessing them and using their bodies as instruments of his wrath, speaking what amounts to a supernatural liberty. He has ordered the slaves to take revenge--" Mais dié la qui si bon, ordonn nous vengeance "--and he will also control their actions as they destroy the slave economy that has so oppressed them: "Li va conduit bras nous." This god will speak "liberty" by possessing the revolutionaries' bodies. They will be free in as much as they offer themselves to his possessing presence. Furthermore, none of these possible translations are mutually exclusive, for it might be in opening themselves up to the possessing control of the god that the revolutionaries are able to manifest themselves as enlightenment individuals.

Thus the revolution is born in the indeterminate space between individual liberty and spirit possession. This *serment*, both in the language that it uses and in the history of its reception, is a repossessed poem about possession. Whichever came first, the French or the Creole, the Creole version has cleverly undermined not only the French version, but also the

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<sup>376</sup> We might side-step the rather thorny historical debate about the relative importance of the French Revolution to the slave uprisings in the North that began the Haitian revolution in earnest by pointing out that, in typical Creole fashion, the poem suggests multiple origins; "la liberté" is both an Enlightenment ideal and a value inspired by African traditions and gods.

original politics of the Bois-Caïman story. The poem's god possesses the revolutionaries in order to destroy the white god--"jetté portrait dié blancs qui soif dlo dans gié nous"--and in so doing he reclaims or repossesses the Bois-Caïman story for Haitian history. As Hoffmann points out, Dumesle's account of the "[d]élire prophétique" that gripped the ceremony participants was the first description of the Vodou "crise de possession" in Haitian letters.<sup>377</sup> It is also an early example of the poetics of possession that animates so much of Haiti's nineteenth-century literature.

### Boisrond Tonnerre's Phantom Revolution

Histories of Haitian literature often begin<sup>378</sup> with Boisrond-Tonnerre's two stirring January 1st, 1804, proclamations that declared the new nation's independence, named it "Haïti," and pledged its "haine éternelle à la France!"<sup>379</sup> Tonnerre convinced revolutionary general Jean-Jacques Dessalines to give him the job of writing these proclamations by telling him that whoever composed the speeches should use "la peau d'un blanc pour parchemin, son crâne pour

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<sup>377</sup> Hoffmann 17.

<sup>378</sup> To begin at the beginning hints at a mastery of Haitian literature that this study in no way claims. We begun here at the beginning only because it is a haunted beginning, and we are looking for ghosts. As we saw in the Hugo chapter, the work of erecting a foundation can often involve patching over huge cracks that threaten the entire structure, ghosts that, as Derrida has suggested, will return to menace the unity and presence that beginnings usually demand. I have begun at the beginning because Haiti, like *Hamlet*, "commençait déjà par le retour attendu du roi mort. Après la fin de l'histoire, l'esprit vient en revenant, il figure à la fois un mort qui revient et un fantôme dont le retour attendu se répète, encore et encore." (Derrida 32). French patrimony haunts the Haitian republic at its birth. The bovaric rhythms that I will describe in Haitian letters announce themselves in this repeating *revenance* : "encore et encore." However this is not a totalizing reading strategy; the ghosts will reappear *irregularly* in Haitian letters -- "polyrhythmically," to use Benito-Rojo's term--and my reading of Haiti's nineteenth-century canon is similarly syncopated.

<sup>379</sup> Christophe Ph. Charles, *Littérature Haïtienne. Tome I*. (Port-Au-Prince: Éditions Choucouné, 2001) 23.

écritoire, son sang pour encre et une baïonnette pour plume."<sup>380</sup> The longer of the declarations, a message to the Haitian troops signed by Dessalines, calls for the political and military destruction of the French in Haiti and urges Haitians to break the cultural binds that link them to their former masters: "...nos lois, nos moeurs, nos villes, toute porte encore l'empreinte française." <sup>381</sup> This proclamation, read to an assembly of soldiers in Gonaïves, was preceded by an extemporaneous speech in Creole by Dessalines himself. The speech was not recorded, but it was at this moment that he supposedly uttered his famous order to behead the thousands of remaining soldiers and colonists in Haiti and burn down their houses: "koupe tet, boule kay."

But Tonnerre's proclamation, which followed Dessaline's Creole speech, sinks under the weight of its own eloquence, for Tonnerre is calling for a final rupture with France in fluent Jacobin French. The irony of Tonnerre's proclamation--what Joan Dayan calls "the horror of ...a liberation that cannot be glorified except in the language of the former master"-- still resonates in Price-Mars' own declaration of independence.<sup>382</sup> Tonnerre is trapped by the doubled desire to be independent *from* France and to be as independent *as* France. He is trying to liberate Haiti "in a language that recalled Maximilien de Robespierre's speeches in 1792."<sup>383</sup>

Tonnerre's proclamation is further complicated by the ghosts that haunt it. Tonnerre is clear about the role that death must play in the rebirth of the nation: "Indépendance, ou la Mort!..."<sup>384</sup> The proclamation begins by invoking the shade of an idea that might now truly make itself present:

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<sup>380</sup> Quoted in Maximilien Laroche, La Littérature Haïtienne. identité, langue, réalité (Port-au-Prince: Les Éditions Mémoire, 1999) 49.

<sup>381</sup> Boisrond Tonnerre, "Liberté ou la mort" Littérature Haïtienne. Tome I. ed. Christophe Ph. Charles (Port-au-Prince: Editions Choucounne, 2001) 22.

<sup>382</sup> Dayan 4.

<sup>383</sup> Dayan 4.

<sup>384</sup> Tonnerre 22.

Citoyens,  
Ce n'est pas assez d'avoir expulsé de votre pays les barbares qui l'ont ensanglanté depuis deux siècles. Ce n'est pas assez d'avoir mis un frein aux factions toujours renaissantes qui se jouaient tour à tour du fantôme de liberté que la France exposait à vos yeux.<sup>385</sup>

Recalling Boukman's *serment*, we see here the French colonial presence in Haiti had been accompanied by a similarly ambiguous "fantôme de liberté." To expel once and for all these phoenix-like barbarians--"factions toujours renaissantes"--would enable this ghostly idea to be reborn. Before Tonnerre declared Haiti's independence he summoned an audience of both the living heroes of the revolution and the recent dead:

Citoyens, mes compatriotes, j'ai rassemblé dans ce jour solennel ces militaires courageux qui, à la veille de recueillir les derniers soupirs de la liberté, ont prodigué leur sang pour la sauver. Ces généraux qui ont guidé vos efforts contre la tyrannie n'ont point encore assez fait pour votre honneur.....le nom français lugubre encore nos contrées!<sup>386</sup>

To properly honor the war dead, this proclamation explicitly acknowledges that they are in the audience. In order to join them in their glory, the living must complete the work that these heroes began--"Songez qui vous avez voulu que vos restes reposassent au-près de ceux de vos pères, quand vous avez chassé la tyrannie. Descendrez-vous dans leurs tombes sans les avoir vengés? Non! leurs ossemens repousseraient les vôtres."<sup>387</sup> This work is explicitly the expulsion of "le nom français" which "lugubre"--or haunts, shadows over, the country. Honoring the Haitian ghosts means exorcising the French ghosts that still haunt the land.

In his essay "Violence et Langage," Maximilien Laroche argues that the neologism *lugubrer* betrays Tonnerre's impossible narrative position<sup>388</sup> By describing the menacing

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<sup>385</sup> Tonnerre 22.

<sup>386</sup> Tonnerre 22.

<sup>387</sup> Tonnerre 22.

<sup>388</sup> Tonnerre 22.

presence of this ambiguous "nom Français" with a newly coined verb, Tonnerre speaks as "un sujet exclu du langage":

Pour le rédacteur de l'acte d'indépendance, le Français (personne collective) était ainsi un monstre terrifiant et le nom (son ou parole) français, un son qui semait la terreur. Pourtant c'est dans les sons du français qu'il rédige sa proclamation. Il se condamnait ainsi, à son issu peut-être, à se terrifier lui-même puisqu'il s'imposait, en tant que sujet, cette terreur qu'il rejetait et qu'il identifiait au son français.<sup>389</sup>

By January 1804, the Haitian armies had defeated Napoleon's expeditionary force and won their freedom after years of fighting, but the lugubrious specter of the French still haunted the new republic. The *Blanc* may have been driven out, but he left his cultural and linguistic shadow behind for Haitians to copy. In order to guarantee their freedom, the Haitian revolutionaries had not only to kill the French, but also to kill off in themselves all things French. Yet Tonnerre calls for the death of the French and the extermination of their language and culture while occupying a position within the very "nom Français" that he hopes to exterminate. As the bearer of this message Tonnerre is, as Laroche goes on to say, "un bourreau de soi-même," for his purge of all things French will inevitably turn around to cut him down as well.

Laroche further suggests that Tonnerre's neologism is an inverted corollary to Aimée Césaire's revolutionary neologism "Négritude"; Tonnerre's word is an offensive, violent attempt to darken the *Blanc*, while Césaire's is a defensive, celebratory move that raises the status of blackness to match that of the *Blanc*. If "négritude" has succeeded in agitating for a black identity and "lugubrer" has fallen into obscurity, it is because Césaire's word is less revolutionary, that is, it deviates in a more predictable way from the metropolitan French language and French racism: "il était plus facile aux Français de voir des Noirs comme Blancs (négritude) que de se voir comme noirs (lugubrer), eux, Blancs et locuteurs d'une langue tenue

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<sup>389</sup> Laroche 49-50.

pour être le véhicule de la clarté ou raison, blanches forcément."<sup>390</sup> And so for Laroche, Tonnerre's utterance "lugubrer" marks the difference of the Creole language and is a trace of this language's absence in Tonnerre's proclamation. Had Tonnerre written in Creole to begin with, his distance from that which he was trying to destroy would have been well established and his narrative position would not have been so quickly undermined by his own call to arms.

Laroche's reading of Tonnerre's text reveals a narrative voice pulled in one direction by his mimetic use of French, and in another by his desire to destroy the conditions of this imitation. It is an impossible position from which to write, and it frustrates any attempt to found a Haitian identity as such. But we might also see in Tonnerre's word "lugubrer" the shadow of a solution to this mimetic problem. Tonnerre, who pledged to turn the many French cadavers laying about into writing implements, has enacted a similar transformation in his use of the French language, and in so doing he covertly suggests a new tactic in the battle for Haitian independence.

On the surface of Tonnerre's proclamation we can see the mimetic nature of the Haitian strategy: the Haitian armies will defeat the French by copying them at the same time that they kill them; where once the French ruled, now the Haitians will rule; they will eliminate every Frenchman and so will be able to occupy the fullness of French presence in Haiti with their own presence; and they will match and imitate, blow for blow, the moves of their opponent. But in one brief, improvisational moment, Tonnerre fails to parry his opponent's blow. Instead he attacks where his opponent is not, or, rather, he attacks where his opponent is only partially present, where he used to be--his lugubrious shadow. Tonnerre jabs at an opponent that is not fully there, and his quixotic, poorly-aimed blow, fails to strike the Frenchman. But in so failing it opens up an entirely new tactical approach to resisting French domination by recreating his opponent as a

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<sup>390</sup> Laroche 110.



phantom. Just as spilled French blood becomes ink to darken Tonnerre's newly stretched pages of Gallic vellum, so too does this newly conjured opponent "lugubre"--darken, cloud, pollute, echo in, haunt --the Haitian countryside. Tonnerre's word announces the partial and incomplete presence of the French. Where once he was fighting a menacing French soldier, now he faces the butchered cadaver of French presence, a Frenchman who is no longer the glowing white beacon of full ontological presence, but its shadowy, darkened ghost.

In uttering his neologism, Tonnerre resists the mimetic compulsion, not with a revolutionary anti-mimetism, but with a sly, deviating move that undermines the very foundation of the mimetic/anti-mimetic paradigm. In spite of his impossible position, there is the trace of the fleeing self, the imitating voice that responds as the "almost the same but not quite." Tonnerre is violently torn asunder, split between his revolutionary duties and the language in which he writes. But in the very space of this split, at the indeterminate moment of self and other, we encounter a ghost, a word that simultaneously describes the absence and presence of the French. This ghost performs the absence and presence of the speaking subject, and it mourns for the lost subject, by memorializing his former (or announcing his future) presence.

To occupy the place of the French *ghost* might well be the best way to dodge the mimetic, identitarian mines that the French laid down as they fled the island. By naming this ghost, Tonnerre has, in effect, conjured it into an uneasy presence in himself. Like the Vodou initiate, he names, calls out to, and is occupied by this French ghost. Tonnerre is indeed "un bourreau de soi-même," but in the space of the mortal wound that he gives himself he is able to stage a masterful ventriloquist act; by opening himself up to the ghosts of the French, he is able to usurp their voices and announce their defeat in their very own language.

He is thus possessed by the French and their language, but in slyly submitting to this possession he undermines the power of his oppressor. Just as the Vodou ceremony rehearses and reinforces the nature of the gods' relation to the world of the living, so too does Tonnerre's French declaration of independence describe and delimit the nature of colonial power. Tonnerre speaks in the voice and language of France, but in so doing he reveals that this voice and language are dominant only in as much as they are channeled and imitated. With the perspective of the Hegelian slave, Tonnerre invites the possessing spirit of the French and their language to mount him for a tour of their destruction.

Such a tactic ends any hope that the Haitian will achieve the full ontological presence that the Frenchman seemed to enjoy by revealing that the Frenchman did not in fact enjoy such presence, that his hegemonic subjectivity was an illusion, and that all identities are ghostly and transient. Tonnerre has not created an identity calqued from the *Blanc* (negritude), but has instead hinted at the ghostly, lugubrious nature of all such identities. In Bhabha's terms, his word employs the disruptive power of the mimic to destabilize the very structures of self and other that compel him to copy in the first place.

Tonnerre's speech founds the genre of the Haitian anti-Bovarist manifesto on unstable, haunted ground. But in so doing it describes the violence inherent in the mimetic structure--both the destructive power of colonial mimesis and the equally violent self-destructive goals of the anti-mimetic cultural revolutionary--while at the same time hinting at a way of resisting and short-circuiting this mimetic trap.

#### "Il s'agit de moins ici": Creole Romanticism and the "École de 1836"

After years of war and a post-revolutionary power struggle between Henri Christophe in the North and Alexandre Pétion in the South, Haiti was united under Pétion's successor Jean-

Pierre Boyer. During Boyer's long presidency (1818-1843), Haiti's bourgeois elite consolidated its grip on political power, took control of most commercial interests in the capitol, and followed a Francophile social and cultural agenda in order to differentiate itself from the country's Creole speaking peasant majority. Boyer's regime, and the Francophone urban elite from which it drew its power, sought to replace Vodou and the other Africanisms of Haitian culture with French cultural forms.<sup>391</sup> But in the mid 1830s a disgruntled young clique within Boyer's own ruling class organized an opposition camp around what amounts to an anti-bovarist political position.

This group, known in the received periodization of Haitian literature as the "École de 1836," promoted a cultural nationalism based on the anti-mimetic ideals of French Romanticism. In Port-au-Prince young journalists, historians and poets banded together to form a literary fraternity modeled on Charles Nodier's famous Parisian *Cénacle de l'Arsenal*. Publishing their work in two papers, Le Républicain and L'Union, the Haitian *cénacle* included such prominent intellectuals as Ogé Longfosse, the Lespinasse brothers, Beauvais and Dumai, the Ardouin brothers Beaubrun and Céigny, and the Nau brothers Emile, Eugène and Ignace. On a political level, the *cénacle* advocated the creation of a Haitian banking system that would allow more access to capital and greater financial independence. In a similar way they felt that Haiti must abandon its reliance on borrowed cultural forms and establish an independent literary voice.<sup>392</sup> While the intellectual activity surrounding this *cénacle* flourished only briefly--Boyer soon suppressed its two papers--the circle's members remained engaged in Haitian politics, and their efforts eventually led to the overthrow of Boyer in the revolution of 1843.

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<sup>391</sup> David Nicholls, From Dessalines to Duvalier: Race, Colour and National Independence in Haiti (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 68-73.

<sup>392</sup> Henock Trouillot, Les Origines Sociales de la Littérature Haïtienne (Port-au-Prince: Fardin, 1986) 124.

In a series of articles in *L'Union*, Emile Nau, the *cénacle*'s most prolific theorist, proposed a Romantic, anti-mimetic revolution in Haitian literature. Nau's articles were inspired by the outrage that he felt when he read poetry written by his contemporaries in Haiti. This poetry not only lacked inspiration and imagination, he argued, it also had the bad taste to copy outmoded eighteenth-century French verse and its attendant mythological imagery: "De la mythologie au dix-neuvième siècle! de la mythologie en Haïti! est-ce que nous aurions quelque inclination au paganisme."<sup>393</sup> Nau believed that Haitian poetry should not blindly follow the currents of European literature, but should find within itself a new source of inspiration:

L'imitation de la manière et du faire des poètes européens est plus ingrate et plus stérile ici qu'ailleurs; nos poètes ne doivent avoir nul parti à prendre pour ou contre telle ou telle école: ils doivent les étudier toutes et n'en être d'aucune....Nous dirons enfin à nos poètes ou à ceux qui aspirent à l'être: la source de l'inspiration pour vous est en vous et chez vous: hors de là vous n'avez pas de salut.<sup>394</sup>

This is one of the most frequently quoted passages in the Haitian literary canon, and it is usually invoked to demonstrate the Haitian *cénacle*'s prescient nationalism and indigenism. While the poetry produced by this circle never successfully emerged from the shadow of French Romanticism, the argument goes, the indigenist ideals that Nau proposed would remain in circulation to be fulfilled by later generations of Haitian intellectuals.<sup>395</sup> Thus histories of Haitian

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<sup>393</sup> Emile Nau, "Littérature" in Christophe Ph. Charles, *Littérature Haïtienne. Tome I. Les Pionniers--L'École de 1836* (Port-au-Prince: Éditions Choucounne, 2001) 71.

<sup>394</sup> Emile Nau, "Littérature" 72.

<sup>395</sup> J. Michael Dash, for example, suggests that this early indigenism was simply too far ahead of its time: "The reasons for the failure of this generation to establish an original literature were fundamental. One does not know how widespread these ideas of a national literature were among the educated elite of the time, but a truly Haitian literature somehow presupposes not only a public but one that was not hostile to this revolutionary concept. Such conditions did not exist at the time." [J Michael Dash, "Haitian Literature: A Search for Identity" *Savacou* 5 (1971) 81-94.]

literature often characterize this movement's call for an independent Haitian literary voice as "l'indigénisme avant la lettre," for it seems to anticipate Price-Mars's anti-mimetic indigenism.<sup>396</sup>

However Nau's denunciation of copying is itself copied from the French Romantic distaste for imitation. Indeed, we can see that Nau's declaration of cultural independence is largely an echo of well-known Romantic manifestos like Hugo's preface to the 1826 edition of Odes et Ballades, in which he defines the Romantic movement by its specific rejection of *classique* imitation.<sup>397</sup> Emile Nau and his contemporaries were swept up in the great flowering of French Romanticism of the late 1820s, and thus it is difficult to separate their call for an independent national literature from the general Romantic rejection of Classicism's institutionalized mimesis. When Nau urges his fellow writers not to imitate Europe, he is, on one level, simply taking sides the great debate between the *classiques* and *romantiques*.

However Nau does insist on highlighting the differences between Haiti and France, and he claims a special place for Haiti in the literature of the Americas. Haiti was the second independent American Republic, but it was the first to establish its own unique culture. Unlike its neighbor to the north-- "L'Américain n'a pas de tradition; il est transplanté" --Haiti had forged a new and unique civilization from the still smoldering "ruines de la société coloniale."<sup>398</sup> This is not to say that Haitian culture freed itself from all French influence, but the violence of the

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<sup>396</sup> See: Christophe Ph. Charles, Littérature Haïtienne. Tome I. Les Pionniers--L'École de 1836 (Port-au-Prince: Éditions Choucoun, 2001) 70. and F[rère] Raphaël Berrou et Pradel Pompilus, Histoire de la Littérature Haïtienne, Illustrée par les Textes. Tome I (Port-au-Prince: Éditions Caraïbes, 1975) 187.

Perhaps Price-Mars was so eager to exorcize his literary forbearers in order to get rid of the memory of this first wave of indigenism. His work of founding a literary movement and establishing a Haitian literary identity was haunted by previous efforts to do just that. Indeed, instead of seeing Nau's early anti-bovarysme as a prediction or anticipation of indigenism, it might be more accurate to describe Price-Mars's twentieth-century movement as a "Romantisme après la lettre."

<sup>397</sup> Victor Hugo Oeuvres Complètes. Poésie I. Odes et Ballades 28.

<sup>398</sup> Victor Hugo Oeuvres Complètes. Poésie I. Odes et Ballades 14.

revolution brought about such a dramatic transformation in the Haitian people that they can claim a certain distance from their former colonial masters: "[I]l y a dans cette fusion du génie européen et du génie africain qui constitue le caractère de notre peuple, quelque chose qui nous fait moins Français que l'Américain n'est Anglais."<sup>399</sup>

This kind of comparative statement demonstrates the extent to which Haiti remained dependant on the *metropole* to determine the success or failure of its independence. Haiti's has assembled a new culture from the ruins of its colonial past, yet this culture still understands itself only by maintaining a certain distance from France--"maintaining" here being both a pushing away from and a holding fast to, what Bhabha describes as a "tether."<sup>400</sup> On the level of language, for example, Haitians must strive to speak an idealized Parisian French, while at the same time occasionally taking advantage of Haiti's abundant local color:

La langue française, dans nos écrits et dans nos conversations, a toujours l'air d'une langue acquise; un des bienfaits de la civilisation sera de la naturaliser chez nous. C'est surtout à ceux qui aspirent à être poètes d'en faire dès à présent une étude spéciale et approfondie. Il ne s'agira pas cependant, de prendre la langue toute faite dans les meilleurs modèles; il faudra la modifier et l'adapter à nos besoins et à nos localités; transplantée sous un climat étranger, elle perdra inmanquablement de sa saveur, et ses fruits se ressentiront naturellement du terroir nouveau. Il sera presque impossible, nous croyons, d'atteindre à l'atticisme parisien, (les provinces elles-mêmes de France n'y ont pas réussi); mais notre français bâtard aura peut-être ses qualités précieuses, quelque chose de franc, de fortement accentué et de naïf, quelque chose d'ardent comme notre climat et comme notre âme; et peut-être que la France ne lira pas sans plaisir sa langue quelque peu brunie sous les tropiques.<sup>401</sup>

This is a doubled position: the Haitian writer must "faire...une étude spéciale et approfondie" so that his French does not so obviously carry the mark of difference, but he must also naturalize

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<sup>399</sup> Émile Nau, Le Républicain, 1836. quoted in Christophe Ph. Charles, Littérature Haitienne, Tome I. Les Pionniers--L'École de 1836. Nouvelle Édition (Port-au-Prince: Éditions Choucoune, 2001) 73.

<sup>400</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 44.

<sup>401</sup> Bhabha 44.

this same difference so that his "qualities précieuses" might be interesting and exotic to a French audience. He will speak a French that is recognizable because it strives towards a Parisian norm, but that also remains lightly touched by his native difference--"quelque peu brunie sous les tropiques." The writer is thus split between a desire to speak from a fully French position and a desire to keep about him a certain amount of difference that will serve him well in the discourse of European exoticism. This is the same sort of identitarian calculus that d'Alaux described thirty years later, and it signals the beginning of the long tradition of *Bovarism* in Haiti that Price-Mars hoped to put an end to with his indigenist manifesto.

We can thus see that the Haitian writer's doubled narrative position compromises the anti-mimetic Romantic ideal that Nau advocates, for his composite subjectivity demands that he make certain choices about where to locate himself along the Creole cultural continuum. How can the Haitian writer, who consciously triangulates his language, identity, and voice from metropolitan cultural landmarks, expect pure subjective inspiration to emerge from deep within what is clearly a provisional, relational selfhood?

René Girard usefully describes the trope of pure poetic genius as the Romantic *mensonge*, a programmatic deception about the internal source of all inspiration. In Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque, Girard uses Jules de Gaultier's description of Bovarism as the foundation for his theory of mimetic desire. Beginning with the realization that Gaultier's theory is essentially a way of describing intersubjective (or intercultural) mediation, Girard identifies a persistent pattern in European novels in which the subject's seemingly pure and authentic longing for a

beloved masks a more complex triangular desire--the desire for a rival's desire for the beloved.<sup>402</sup>

Girard claims that the Romantic movement coheres around an illusion of origins:

The romantic insists on a "parthenogenesis" of the imagination. *Forever in love with autonomy, he refuses to bow before his own gods.* The series of solipsistic theories of poetry produced during the past century and a half are an expression of this refusal.<sup>403</sup>

Without subscribing fully to the demands of Girard's model, we might nonetheless see in his analysis of Romantic poetics a helpful description of anti-mimetism and its attempt to implant the mechanism of mediation within the individual. For Girard, the Romantic poet is an orthodox Bovarist, and his fundamental dogma asserts the virgin birth of his art. The Romantic poet's primary figurative move is to hide the fact that he is dealing in second-hand goods and to exorcise any lingering external models for his seemingly pure and original voice.

We have seen how Hugo, in spite of his great fascination with the *tables tournantes*, was determined to keep his own inspiration separate from any spiritual influence. In his poetry Hugo talks to the dead, God and nature, but these voices always emerge from the immutable

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<sup>402</sup> René Girard. *Deceit, desire, and the novel; self and other in literary structure*. Tr. Yvonne Freccero. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965).

Girard's use of the term "Bovarism" is the most prominent legacy of Gaultier's theory in contemporary literary theory. When confronted with a coherent and seductive theoretical edifice like Girard's, it is tempting to simply impose this structure onto these texts by saying that Haiti's indigenist desire for its African roots is hiding the mediated, triangular desire that Haiti feels for France's desire for an exoticized African Other. But this is a vast oversimplification of (post)colonial subjectivity, not least because it assumes an ignorance on the part of Haitians as to the nature of their split and unstable subjectivity. Nau and other Haitian Romantics are all too aware of the copied nature of their literary desires. More useful here is Bhabha's understanding of the mutually menacing, interpenetrating play between mimesis and mimicry that animates colonial subjectivity--"post-Enlightenment man tethered to, *not* confronted by, his dark reflection, the shadow of colonized man, that splits his presence, distorts his outline, breaches his boundaries, repeats his action at a distance, disturbs and divides the very time of his being"-- a description that accounts for the precarious narrative position of the colonial subject. Bhabha recognizes the threatening nature of the mimic, this shadow that is in constant dialogue with its metropolitan model, earnestly imitating out of one side of his mouth, mocking and deriding out of the other" (Bhabha 44).

<sup>403</sup> Girard 17-18. [Emphasis Mine]



fountainhead of his genius. In a similar way, the Romantic reproach of imitation that Nau copies invites the subject to entirely absorb his creative apparatus: "la source de l'inspiration pour vous est en vous et chez vous: hors de là vous n'avez pas de salut." <sup>404</sup> But this assumes that the poetic voice in question can accommodate these new responsibilities. Nau later undermines his Romantic program by demonstrating the provisional, relational nature of Haitian subjectivity. The Haitian poet cannot pull off the fundamental Romantic parlor trick-- parthenogenesis-- because his is a split and provisional subjectivity. How can the Haitian poet talk to God like Hugo--or, as Girard suggestively puts it, "refuse[...] to bow before his own gods"-- when he is constantly engaged in a dialogue about (and constitutive of) himself.

From the perspective of Western expectations of a unified subject, we might say that the split nature of colonial subjectivity compromises the colonial subject's ability to speak in a Romantic idiom that coheres in its anti-mimetic function. Creole Romanticism is a failed parthenogenesis, a copying that cannot conceal its mixed origins because they are so explicitly on display. Romanticism demands of its subjects an ontological independence that the Creole cultures of Haiti and Louisiana and cannot effectively simulate. The Creole poet might strive towards the ideals of Romantic anti-mimetism, but in as much as he speaks with the sun-kissed voice of colonial alterity, he has trouble making his borrowed authenticity *seem* natural; he has trouble performing the *mensonge romantique* because he has already admitted, from the very start, that he is an imitator. The bronzed French of Haiti's romantic poets--"sa langue quelque peu brunie sous les tropiques"-- is different from its French model, for in as much as it is an explicit copy, it cannot inhabit the expansive metropolitan subjectivity that so nimbly hides the fact of its own split and copied nature. Creole Romanticism is necessarily a failed Romanticism.

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<sup>404</sup> Girard 72.

But, seen from another angle, we might simply say that Creole Romantics are simply less theologically obtuse than their European counterparts; to paraphrase Girard, they *do* bow down before their own gods. In the Haitian context, the type of inspiration that the Romantic poets received and then claimed as their own would have been easily recognized as coming from the rich, unruly babble that floats about all of us. In Haiti the Romantic *mensonge* is laughably absurd.

And yet, as we shall see, Haitian writers persist in their use of the Romantic subject position, for in so doing they hint at the mediated nature of all subjectivity. As he speaks from a position of ambiguous difference, all the while claiming as his own the profound depths of the Romantic's voice, the Haitian poet's imitation gives way to mimicry at the very moment of its disintegration, the very moment when he reveals his own split and mediated nature. His "langue...brunie," like Tonnerre's "lugubrer," casts an uncanny shadow over the prospect of any pure presence. And so we might not be surprised to find that Haiti's first fully romanticized poet, Coriolan Ardouin, is often described by critics as a "poète manqué." It is his failure to pull off the Romantic *mensonge*, I would suggest, that makes him and the other writers of the "generation de 1836" so important to Haitian literary history.<sup>405</sup>

It is hard to underestimate the influence of Alphonse de Lamartine's Méditations Poétiques on nineteenth-century Haitian poets, and Coriolain Ardouin's poetry is deeply indebted to Lamartine's work. Ardouin died in 1835 at the age of twenty-three, having survived the death of most of his family and his young wife. His was a painful and tragic life--a singular gift for an ambitious young Romantic poet--and many of his poems are melancholic laments. In a poem that

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<sup>405</sup> See: Charles A. Abellard. "À la mémoire de Coriolan Ardouin, un grand poète manqué," Le Nouvelliste (Port-au-Prince) 1 Août 1963.

he dedicated to his friend and fellow poet Ignace Nau, Emile's brother, Ardouin described a melancholic solidarity between their tortured souls:

Ah! lorsque la douleur comme un cancer nous ronge  
Quand le dard des soucis, hélas! dans nos coeurs plonge  
Et que notre avenir en un pâle lointain  
S'obscurcit à nos yeux ou vacille incertain,  
Attendons qu'il nous luise un rayon d'espérance,  
Et poètes, souffrons, dans l'ombre et le silence!<sup>406</sup>

This is exactly the kind of rank bovarism that so bothered Price-Mars. Ardouin has borrowed from his French models the already tired and clichéd commonplace of the tortured poet, and he has structured his poetic voice around this melancholic attitude. But why is it that this is an imitative poem? It is not as if Lamartine were writing in a vacuum? What is it about Coriolan Ardouin's poetic voice that makes him unable to tap into the authenticity available to other poets who participated in the worldwide Romantic movement? What is it that leads critics to say that Ardouin's melancholy arise less from the depths of his own tortured soul-- "dans l'ombre et le silence"--than from the verse of his favorite poets.

In the Méditations Poétiques Lamartine dedicates the poem "L'homme" to Lord Byron, and his later commentary on the poem states that Byron's melancholic verse is direct evidence of his profound poetic soul. Having just met Byron in Switzerland, Lamartine describes how impressed he was with this dashing young aristocrat who had all of life's advantages yet who wrote with such an intensely melancholic voice:

Il fallait que ses larmes vinssent de *quelque source de l'âme bien profonde et bien mystérieuse* pour donner tant d'amertume à ses accents, tant de mélancolie à ses vers. Cette mélancolie même était un attrait de plus pour mon coeur.<sup>407</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Berrou and Pompilus 148.

<sup>407</sup> Alfonse de Lamartine, Oeuvres de A. de Lamartine . Poésies. Premières Méditations Poétiques. La Mort de Socrate (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, n.d.) [emphasis mine].

Lamartine, who is careful to add that he had written "la plupart de mes Méditations avant d'avoir lu ce grand poète," is very taken with Byron's work: "Le seul récit de quelques-uns de ses poèmes m'ébranla l'imagination." He feels a great sympathy between his own poetic mission and Byron's, and claims, in the poem, to be part of a melancholic poetic brotherhood: "Hélas! tel fut ton sort, telle est ma destinée./ J'ai vidé comme toi la coupe empoisonnée;"<sup>408</sup> According to the poem, the similar melancholic tone of these two poet's work is the result not of one imitating the other, but rather of their both having access to the depths of their own souls. If there are similarities in their work it is only because they have both felt the same eternal truth.

The stylistic and thematic links between Ardouin's and Lamartine's poems are clear: both are poems dedicated to a fellow poet who shares a profoundly melancholic Romantic sensibility. What, then, is the difference between these poems? Why can Lamartine assume that he and Byron shared an emotional depth, while Ardouin's poems are read as merely a copied poetic commonplace? Is there something about Ardouin's poetic voice that prevents him from telling the Romantic lie?

Emile Nau begins to answer these questions when, eighteen years after Ardouin's death, he published a critical essay on Ardouin's literary production. Nau excuses his old friend's melancholy poetry by underplaying the poet's ambitions and scope. These could not be tragic poems on the scale of the great Romantics because Ardouin's melancholy was a localized phenomenon. His pain was merely that of an individual, and he lacked the transcendent genius that his poetic heroes displayed:

La tristesse! Voilà le mal incurable de l'âme du poète. Il n'est rien semblable à ce tourment des grandes maîtres de la pensée, Chateaubriand ou Byron, qui ne leur fait voir que déceptions dans ce monde et les porte à s'en prendre à tout ce qui les entoure de ce qui les agite ou les oppresse. *Il s'agit de moins ici.* C'est un humble

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<sup>408</sup> Lamartine 80.

jeune homme qui se sent individuellement malheureux, qui croit que lui seul souffre.<sup>409</sup>

Thus according to Nau, the transcendent melancholy of Chateaubriand and Byron is inaccessible to the Creole Ardouin, for "[i]l s'agit de moins ici." The specific pain that he feels is a local phenomenon. Ardouin's melancholy is specific to his own life, and any attempt to compare his melancholic voice to other famous voices merely reveals his evolution as a poet:

En outre, et c'est surtout ce que je veux exprimer, Coriolan, dont les débuts accusent encore l'étude à ses premiers tâtonnements, l'imitation trop docile des modèles, se fût enhardi plus tard à être lui-même et eût acquis une originalité suffisante pour devenir non seulement un poète éminent, mais, avant tout, notre poète national.<sup>410</sup>

Ardouin is eventually able to found a literary identity for himself, and in doing so he becomes the "poète national." But he has acquired this originality only through "l'imitation trop docile des modèles." He has channeled the voices of his literary heroes, but in so doing has he established his own enunciatory originality?

Nau is well aware of the problem of writing as a Haitian, and he hints at these problems when he claims that imitation is "pire ici qu'ailleurs." The Haitian poet has no ground on which to stand. He speaks from a position of abundant alterity. What passes for influence and dialogue in other places is worse in Haiti because of the very lack of a stable subjective position from which to enter into dialogue with the larger world. Thus Ardouin's eventual evolution gives him the simultaneous titles of "poète national" and "le Lamartine haïtien."<sup>411</sup>

Thus in channeling Lamartine's voice, Ardouin does not so much establish his own voice as precipitate his own elocutionary disappearance. Liautaud Ethéard, another of Ardouin's

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<sup>409</sup> Emile Nau, "Littérature" Conjonction 103 (Déc. 1966) 15.

<sup>410</sup> Emile Nau 20.

<sup>411</sup> Charles 83.

contemporaries, understood Ardouin's early death as his most important contribution to Haitian literature:

Le lecteur est sans doute étonné de n'avoir pas encore rencontré un nom, un véritable nom de poète, ignoré de son vivant, pauvre fleur cachée sous l'herbe et dont les tristes pétales ont été effeuillés par le vent de l'orage. C'est que nous avons voulu faire comme le siècle. Le siècle l'a laissé mourir et a ouvert sa tombe! Il a fallu qu'il mourût pour faire connaître sa poésie.<sup>412</sup>

Ardouin has assembled a calqued poetic voice, but must die for this voice to emerge from the shadows, an arrangement that he hints at in his poem "Moi-Même":

...Vivre ou mourir, qu'importe?  
Vivre jusques au jour où la tombe l'emporte,  
Jusqu'à ce que le coeur  
Plonge sans remonter et se noie et s'abîme,  
Alors c'est le repos éternel et sublime,  
Alors, c'est le bonheur!<sup>413</sup>

Ethéard's reading of Ardouin's poetry reveals that, like Tonnerre, Ardouin must be a "bourreau de soi-meme." He must kill off the very borrowed subjectivity that he needs to carry out the Romantic *mensonge* in order to allow the voices of others to speak in his mouth. His selfhood is polluted by the borrowed voices that he folds into his language, and it is in dying that his voice can be heard. Ardouin has established a voice, but it is a voice that can only speak from beyond the grave, that can only cohere in Ardouin's absence.

In as much as Ardouin fails to create a distance between his own voice and that of his models he has failed to establish a voice that later critics recognize as authentically Haitian. But this failure spawned an entire generation of Haitian poets. It is as if, having channeled the voices of metropolitan Romanticism and then dying, Ardouin has liberated these voices for his contemporaries to pick up and use to speak. His early devotion to and possession by these

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<sup>412</sup> Liautaud Ethéard, *Miscellanées* (Port-au-Prince: Jn. Courtois, 1855) 113.

<sup>413</sup> Berrou and Pompilus 150-151.

Romantic gods demonstrated their availability to his fellow poetic adepts. In this way the poem that Ardouin's addressed to Ignace Nau is an invitation to his friend to share in his ventriloquism.

#### Ignace Nau's "Isalina" and Vodou Authority

Like his friend Coriolan Ardouin, Ignace Nau died as a relatively young man, and his stories and poems were celebrated only after his death. Ignace was an early adherent of his brother Emile's indigenist agenda, and his poetry often celebrates the natural beauty of Haiti, as we see in "Pensée du soir."

Ah! vous ne savez pas ce que c'est la nuit!  
La nuit dans la campagne, où l'on n'entend de bruit  
Que l'effort des moulins, que les chants de la dance  
Et l'accent du tambour perdu dans la distance,  
Où l'on a pour parfum les senteurs de la canne  
Et du pin dont le pauvre éclaire sa cabane,  
L'encens du vanillier et de l'humble oranger  
Que vous porte à toute heure un vent pur et léger.<sup>414</sup>

Critics generally read Ignace Nau's poetry as more nuanced than Ardouin's, but they nonetheless see it as imitative of the same Romantic conventions. In Les Origines sociales de la littérature haïtienne Henock Trouillot sees Nau's poetry as a continuation of Ardouin's mimetic Romanticism, claiming that Nau simply transposed commonplace Romantic sensibilities onto a Haitian setting. Nau's evocation of the Haitian countryside might echo with the drums of Africa, "[m]ais c'est encore là du romantisme, et du romantisme le plus effréné."<sup>415</sup>

But if his poetry fails to bring about an independent Haitian voice, his short fiction provides an interesting model for a hybrid Creole voice. In 1836, Ignace Nau published three folkloric short stories in the Port-au-Prince paper Le Républicain, which was edited by his brother Émile. These stories were innovative in that they drew upon Haitian history and folk

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<sup>414</sup> Berrou and Pompilus 118

<sup>415</sup> Hénock Trouillot, Les Origines sociales de la littérature haïtienne (Port-au-Prince: Éditions Fardin, 1986) 141.

culture as sources. Nau also put Creole words and phrases into the mouths of his characters.<sup>416</sup>

Liautaud Ethéard's 1855 Miscellanées, one of the few early critical responses to Haitian

literature, describes the importance of these stories to Haitian literature:

Il ne s'adresse pas à l'étranger. Ses inspirations, c'est à la nature, à la riche nature qui se développe devant lui, qu'il les demande. Tout prend une forme nouvelle sous ses mains. Les superstitions haïtiennes sont caractérisées par lui dans de petits chefs-d'oeuvres inimitables qu'il appelle contes. C'est en français qu'il écrit, et cependant le français, pour bien comprendre le récit qu'il expose, est obligé de recourir au dictionnaire d'Ignace Nau, un dictionnaire composé tout exprès pour l'intelligence de ses narrations. C'est que nulle part, il n'existe plus de couleurs locales. Il appelle chaque chose par son nom: nos magiciens se nomment *caplatas*; pour exprimer une misérable petite maison, il ne vous parlera pas de chaumière, il vous dira tout simplement *counouque*. On dirait une autre langue. Sa pensée se revêt quelquefois de formes et de tournures si hardies, que vous vous arrêtez tout court au milieu de votre lecture pour vous interroger dans le silence.

<sup>417</sup>

These stories, Ethéard suggests, are not written for a French audience, for in as much as "[i]l appelle chaque chose par son nom," Nau is writing in the sun-kissed language of Haiti that his brother Émile described. Of course, the lively "couleurs locales" that one finds in Nau's stories are a function of his ability to represent Haiti's exotic difference to an ideal metropolitan French reader. Nau has thus rather successfully carried out the complicated task that D'Alaux described of speaking as both a Haitian and a Frenchman, and for Ethéard to claim that "Il ne s'adresse pas à l'étranger" is a testament to this success. Nau has successfully negotiated these identitarian pitfalls precisely because he has obscured the location of his voice and authority within the complications of Vodou possession.

One of these stories, "Isalina, ou Une Scène Créole" tells the story of Paul, a young man whose love for the beautiful Isalina is threatened by a mysterious rival who injures her. Paul visits a Vodou priest to find a cure for his comatose lover, and in the end he defeats his rival and

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<sup>416</sup> Léon-François Hoffmann, Littérature d'Haïti (Vanves: EDICEF, 1995) 110.

<sup>417</sup> Ethéard 110.



is reunited with Isalina. This simple story is a fable about the difficulties of authorial integrity in the Haitian setting, and it demonstrates the disruptive power of Vodou's narrative innovations.

As the subtitle suggests--"Une scène Créole"--the story is full of colorful local descriptions and Creole phrases, all of which respond to Émile Nau's suggestion that Haitian literature should be marked by a difference that indicates its origins. Arriving from abroad, the narrator gives specific directions to orient his reader in the exotic country: "Après avoir doublé les collines de Soission et franchi son point de pierre auquel s'attachent maintes chroniques, la grande rivière d'abord se présente à vos regards..."<sup>418</sup> This voice is a trustworthy guide up the river to the chaotic opening scene in the factory of the Dignerons sugar plantation in the Plaine de Cul de Sac near Port-au-Prince: "Figurez-vous un atelier, de cent bras au plus, divisé par groupes et disséminé sur toute l'habitation..." But the narrator's confident description is soon complicated by the chatter of the workers themselves--"Chaque groupe mène sa besogne sans interruption du matin au soir; celui-ci devisant, celui-là s'émerveillant à quelque récit fantastique d'ensorcellement ou de quelque prouesse inouïe d'un danseur."<sup>419</sup>

Into this noisy plantation scene wanders an impressive figure without whom "le moulin est comme un navire dans le malaise de calme":

Il porte un long bâton de bambou dont le premier noeud contient quelquefois sa ration de tafia; un chapeau de paille, dont les larges bords retombent sur ses épaules, coiffe sa tête blanche et les poches de sa vareuse de ginga renferment un trésor précieux qui consiste en une pipe, une demi-livre de tabac espagnol soigneusement pressé dans un morceau de tache de palmiste et son indispensable batte-feu. Il se promène sans cesse en long et en large, allant à toutes les vieilles femmes pour allumer sa pipe éteinte. Il est surtout l'improvisateur ou, en nous servant du mot technique, excellent Samba. Quand l'inspiration lui vient, il faut le voir interrompre tout-à-coup sa promenade, revenir sur ses pas, puis s'accoudant sur la table, jeter rapidement sa strophe qu'il accompagne de certains mouvements

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<sup>418</sup> Ignace Nau "Isalina" 27.

<sup>419</sup> Ignace Nau "Isalina" 28.

brusque et inimitables de tête. Il semble pas ces tics vouloir imprimer plus de force et d'énergie à chaque mot, à chaque idée de sa chanson.<sup>420</sup>

The *Samba* is a storyteller much like the African griot, and here at the beginning of the story his voice creates a tension between the sweeping panoramic perspective of the narrator and the fluid voices that emerge from the story. Where in the very beginning of the story objective landmarks situated the "Scène Créole" in an exoticized space, the voice of the Samba interrupts this description with a competing narrative. Inspiration strikes him, stopping him in his tracks as he walks through the sugar factory. The song that possesses him has a similarly disruptive effect on his behavior. His formerly tranquil and dignified carriage is seized by "certaines mouvement brusque et inimitables de tête." His performance might be inimitable, but the audience soon takes up his refrain and the whole plantation soon rumbles with his song:

Mais du moment que le dernier mot expire sur ses lèvres, que l'atelier, jusqu'alors attentif et silencieux, saisit le refrain, éclatant souvent d'un rire de contentement inexprimable, il remet la pipe à sa bouche et se remand à marcher et à méditer. Et c'est, en vérité, quelque chose de délicieux que d'entendre ce mélange de voix mâles et féminines confondant leur timbre pur et sonore, d'écouter le refrain courir, et gagner les alentours du moulin, puis tout-à-coup ce chœur dispersé, mais toujours en harmonie clore la ballade par des cris ou points d'orgue caractéristiques.

Au hé! Au hé! O!<sup>421</sup>

The Samba, in a seizure-like bout of inspiration, has hijacked the sweeping narrative that brought us up the river and into the factory. He is possessed, and in his possessed state he repossesses the narrative. The Samba's intervention halts the masterful panoramic description and allows the story itself to begin, almost as if he were telling it himself: "Un soir..." The story is not an imbedded narrative, but it nonetheless seems to emerge more from the Samba than from

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<sup>420</sup> Ignace Nau "Isalina" 32.

<sup>421</sup> Ignace Nau "Isalina" 36.

the authoritative voice of the initial narrator. Thus Nau's story emerges from a doubled source and an ambiguous narrative voice.

From this point on, the story persistently thematizes the problem of narrative authority and subjectivity. In the first scene, Paul confronts his lover Isalina about a whispered conversation he overheard during a recent "Calinda" or dance. Someone at the dance whispered to a group of friends that he loved Isalina, but Paul could not recognize his distorted voice: "Cette voix, cependant, avait été tellement altérée, soit par émotion ou par ruse, que je n'avais pu la reconnaître, bien que l'accent ne m'en fût point tout-à-fait inconnu." This "voix altérée" is the first in a long series of mysterious, hidden or unidentifiable voices in the story.

As she passes through a dark graveyard on her way home after the long day's work, Isalina is confronted by this secret admirer, Jean-Julien. Startled, Isalina threatens to cry out. Jean-Julien responds: "--Crier? Qui donc vous entendra à cette heure? Tâchez plutôt de réveiller ces morts et de les conjurer à votre secours."<sup>422</sup> While the dead do not rise up to help Isalina in her moment of peril, they will, later in the story, speak in her defense.

Isalina rejects Jean-Julien, and, infuriated, he violently shoves her. Isalina stumbles, hits her head on the corner of a tomb, and passes out. The next day, as he waits alone at his house, Paul becomes frustrated with Isalina for missing their rendezvous and begins to mumble under his breath: "Eh! que diras-tu quand l'âme de ton père viendra dans les songes de tes nuits demander compte du témoignage dont tu l'as chargée?" Here again we see that the dead play a part in the lives of the living.

As he waits, two colorful peasant travelers pass close to Paul's house. Paul hides close to the place that they stop for lunch in order to eavesdrop on their conversation. They begin to

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<sup>422</sup> Ignace Nau, "Isalina", 40.

discuss the beautiful women of the area, and their conversation turns to Isalina and her injury.

They also discuss the opinion that is circulating that, in regards to Isalina, "Il y a de

l'ensorcellement," and that the cemetery was frequented by "zombis"<sup>423</sup>

Having learned of her injury, Paul runs to Isalina's house, but as he approaches her she cries out and hides herself under a bed sheet. Paul concludes that she has indeed lost her mind, and becomes convinced that she is the victim of sorcery. He swears to avenge the attack on his lover, but despairs over discovering who is responsible for her illness. Paul's mother then suggests that they visit the "papa-loi," or Vodou priest, "Galba de la montagne 'Shasha.'" to ask for help in this matter.<sup>424</sup>

The exotic scene at Galba's is described in the same masterful tone as the opening scene. Galba is a bow-legged old man whose constant companion is "une couleuvre magdeleine...à la fois son ange gardien et sa déité."<sup>425</sup> Paul approaches Galba and describes his problem:

Ainsi, mon père, je voudrais savoir d'abord, si c'est la blessure qui la jette dans un délire où elle repousse même celui qu'elle a le plus aimé; ensuite quel est *l'auteur de cet assassinat*, et si, comme je le présume, elle est ensorcelée, veuillez m'apprendre le nom de l'individu, et celui de la personne qui lui vendit ses conseils et ses drogues.<sup>426</sup>

Paul must learn the identity of "l'auteur de cet assassinat," but this turns out to be both the name of Isalina's attacker and that of the attacker's Vodou helper. Paul's cousin Georgina, who had traveled with Paul and his mother up the mountain, informed Galba that Isalina, during her frequent hallucinations, repeated the names "Jean" and "Marie...," the last name trailing off as if incomplete. Galba asked if Isalina might know anyone with these names, and Paul mentioned Jean-Julien, his "frère de baptême." Galba also learned that Jean-Julien had visited Isalina since

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<sup>423</sup> Ignace Nau, "Isalina", 41-42.

<sup>424</sup> Ignace Nau, "Isalina", 44.

<sup>425</sup> Ignace Nau, "Isalina", 47.

<sup>426</sup> Ignace Nau, "Isalina", 49.

her injury and that she had seemed happy to see him. Galba concludes that this is an unmistakable case of sorcery, and that it will be necessary to divine the identity of the two assailants responsible for her illness.

Galba begins the divination by retreating to a secret chamber. There is a long silence and then Paul begins to hear "des gémissements sourds, des soupirs convulsifs, et comme un bouillonnement d'eau mêlé à des sifflements aigus de serpent." Galba emerges from this "conjunction" wearing a "singulière expression" and invites Paul and his party into the chamber. During Galba's possession, we learn later, Paul's father visited Galba and spoke to him. Galba then asks Paul to look at a series of playing cards that bear images of those responsible for Isalina's illness: Jean-Julien and Marie Robin, a well-known sorceress. Paul then gazes into a water-filled bucket and sees an image of Jean-Julien courting Isalina at her bedside. Galba throws a powder onto the surface of the water and Jean-Julien stumbles away from Isalina's bedside as if drunk.

When he returns to Isalina's side, Paul discovers that she has recovered. Paul ties a serpent's tooth into Isalina's hair as a protective talisman and then seeks out Jean-Julien who is lying on the floor of his house in a drunken stupor. Paul completes Galba's instructions by pouring a special powder onto his face. Paul thus defeats his rival and wins back Isalina's love.

This story can be read in two ways. One can listen to the masterful descriptive voice that introduces the story and decide that, in fact, there is no author to Isalina's sorcery because she has not been sorcelled. In this interpretation, Isalina's delirium was merely the result of her head injury, and the subsequent story of Vodou and revenge is merely a colorful folkloric description of the Haitian peasantry's paranoia and superstition.

But the story also leaves completely open the possibility that Isalina did indeed suffer from a malevolent illness sent to her by Jean-Julien and Marie Robin. The voice of the Samba seems to authorize this interpretation, and it is clearly the way that a certain Haitian audience might read the situation, for at the end of the story we read that when the Digner community learns of Paul's visit to Galba they suddenly come to remember details that support the truth of Galba's cure and therefore of Jean-Julien's guilt:

En attendant, dans tous les cercles on ne parlait que de la maladie subite et de la guérison miraculeuse d'Isalina, de la perfidie de Jean-Julien et des efforts généreux de Paul. Alors chacun se rappela un incident qu'il avait point remarqué sur-le-champ. L'un disait qu'il avait vu Isalina sans doute au même moment que la conjuration avait lieu à Shasha, redevenir plus calme et respirer plus librement; un autre, qu'il avait remarqué une soudaine hésitation dans les procédés de Jean-Julien, une gêne, un trébuchement dans ses pas lorsqu'il sortait de la maison. Et parmi des choses inouïes débitées par chacun, *selon les fantaisies de son imagination*, plusieurs avançaient qu'ils avaient ouï un certain tressaillement dans la paille du toit de la maison, comme si un vent léger y avait passé qu'un oiseau ou quelque esprit s'y était posé.<sup>427</sup>

These details emerge from a communal voice. Just as in the beginning of the story the Samba's song was taken up by his audience, here the community begins to read and analyze Paul and Isalina's story, adding their own details to confirm their view of the situation.

And yet these voices remain unreliable, for the gossiping peasant is willing to invent details "selon les fantaisies de son imagination." Are these details, from the uncanny spiritual presence that rustles the roof of Isalina's house to Jean-Julien's sudden stumbling and disorientation, evidence of Galba's power, or are these simply products of the vivid imagination of the Haitian peasants? The story leaves these questions undecided.

"Isalina" is thus written simultaneously in two registers. The "author" of Isalina's illness, like the author of this story, and the Haitian author in general, remains ambiguous. But in the

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<sup>427</sup> Ignace Nau, "Isalina" 49.

space opened up by this indeterminacy, the Haitian writer can speak in a way that both conforms to the expectations of metropolitan French exoticism and undermines and disrupts these expectations with a competing narrative.

Furthermore, this ventriloquism is carried out using the tools of ceremonial possession. The Samba does not merely interrupt the early masterful narrative; he seizes and pitches, possessed by the story that he will tell. Voices of the dead echo in the story, and Galba's discovery depends on his own possession. Isalina's illness ends when she regains possession of herself. Finally, the story closes with a large celebration during which most of Dignerons enters into a possessed state. When the village sees that Isalina will recover they decide to celebrate with "les diverses danses et prières en actions de grâces":

Alors ils tournoyaient, reculaient, s'élançaient, et tous leurs membres se prenaient à palpiter convulsivement. Il est inutile de dire que tous les initiés, quelque éloignés qu'ils soient du lieu de la danse, se sentent pris du Vaudoux, à n'entendre que la cadence du tambour.<sup>428</sup>

To hear the "cadence du tambour" is to lose oneself in the rhythm of the story. Paul takes Isalina away from the dancers to protect her from the influence of the drums and to preserve her newly regained consciousness, but the loss of the self that these dancers experience is quite different from the illness that afflicted Isalina. These dancers, like the story itself, is taken over by an alternative consciousness: "tous les initiés...se sentent pris du Vaudoux."

But we should not understand this dancing, or this story, as a chaotic *mêlée* of identity. Just because characters can speak as someone else does not mean that authority is unimportant. Indeed, the characters in the story are obsessed with authority, namely the author of Isalina's illness, a concern that reflects the Haitian tendency to think of illness as arising from human or supernatural agency rather than natural causes. Vodou possession does not destroy the notion of

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<sup>428</sup> Ignace Nau, "Isalina" 50.

individual identity, rather it demonstrates that the individual can be penetrated, changed, entered into, emptied out, and overfilled. This story, like the model for Haitian identity that it proposes, is narrated by fluid and indeterminate voices. Like the possessed Samba it speaks in a familiar but disrupting voice that both demands and undermines the idea of authoritative dominance.

### Bergeaud's Stella and Aggregate Identity

The same fluidity of identity that animated Nau's "Isalina" is taken to an extreme in Emeric Bergeaud's *Stella*. Bergeaud was born in Les Cayes in 1818 and, while he was not part of the Port-au-Prince *cénacle*, maintained connections with this group. In 1848 Bergeaud was forced to flee into exile because of his family's political connections. During this exile he wrote *Stella*, but it was not published until after his death in 1859.<sup>429</sup>

Ostensibly an historical novel, *Stella* traces the events of the Haitian Revolution by following the lives of several allegorical characters, principally the brothers Romulus and Rémus, their mother Marie L'Africaine, and the mysterious young white maiden Stella, whom the brothers rescue during the violence of the revolution. Stella, who advises the revolutionaries during the course of the story, eventually reveals herself to be the physical manifestation of "Liberté," and the final scene describes Stella's apotheosis:

Les deux frères et le peuple s'agenouillèrent, vivement émus. L'adorable vierge leur adressa son plus tendre sourire, et, déployant ses ailes d'ange, prit son vol vers les cieux. Tous la suivirent d'un œil humide, jusqu'au moment où elle se perdit dans l'espace, laissant après elle un long sillon d'or.<sup>430</sup>

Stella's ascent into heaven does not necessarily come as a surprise. Indeed, Bergeaud explicitly outlines the allegorical nature of the characters in the novel's introduction:

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<sup>429</sup> Berrou and Pompilus 119.

<sup>430</sup> É[meric] Bergeaud, *Stella* (Paris : E. Dentu, 1859) 308.



Toutefois ce livre, pour produire quelque bien, ne devait avoir du roman que la forme. Il fallait que la vérité s'y trouvât ; voilà pourquoi nous avons pris soin de ne point défigurer l'histoire.

La révolution de Saint-Domingue, laborieux enfantement d'une société nouvelle, a donné naissance à quatre hommes qui en personnifient les excès et la gloire : RIGAUD, TOUSSAINT, DESSALINES, PÉTION.

Nous avons emprunté à la vie de ces hommes les détails dont nous avons besoin pour compléter celle des deux frères qui, à proprement parler, n'ont point d'individualité.

*Romulus, Rémus et le Colon, sont des êtres collectifs, l'Africaine une idéalité, Stella une abstraction.*

Cela dit, nous n'avons plus qu'à protester du dévouement pieux qui nous a inspiré l'idée d'écrire ce livre dont nous faisons hommage à la patrie.<sup>431</sup>

Bergeaud's characters, as "êtres collectifs," thus bear a striking resemblance to the gods of the vodou pantheon. These characters do not proceed from a unified essence or personality, but are rather accumulations of traits from many different sources. Their individuality is much less important than their function as a framework for the display of diverse selves within their name. In this way Romulus is not only one of the twin founders of Rome, he is also the twin black revolutionaries Toussaint and Dessalines. "Remus" gathers within his name Rigaud and Pétion, the "mûlatre" heroes of the revolution. This novel does then operate on the allegorical level, for the brother's eventual ability to set aside their differences and work together leads to their eventual success.

Yet in another way the novel seems to be responding to a different pattern of characterization, for we see within these characters a fluid diversity of identity. While an in-depth reading of the novel is beyond the scope of the present study, we might provisionally suggest that, just as in the Vodou ceremony the initiate's identity is an accumulation of traditional

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<sup>431</sup> Bergeaud vi.

patterns of cultural knowledge, so too in this first Haitian novel are the characters accumulations of various traits and characteristics. To be possessed by Damballa is not to plumb the depths of his motivations. It is rather to display a range of codified behaviors and a familiar speech patterns. Criticism of this novel often centers on the flatness of these characters; they have no psychological depth, but this precisely the point, for in failing to create realistic characters, Bergeaud has signaled a difference in process of Haitian identity formation.

Demesvar Delorme's "Veau d'Or"

Je suis fermement persuadé, d'ailleurs, je te l'ai déjà dit, qu'avec la tendance en quelque sorte éclectique de l'esprit des populations dont nous parlons, il est plus facile ici qu'en beaucoup d'autres milieux d'effacer toute trace de superstition.

Demesvar Delorme. Les Théoriciens au Pouvoir<sup>432</sup>

Demesvar Delorme, nineteenth-century Haiti's most prolific novelist and essayist, occupies a very problematic position in the Haitian literary cannon. Delorme, like Bergeaud, was from the North of Haiti; he was born in Cap-Haïtien in 1831. As a young man Delorme taught school and edited a newspaper, L'Avenir, which backed the republican reforms of Fabré Geffrard. As a newspaper editor he corresponded with Victor Hugo, who told him that he was, like his compatriot Eugène Heurtelou, "un de ces hommes qui honorent leur race, vous prouvez que sous la peau du Noir, l'âme peut-être lumineuse; la clarté est en vous."<sup>433</sup>

Delorme entered politics in 1862 and soon aligned himself with the rebellious Northern General Salnave. Salnave's initial efforts to gain power were thwarted, and Delorme was forced into exile in Belgium for a time. When Salnave succeeded in overthrowing Geffrard in 1867, Delorme returned to Haiti and took a position with his government. But the two men had a falling out and Delorme again left the country for a ten year exile in Paris, during which time he

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<sup>432</sup> Demesvar Delorme. Les Théoriciens au Pouvoir (Port-au-Prince: Collection du Bicentenaire, 2004) 602.

<sup>433</sup> Berrou and Pompilus, 545-546.

wrote several political attacks on Salnave, two novels, and the long historical and a long political essay Les Théoriciens au Pouvoir, first published in 1872. Delorme returned to Haiti for a time in the 1880s to again edit a newspaper, but he died in exile in Paris in 1901.<sup>434</sup>

Delorme's two highly romanticized novels were, aside from Bergeaud's Stella, the earliest Haitian novels. Yet because they were set in Renaissance Europe and include no mention of Haiti, they are rarely considered part of the Haitian literary tradition. Haitian historian and critic Henock Trouillot typifies the reaction to Delorme's work among Haitian intellectuals, saying that he was too busy building an international reputation to pay attention to his home:

La grande faute de Delorme, c'est que, dans le but d'obtenir une réputation internationale comme écrivain, il tourna son regard et son grand talent de romancier vers la blanche Italie et d'essayiste vers les grands hommes du passé européen. Son ambition paraissait trop grande pour la petite nation nègre des Caraïbes, qu'il ne renia d'ailleurs pas, comme en témoignent bien de ces lettres privées.<sup>435</sup>

As he condemned Haiti's nineteenth-century literary Bovarism in Ainsi Parla L'Oncle, Jean Price-Mars reserved a special place of dishonor for Demesvar Delorme: "M. Delorme a sacrifié à l'un des plus stupides, parmi les plus plats préjugés qui jugulent l'activité haïtienne, à savoir que notre société, dans son passé comme dans son existence actuelle, n'offre aucune intérêt à l'art du romancier."<sup>436</sup>

In spite of these critiques, Delorme's novels are not without interest or subtlety. Francesca tells the story of an exiled Turkish prince Djem and his romantic and political adventures in fifteenth-century Rome as he tries to overcome a quarrel with the Borgia family and reclaim the throne that is rightfully his. Le Damné traces the life of the young Swiss Ulrich as he grows from

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<sup>434</sup> Berrou and Pompilus 546-547.

<sup>435</sup> Henock Trouillot. Demesvar Delorme, ou Introduction à une Sociologie de la Littérature Haïtienne (Port-Au-Prince: Imprimerie des Antilles, 1968) 9.

<sup>436</sup> Price-Mars, Ainsi parla, 174.

an innocent boy to a violent and evil man.<sup>437</sup> While an extensive reading of these novels is beyond the scope of this study, we might nonetheless point out that in these novels Delorme thematized the problems of exile and identitarian anxiety that a Creole in Paris must have experienced. For example in Francesca the noble Djem employs a wily and resourceful Roman helper named Luigi who is able to slip into and out of a whole series of identities. Djem spends most of the novel literally imprisoned because of his singular difference as heir to the Ottoman throne, while Luigi successfully adopts a whole series of identities including that of an Armenian priest, a Franciscan monk, and a highway bandit. While Djem writes poetry from his cell and longs for his lover Francesca, the uneducated Luigi acts on his behalf by becoming many different people. The shape-shifting Luigi, in discussing with Djem the difference between them, sums up the plight of the poet imprisoned within his own tragic identity: "Être poète, c'est donner prise sur soi. Comment peut-on être de cette espèce-là!"<sup>438</sup>

Delorme also published a series of political tracts, most of them attacks on his political rivals in Haiti. But it was in his 1872 Les Théoriciens au Pouvoir that Delorme most explicitly discussed Haiti. The book opens by describing an ideal Caribbean natural scene. Paul and George, two longtime friends, have retreated for several days to the mountains. Paul has brought his copy of *Émile*, for "[I]ire Rousseau au milieu des bois et sur les montagnes, c'est étudier la nature dans son sein même et à la voix de son plus fidèle interprète."<sup>439</sup> After a brief discussion of Rousseau's turn away from "l'autorité du sentiment" towards the contractual theory of government, Paul and George decide that they will pass their time in the mountains by discussing

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<sup>437</sup> Demesvar Delorme, Le Damné, 2e édition, (Paris: Challamel aîné, 1877)

<sup>438</sup> Demesvar Delorme, Francesca ou Les Jeux du Sort (Paris: E, Dentu, 1872) 360.

<sup>439</sup> Delorme, Les Théoriciens 2.

the great political figures of history.<sup>440</sup> Paul limits the scope of their discussion by asserting that "[t]rois peuples surtout se sont signalés sur la terre par l'éclat de leur histoire, par la grandeur de leurs travaux, par leur esprit d'initiative, par l'influence intellectuelle et politique qu'ils ont exercée sur le reste du monde: les Grecs, les Romains, les Français."<sup>441</sup> The 700 page book is thus divided into three parts: the Greek section treats Pericles, Demosthenese, and Solon; the Roman section focuses on Cicero; and the French section is divided into a discussion of the politics "Avant '89," "Mirabeau" and "Lamartine." Delorme not only places Lamartine at the end of this line of political figures, he claims that he represented the intellectual, political and artistic summit of all humanity.

But before George and Paul can begin their discussion of Lamartine's political importance, they are interrupted by the distant drums of a Vodou "cérémonie" in honor of a young peasant girl who had recently died. Several other such digressions punctuate the previous chapters, and they all are narrated by a masterful voice that is knowledgeable about Haitian history and culture. In this final chapter, as Paul and George set out to find the ceremony deep in the mountains, this same narrator gives a bit of background information on the Vodou religion of Haiti, describing the social function of this particular ceremony, the role that the "Samba" plays in directing and narrating the ritual, and the emergence of a possessed initiate:

Tout à coup, de la foule des assistants s'élance une femme au milieu de quadrille. Ses yeux sont en feu. Un mouchoir blanc, légèrement noué, est enroulé autour de son front... Tout son corps s'agite, comme sous l'impulsion d'une pile électrique. Elle ne danse pas, elle bondit; et ses élans impétueux écartent tous les danseurs, qui se rangent respectueusement de côté et lui laissent la place, insuffisante à son ardeur. On dirait une crise d'épilepsie.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>440</sup> Delorme Les Théoriciens 2.

<sup>441</sup> Delorme Les Théoriciens 7-8.

<sup>442</sup> Delorme Les Théoriciens 590.

This spectacle is startling to Paul and George, not least because of the transformation that overcomes the possessed woman:

Elle se plaça à gauche de l'autel. Cette femme était comme transfigurée: le blanc de ses yeux s'était élargi, et du point noir de la prunelle jaillissait un éclair au lieu d'un regard. Ses lèvres, plus calmes, s'étaient refermées, et avaient pris une sévère expression de commandement et d'autorité. Elle était grande, élancée, svelte, et l'énergie de ses mouvements, jointe à l'espèce de gravité répandue sur ses traits par l'exaltation et le délire, lui donnait une beauté étrange et comme virile.<sup>443</sup>

But in spite of the fascination that the narrator shares with Paul and George, these spectators are quick to contain the ecstatic energy of her performance by fitting it into a rigid narrative of social and spiritual progress. The narrator fixes this possession, and the Vodou religion in general, into an historical argument about religion and spirituality. Vodou is an earlier stage of spiritual consciousness that harkens back to ancient Greece and Rome:

C'est son dieu qui la possède. C'est la divinité qui vient d'arriver. C'est la dieu *Léba* qui, comme l'antique Apollon de Delphes, vient de passer, frémissant et terrible, dans le sein de la pythonisse. *Elle parle, et sa parole s'empreint d'une autorité*, d'une sorte de majesté dont la pauvre femme, tout à l'heure confondue dans la foule, était bien loin d'avoir l'apparence. Son langage n'est que sentence et allégories. Elle prophétise, elle commande, elle rend des oracles. C'est la sibylle sur le trépied.<sup>444</sup>

Paul, commenting on the ceremony, further connects Haitian Vodou to other "primitive" world religion by suggests a specious etymology for the word Vodou:

Cette religion du veaudoux, mot altéré sans doute du veau d'or des Hébreux, est évidemment un culte semblable à toutes les espèces de polythéisme qui formaient la foi générale des peuples les plus éclairés de l'antiquité. Elle reconnaît, au-dessous d'un dieu suprême, Jupiter, Allah ou jéhova des nations africaines, des divinités de second ordre, officier et ministres du souverain maître, comme les dieux inférieurs du paganisme gréco-romain, comme les anges obéissants du paradis de John Milton. Ce sont ces dieux intermédiaires, ces anges, comme on

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<sup>443</sup> Delorme *Les Théoriciens* 593.

<sup>444</sup> Delorme *Les Théoriciens* 590. This passage also nods towards other contemporaneous theories about possession. Paul suggests that the Vodou initiates "ont, en outre, sur le magnétisme animal des données vagues mais étonnantes par les expériences inconscientes qu'on leur en voit faire."

les appelle précisément dans ces montagnes, qui sont adorés dans ces religions nées dans les forêts et dans les déserts de l'immense Afrique.<sup>445</sup>

There is little evidence to suggest a connection between the Hebrew idol and the West African religious system, but Delorme's creative etymology serves to link Vodou to the "primitive" religions of the world.

Coming at the beginning of the final section of this book, this possessed Haitian peasant tends to cast a shadow over the subsequent discussion 110-page discussion of Lamartine. This is, after all, an encomium to Delorme's great literary hero, and in so writing about Lamartine Delorme adopts a similarly ecstatic posture. This is not to say that Paul and George imitate the Vodou ceremony; their conversation retains the proper bourgeois decorum. But in discussion Lamartine, Paul must borrow the very authority of Lamartine's voice--"*et sa parole s'empreint d'une autorité*"-- to make his argument:

C'est lui, le poète des poètes, qui achèvera de prouver entre nous que la culture des lettres et du sentiment n'a rien d'incompatible avec la direction des sociétés, et que la poésie même la plus éthérée ne fait pas contraste avec la politique et le gouvernement. Lui, qui a dit une fois, dans un livre que je ne me rappelle pas, que les temps modernes s'appliquent, on ne sait pourquoi, à rapetisser les hommes par l'idée outrée des spécialités.<sup>446</sup>

But if the Vodou ceremony was meant to be a foil to Lamartine's evolved spiritual consciousness, quite the opposite has happened. Lamartine has become Delorme's *veau d'or*.

[PAUL:] Je l'ai vu couché sur son lit mortuaire, les mains réunies sur le crucifix, la figure calme et confiante, comme les espérances qui remplissaient son âme: tête de poète et de philosophe, beauté du vieillard et du génie, que rien n'altère dans les luttes du monde! On croyait voir l'auréole des saints autour de son front... Il eût été inhumé à Saint-Denis, dans la tombe des rois, avec tout l'appareil de leurs majestés, qu'il n'eût pas eu des funérailles plus solennelles, plus vraiment dignes, dans leur majestueuse simplicité, de sa royauté de l'intelligence et du génie.

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<sup>445</sup> Delorme Les Théoriciens 598-599.

<sup>446</sup> Delorme Les Théoriciens 606.

GEORGE: Ce n'est pas de l'admiration que tu as pour celui-ci, *c'est un vrai culte*.

PAUL: Diderot disait qu'il tenait pour malhonnêtes gens ceux qui n'avaient pas pour Richardson l'enthousiasme qu'il lui inspirait; je taxe, moi, d'ingratitude et de déloyauté ceux qui ne vénèrent pas le nom de l'homme exceptionnel dont nous parlons.<sup>447</sup>

Lamartine has thus ascended to the level of the "dieux inermédiaires" that Paul recognized in Vodou and other primitive religions. Indeed, this entire book can be read as a sort of litany of political saints. Delorme's calls Lamartine spirit into presence in order to write with his borrowed authority. To praise Lamartine in such a way is to commune with the spirit of his literary hero.

Furthermore, the low gods of Haiti and other "divinités de second ordre" can manifest themselves with different aspects. Just as Erzulie can appear as the seductive Erzulie Fréda or the vengeful Erzulie Dantor, all the while playing on the image of the Virgin of Guadeloupe, so too is Lamartine a multifaceted divinity:

(PAUL:) Telle est l'idée nouvelle de l'art nouveau que le maître a rêvé. C'est tout un monde qui éclot tout à coup à nos regards.

GEORGE: Mais c'est surtout Victor Hugo qui a accompli cette transformation.

PAUL: Victor Hugo, marchant sur ses traces, a ajouté la mâle vigueur de génie aux grâces souveraines de son devancier et de son frère par la pensée et par l'inspiration. Il a complété la tendresse par l'énergie, le sentiment par la conviction. C'est le second terme du binôme intellectuel et social que forment ces deux noms dans l'époque actuelle. C'est l'élément pour ainsi dire virile de cet éclatant dualisme moral qu'ils semblent avoir pris à tâche de constituer à eux deux, pour exprimer ce siècle étonnant, où le rayon qui s'épanache du coeur se marie à l'éclair qui jaillit de l'esprit.

Involontairement, en pensant à eux, on se rappelle ces quatre autres couples de génies qui ont successivement éclairé le monde en mêlant leurs rayons divers: Platon et Aristote, Virgile et Horace, Racine et Corneille, Schiller, l'harmonieux et doux poète, et Goethe, son hardi confrère, qui s'entoure à plaisir de nuages pleins de foudre et d'éclairs rutilants.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Delorme Les Théoriciens 728-730.

<sup>448</sup> Delorme Les Théoriciens 616-617.



Lamartine's masculine aspect takes the form of Hugo. Delorme's Lamartine is, like the characters in Bergeaud's *Stella*, an "être collectif" who assembles within himself a series of characteristics. Delorme's worshipful chapter on Lamartine thus turns into actual worship as the ceremonial structures of Vodou exceed his attempts to explain and thereby master the religion. Delorme's book establishes Lamartine as a divinity and then offers itself as a vessel for his divine presence.

Later in his career Jean Price-Mars published a less hostile article on Delorme in a Haitian newspaper. Price-Mars told the story how as a young man in 1901, during a visit to France, he and a group of other young Haitians called on the elderly Delorme in his Parisian apartment. Delorme entertained his young audience of admirers with tales of his life among the great men of the previous century: "Michelet, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Lamartine, et bien d'autres." But Delorme's admiration for Lamartine rose to the level of idol worship:

Un jour--nous conta M. Delorme--Lamartine l'invita à déjeuner à la campagne en compagnie de personnages de la plus haute envergure, entr'autres Victor Hugo. Déjeuner gai, conversation riche en chocs d'idées, discussion savoureuse sur les choses de l'esprit. Lamartine lut à ses hôtes une partie de son drame sur Toussaint Louverture et Delorme obtint le plus vif succès en disant un poème des "Méditations."

Lamartine fut si satisfait d'entendre ses vers dits avec nuance, netteté et élégance qu'au milieu des applaudissements de l'auditoire il embrassa l'auteur du *Damné* avec effusion et lui remit un manuscrit autographe en souvenir de l'inoubliable journée.

M. Delorme nous fit voir le manuscrit qu'il gardait précieusement enfoui parmi d'autres papiers où l'on pouvait reconnaître sa grosse écriture à lui pâteuse, pleine et ascendante.<sup>449</sup>

This sacred manuscript links Delorme, then in the last years of his life, to the divine presence of Lamartine. But beyond mere reification, Delorme has taken on the very characteristics of his literary heroes. Like the wild-eyed Vodou initiate in the Haitian mountains, Delorme invites

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<sup>449</sup> Jean Price-Mars. "Silhouette. Démesure Delorme. La fin d'une carrière." *Le National* [Port-au-Prince] 28 Juillet 1954.

these figures to enter into his very selfhood, to possess his body and govern his actions. Price-Mars describes the performance that, even as an old man, he still carried off with great mastery:

Et c'était souvent dans l'intonation de la voix, l'éloquence des gestes, des jeux de scène à la manière de la fameuse présentation des portraits dans *Hernani*, moins l'emphase romantique.

Et je compris comment M. Delorme avait pu exercer pendant un demi-siècle la royauté du charme sur tous ceux qui l'approchaient, et je compris pourquoi même le dernier Empereur d'Allemagne, Guillaume II, même le Cardinal Rampolla, princes rompus au cliquetis des dialogues entre gens de qualité n'ont pu se dérober à la séduction du vieux nègre.<sup>450</sup>

Delorme set out to contrast the primitive "veaudoux" with the enlightened spirit of Lamartine, but he only succeeded in himself copying the ceremonial possession that he sought to distance himself from earlier in the chapter. And thus Delorme, like the other mimetic writers of nineteenth century Haiti, succeed in writing in their own voice. He has assembled within himself a manner and personal magnetism that Price-Mars cannot help but admire. In spite of his literary sins, Delorme has opened up his identity to the powerful presence of the possessing spirits of his literary heroes. But in spite of his blatant bovarism, and perhaps because of it, he is able to establish and maintain this identity in the midst of his exile.

Thus as Price-Mars recognizes in Delorme the spark of borrowed genius, he again calls into question his condemnation of Haiti's bovarist literature. This examination of some nineteenth-century Haitian texts has, if nothing else, demonstrated the complex polyvocal quality that can be found there, a quality that is informed by the ceremonial practices that this literature is often so eager to ignore or disavow.

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<sup>450</sup> Jean Price-Mars. "Silhouette."

Chapter Seven: Conclusion:  
Spectres de Napoléon

Discover why the unrested and living dead roam among us. Walk with us and find out why New Orleans is considered by many to be the most haunted city in North America!!  
New Orleans Spirit Tours  
Brochure, 200-.

Napoleon Bonaparte haunts the city of New Orleans. In the city's famous French Quarter, on the corner of Chartres and St. Louis streets, visitors often stop for a drink or a meal at the "Napoleon House," the former residence of New Orleans Mayor Nicholas Girod. Girod, legend has it, offered his house to the emperor in 1815 upon learning of his escape from Elba (or, alternatively, when he participated in a bold scheme to rescue the former emperor from his captivity on St. Helena.) This standing invitation was well known and the house adopted the name not of the former mayor but of the mayor's expected guest.<sup>451</sup> Today Napoleon would probably be more comfortable (though perhaps a bit uneasy about) staying next door, at the *Hotel Ste-Hélène*, which announces on a plaque installed next to a small statue of the emperor that the hotel is "dedicated to the memory of Napoleon Bonaparte." A few blocks away, a banner on the Cabildo, the former Spanish Colonial Administrative building on Jackson Square, advertises "Napoleon's Death Mask" as one of the highlights of the exhibits at the Louisiana State Museum, which occupies the building today. The death mask is displayed in a dimly lit stairwell that brings visitors from the first floor exhibition on Louisiana's French and Spanish colonial history, to the second floor, which depicts the 1803 Louisiana Purchase and Louisiana's antebellum history. In the exhibition narrative, this mask, made from a mold of Napoleon's face just after his death, "[s]ymbolize[s] the waning influence of France as Louisiana progressed from

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<sup>451</sup> Stanley Clisby Arthur, Old New Orleans: A History of the Vieux Carré, its Ancient and Historical Buildings (New Orleans: Harmanson, 1936).

colonial to U.S. rule."<sup>452</sup> On the other side of Canal Street, in the former "American Sector" of the city, visitors can admire the grand houses on Napoleon avenue, which is flanked by several streets bearing the names of his former victories, like Austerlitz, Marengo and Jena. Finally, southwest of the city on Bayou Lafourche, sits the community of Napoleonville, whose Catholic parish patron was, until the early 20th century, St. Napoleon, an obscure Greek martyr of the first century.<sup>453</sup>

It is perhaps not too surprising to find these traces of Napoleon in New Orleans today. The city's tourist industry relies on the unique character of the older parts of town, a difference linked to what is perceived as the city's "French" or "Latin" flavor. The figure of Napoleon Bonaparte is an obvious choice for instilling and maintaining the historical link between French and Louisiana history. Visitors to New Orleans encounter a heavily romanticized history that emphasizes decadence and decay and invokes a rather morbid and deathly version of the city's past. Other American cities, like Jamestown or "Colonial Williamsburg," promote their link to the past as a "living history." Visitors to Williamsburg will find a restored colonial village manned by actors in period costume reenacting daily life in eighteenth-century Virginia. But the history that tourists find in New Orleans is not living-- it is quite dead. What's more, it has returned from the dead and roams the streets at night, delighting tourists with its macabre presence. In recent years a tour group has begun to capitalize on this romanticized fascination with death and haunting. It offers what it calls the "Haunted History" tour of the French Quarter and the adjacent cemeteries. Imitators soon sprang up and now tourists can choose between a "vampire tour," a "voodoo/cemetery tour" and a "ghost and vampire tour". These walking tours

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<sup>452</sup> "Visitor's Guide to the Cabildo" (New Orleans: Louisiana State Museum. n.d.).

<sup>453</sup> Simone de la Souchère Deléry, Napoleon's Soldiers in America, (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1972).

owe much to the popularity of New Orleans novelist's Ann Rice's successful series of books that link New Orleans to vampires and the world of the undead.

I would suggest, by way of conclusion, that such "haunted history" is the residue of the mimetic mode of cultural production that I trace in this study. If a Creole culture declares itself by channeling the borrowed voices of metropolitan authority, then we should not be surprised to learn that some of these voices still linger about, and it is hard to imagine a more salient sign of such authority than Napoleon. Like the spirit of the lugubrious French colonial culture in Haiti that Boisrond Tonnerre sought to expel once and for all, Napoleon lingers about in Louisiana. But rather than exorcise Napoleon's spirit, we might follow it as it appears and disappears, for it is in these wanderings that we see the ventriloquism of Creole culture. Furthermore, Napoleon's spirit both reconnects Louisiana and France by invoking Louisiana's colonial past, and also rehearses the violence of slavery and colonialism.

Creole Louisiana has continually tried to fix or "ontologize" Napoleon's remains in New Orleans, but these efforts failed to stop his spirit from wandering about. Indeed the more he was buried and memorialized, the more he reappeared. Thus, as in a Spiritualist séance or a Vodou ceremony, Napoleon's voice remains available to this Creole culture. To assemble a Creole community is to embrace such a haunted history.

During the early years of the 19th Century Napoleon Bonaparte was widely respected in Louisiana. His politics and colonial ambitions were attractive to many people in Creole New Orleans. For Creole New Orleans the retrocession of Louisiana from Spain to Napoleon's France was understood as the just reward for their loyal patriotism during Spanish rule in the colony. At the beginning of Spanish rule in Louisiana in 1764, a minor rebellion drove away the first Spanish governor to arrive in the colony. Alessandro O'Reilly, the second Spanish governor,

restored Spanish rule in Louisiana and executed five of the rebellion's ringleaders. These five men became "martyrs" and their memory served to rally Louisianians around the cause of a persistent French patriotism and Creole nationalism.<sup>454</sup>

By negotiating the retrocession of Louisiana, Napoleon had fulfilled the dreams of these ardently patriotic Francophone colonists. In a speech made to the people of New Orleans in April 1803, the newly-arrived French Colonial Prefect Pierre Clément Laussat apologized for France's earlier "abandon lâche et dénaturé," and acknowledged the "fidélité...et courage héroïques," that Creole Louisiana displayed in its allegiance to France during Spain's rule: "Tous les coeurs français en furent attendris, et n'en ont jamais perdu la mémoire: ils s'écrierent alors, avec orgueil, et ils n'ont depuis cessé de répéter que *leur sang culait dans vos veines*" (emphasis in original).<sup>455</sup> This long-standing desire on the part of the French people to be reunited with Louisiana was to remain unfulfilled, Laussat continued, until such a man rose to power who had the talent and skill to negotiate a retrocession: "Cet homme; il préside aujourd'hui à nos destinés, et, dès ce moment, Louisianais, il vous répond des vôtres."<sup>456</sup>

However Napoleon was only to rule in Louisiana for a matter of days. News of Napoleon's sale of the colony to Thomas Jefferson reached New Orleans in August 1803. Whatever resentment Louisianians felt about this second betrayal seems not to have changed their high opinion of Napoleon. In fact, this brief reconnection to metropolitan France, this momentary transfusion of French blood (to borrow Laussat's metaphor), seems to have established the figure of Napoleon as a patriotic and spiritual intermediary between Louisiana and France. This brief retrocession was but the first of many "returns" that Napoleon Bonaparte

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<sup>454</sup> Three dramatizations of this 1764 event were written and staged in New Orleans during this time.

<sup>455</sup> Moniteur de la Louisiane. April 2, 1803. no. 337.

<sup>456</sup> Moniteur de la Louisiane. April 2, 1803. no. 337.

would make to the former colony. Napoleon, as we shall see, haunts Louisiana as the specter of Louisiana's lost connection to France.

In September 1821, when news reached New Orleans that Napoleon had died, an advertisement appeared in the city's newspapers that invited interested parties to a meeting to plan a "fête funèbre en l'honneur de Napoleon." The ceremony was necessary to secure "la place que Napoleon doit occuper parmi les grands hommes anciens et modernes."<sup>457</sup> On December 21st, 1821, a mass and funeral services, which were described three days later in the French section of the bi-lingual Louisiana Gazette, attracted a large and diverse crowd. Jean Baptiste Fogliardi, an Italian artist who had recently arrived in New Orleans to work as a scene painter in the city's theaters, had created for the occasion an elaborately decorated cenotaph <sup>458</sup>:

Le premier soubassement offre les arts éplorés ainsi que la religion. L'allégorie placée au-dessus représente la muse de l'histoire ordonnant au génie de buriner les hauts faits de Napoléon, et le génie a déjà inscrit la prise de Toulon, première époque de sa gloire; ce beau tableau est surmonté du manteau impérial, du sceptre, de la main de la justice, de la couronne, enfin de l'aigle qui semble encore vouloir les protéger; deux renommés tiennent la véritable couronne immortelle de lauriers; enfin l'urne cinéraire est au sommet du monument, des trépieds antiques sont aux quatres coins, les aigles d'or portant une crèpe, entourent ce mausolée, et les faisceaux et les drapeaux si longtemps triomphans, ajoutent à l'ensemble de ce bel ouvrage et retrace de beaux souvenirs. <sup>459</sup>

Fogliardi's cenotaph fluently employed a wide range of Napoleonic iconography. The allegory of the "muse de l'histoire," inscribing the battle of Toulon in the annals of history, demonstrates his concern for establishing and defending Napoleon's place in history. The fact that Napoleon

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<sup>457</sup> Louisiana Gazette. Oct. 15th, 1821.

<sup>458</sup> Encyclopedia of New Orleans Artists, 1718-1918, ed. John A. Mahé II and Rosanne McCaffery (New Orleans: The Historic New Orleans Collection, 1987) 139.

See also: A.E. Fossier, "The Funeral Services of Napoleon in New Orleans, December 19, 1821" The Louisiana Historical Quarterly 13. 1930. 246-252.

<sup>459</sup> Louisiana Gazette. Dec 21, 1821.

died a captive of the English, and that his body was buried on St. Helena, was particularly troublesome to the group that planned the memorial, as two inscriptions on the cenotaph show:

Sous un saule étranger repose  
Ce guerrier qui conquit et Thebes et Memphis,  
Et dont l'Europe un jour fera l'apothéose  
Sous la colonne d'Austerlitz.

Albion! Albion! quelle page sanglante  
Tu viens de préparer à l'immortel burin!  
Il t'accuse, il te presse, et de sa voix tonnante  
Te demande un héros dont tu fus l'assassin.<sup>460</sup>

These Napoleonic sympathies are what one might expect from a still largely Francophone city that had, just seven years earlier, repelled an invading English army during the Battle of New Orleans. Napoleon not only died while a captive of the hated "Albion," but his body was buried on foreign soil, the English island St. Helena. But beyond this political message, we see in the description of this cenotaph a concern for this physical displacement of the former emperor's remains. The "urne cinéraire" on the top of this monument was empty, merely a ceremonial case for the emperor's still-exiled remains. But the organizers of this service anticipated the day when Napoleon's remains might return home to France. This memorial mass was thus an attempt to re-bury Napoleon in proxy-- to "faire l'apothéose" in a formal ceremony. If the English would not allow such a ceremony, and the political situation in France prevented it, then at least the loyal Louisianians could ritually elevate Napoleon into their pantheon of heroes. In this sense the ceremony in New Orleans mimicked and subverted the political drama of the 1803 retrocession. Napoleon's ceremonial re-burial in New Orleans revived the link between Louisiana, the twice-abandoned colony, and France. Napoleon's body, the ceremony suggests, would certainly be

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<sup>460</sup> Louisiana Gazette. Dec 21, 1821.



more at home in Louisiana than under this "saule étranger," and this hospitality served to renew and reaffirm the connection to metropolitan France.

This sentiment-- that Louisiana would have been, (or, indeed, was) the ideal resting place for the exiled emperor-- has persisted in Louisiana folk history. Among the many conspiratorial theories that surround Napoleon's death is the curious Louisiana folk tradition that holds that Napoleon is buried in Jean Lafitte, a small town south of New Orleans. While it is not clear when this tradition began, by the beginning of the 20th century some Louisianians told elaborate tales about Napoleon and the famous Louisiana privateer Jean Lafitte. In the 1930s, writers working for the Louisiana Writers Program of the Work Projects Administration interviewed Toinette Perrin of Jefferson Parish. Perrin family oral tradition held that in the small Perrin cemetery, at the confluence of Barataria Bayou and Bayou des Oies in Jefferson Parish, Napoleon Bonaparte was buried alongside John Paul Jones and Jean Lafitte himself.<sup>461</sup> A more detailed version of this story appeared in August and September of 1928 in a four-part feature article written by Meigs O. Frost for the New Orleans States. Frost's informant, Dr. J.L. Genella of New Orleans, claimed to have found a cache of forgotten papers and documents in the attic of an old and distinguished Creole family from New Orleans. Dr. Genella also gave a detailed account of Lafitte's rescue of Napoleon from St. Helena which involved using first a prosthetic body, then a body-double to stand in for the imprisoned Bonaparte:

On February 28, 1819, at 7 p.m., as Napoleon sat solitary on the rocks looking out to sea, the British sentry some distance away, again in the dusk he felt a gentle tug on his sleeve. A man who had crawled to him amid the rocks spoke. Napoleon recognized Jean Lafitte. Napoleon was handed a stick of his own height, with a cross-piece the width of his shoulders. Slowly, that was slipped up the back of his loosely-fitting overcoat. His hat rested on its top. Silently Napoleon slipped down out of coat and hat. As silently another man took his place. He was the man mentioned in some French historical documents as

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<sup>461</sup> Gumbo Ya-Ya. A Collection of Louisiana Folktales. (New York: Bonanza Books, 1984) 318.

Napoleon's "double"--a man who resembles so closely that he had substituted for him in the same costume at certain wearisome public appearances.<sup>462</sup>

After stealing away from the island in "a slim Louisiana pirogue," Lafitte and Napoleon made their way to a larger ship and headed for Louisiana. Suspicion arose over this imposter, but "Dr. Antommarchi [Napoleon's physician], fully aware of the plot, also swore the man was Napoleon." However, the story continues, Napoleon died on the journey to Louisiana, and Lafitte had him buried "on the high point of land where the Bayou des Oies joins Barataria Bayou," in the Perrin family cemetery.

This story inverts the function of the 1821 memorial mass. Instead of ritually representing Napoleon with a ceremonial cenotaph decorated with his iconography, Louisiana has instead secured the actual body of the Emperor by literally scooping him from his emblematic hat and overcoat and replacing him with an imposter. The body that was exhumed on St. Helena and interred with a great ceremony in 1839 in the *Hôtel des Invalides*, according to this tradition, is an imposter's and the great ceremony restoring Napoleon to France was a fraud.

In Paris, the free-black New Orleans-born poet and playwright Victor Séjour witnessed this return of Napoleon's remains (real or not) to France on December 15th, 1840 and was inspired to write a poem--"Le Retour de Napoleon"-- in honor of the occasion. The poem, the first published work by the 25-year-old Séjour, appeared in Paris in 1841 and was reprinted in Les Cenelles.<sup>463</sup> Séjour's poem shares with his fellow Bonaparte sympathizers from Louisiana a concern for the proper ritual circumstances of the former Emperor's re-burial. France, Séjour suggests, should have welcomed Napoleon's remains under more glorious conditions:

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<sup>462</sup> Meigs O. Frost, "How Lafitte Whisked Napoleon Away From Isle," New Orleans States Aug. 28, 1928.

<sup>463</sup> Victor Séjour, "Le Retour de Napoléon" (Paris: Dauvin et Fontaines, 1841).

Ah! quand, seul et pensif, debout sur Saint-Hélène,  
Ses regards se tournait vers la France lointaine,  
Comme vers une étoile d'or;  
Son front s'illuminait d'un souvenir de flamme;  
Il s'écriait: "mon Dieu, je donnerais mon âme,  
"Pour la revoir encor.

.....

Honte à nous! Il fallait le laisser dans son île;  
Loin de nous lâchetés il reposait tranquille...  
Ou bien, pour le ravoir, lui couvert de lauriers,  
Lui vainqueur d'Austerlitz, lui le fils de la gloire,  
Il fallait, l'arme au bras, conduits par la victoire,  
Le ramener dans nos foyers.

C'eût été digne et beau!...le tambour, la mitraille,  
Nos soldats chauds encore d'une grande bataille,  
La poudre et le canon,  
La France relevée, et l'infâme Angleterre,  
Expiant ses forfaits les deux genoux en terre...  
C'est ainsi qu'il fallait fêter Napoléon.

N'importe, il est ici! Courage, noble France.  
On ne peut prolonger ta honte, ta souffrance,  
Car sur le marbre du tombeau,  
Ravivant dans nos cœurs notre haine trompée,  
Nous irons, jeunes, aiguïser notre épée,  
Embêche à Waterloo!!!<sup>464</sup>

Séjour, who was later to become a favorite playwright of Napoleon III, was clearly interested in restoring the memory of the emperor's glory and in promoting a Bonapartist vision of the future.<sup>465</sup> Ideally, Napoleon's return would have been to a more hospitable land, one that was ready to re-embrace his glorious legacy.

As if to make up for the fact that Napoleon was not returned to a France under more glorious circumstances, several prominent New Orleanians again organized a " Service Funèbre

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<sup>464</sup> Les Cenelles.

<sup>465</sup> Charles Edwards O'Neill. Séjour: Parisian Playwright from Louisiana. (Lafayette, La. Center for Louisiana Studies, 1995.

en mémoire de Napoléon."<sup>466</sup> The plans for this ceremony had much in common with the ceremony of nineteen years earlier. The service was to begin with a public military demonstration in the *Place d'Armes* by the *Légion de la Louisiane* and the *bataillon de Washington*, with a mass to follow in St. Louis Cathedral. Only those who had purchased a ticket signed by Judge Canonge, the respected New Orleanian who had delivered the funeral oration at the 1821 ceremony, would be admitted to the church. Gregorio Curto, a well-known New Orleans composer, had composed a Requiem Mass for the occasion, and a 21-gun salute would signal the end of the ceremony. In order to collect the tickets and maintain order during the ceremony, the planning committee had also appointed several "commissaires" who were to wear "pour marque distinctive un ruban bleu sur crêpe noir au bras gauche."<sup>467</sup>

But on March 18th, 1841, two days before the ceremony was to take place, the "conseil des Marguilliers," of the Cathedral met, rejected the plans made by the planning committee, and decided that they alone had the authority to police the church. They also resolved that the church was to remain open to all citizens of the city, Christian and non-Christian alike, and that those who had bought tickets to the event would only be given the privilege of sitting "dans les tribunes que les souscripteurs ont fait élever."<sup>468</sup> The ceremony was cancelled, the *Abeille* reported on March 20th, due to this "malentendu entre le Comité d'arrangement et le Conseil des Marguilliers."<sup>469</sup> In Napoleon's Soldiers in America, Simone de la Souchère Deléry suggests that the anti-Catholic Native American Party, which had held a convention in the city a month before

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<sup>466</sup> L'Abeille. Journal officiel de l'état, Nouvelle-Orléans. 12 Mars, 1841.

<sup>467</sup> L'Abeille. Journal officiel de l'état, Nouvelle-Orléans. 19 Mars, 1841.

<sup>468</sup> L'Abeille. Journal officiel de l'état, Nouvelle-Orléans. 20 Mars, 1841.

<sup>469</sup> L'Abeille. Journal officiel de l'état, Nouvelle-Orléans. 20 Mars, 1841..

this controversy, might have influenced the Marguilliers' decision to assert their authority over the church in this matter.<sup>470</sup>

But on the same page as this announcement and the resolutions of these two groups, was a long poem memorializing Napoleon by Victor Debouchel. This poem, like Séjour's, celebrates the return on Napoleon's remains to France, and ends on a similarly nostalgic note:

Ta place était marqués aux confins des Deux Mondes,  
Pour que tu commandas aux orages, aux ondes.  
Comme vivant aux rois.  
Inaccessible autant que ton vaste génie  
Ste. Hélène, témoin de ta grande agonie,  
Eut conservé ta croix.

Tel que le fier Chrétien, qui prit la Palestine,  
Pour ravir un sépulcre aux enfans de Médine  
Ennemis du Chrétien;  
Tel un jour on eût vu la guerrier de la France,  
S'élancer tout bouillant d'ardeur et de vengeance,  
Pour conquérir le tien.<sup>471</sup>

Debouchel's call for a renewal of French colonial ambitions, and the demand that France capture St. Helena, demonstrates a continued concern for the location of Napoleon's remains. In spite of the fact that Napoleon's remains returned to France, Debouchel considers the first burial site to be important enough to mount a crusade in France to conquer the island.

While on March 20th, 1841, New Orleanians could not attend a ceremony in honor of Napoleon at St. Louis Cathedral, they could go to one of the two theatrical performances about Napoleon that played in the city that day. *Napoléon à St. Hélène* was playing at the Orleans Theater and *Napoleon ou Vive l'Empereur* was part of the bill at the American Theater.

These repeated rituals and reburials indicate the haunting presence of Napoleon in Louisiana. Napoleon is laid to rest, only to return once again to be reburied. These burials, like

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<sup>470</sup> Deléry, 162-3.

<sup>471</sup> L'Abeille, 20 Mars, 1841.

the attempts to fix the remains of Hugo in Paris, are engaged in the project of "ontologizing" Napoleon's remains. But in ritually reburying Napoleon, these New Orleanians enter into this logic of mourning that necessarily invites Napoleon's ghost to return again and again to the city. In stabilizing the place of the body, mourning produces a ghostly version of the dead to occupy (and create) the space of its death. Mourning is, in Derrida's terms, " a mode of production of the phantom, itself a phantasmatic mode of production."<sup>472</sup> This fixing and stabilizing, as we have seen, has been done as a welcoming home, and as such it produces a ghostly Napoleon at home in a phantasmatic city. By creating empty boxes meant to house the displaced remains of the former emperor, these New Orleanians have loosed Napoleon's ghost upon the city. They produced a phantasmatic Napoleon who promptly exceeded the boundaries of his ceremonial tomb. The process of stabilization, Derrida suggests, is not itself stable, and the very phantoms that mourning produces for the purposes of burial inevitably return to wander among the living. This ghost, created in order to be buried, to forge a measure of ontological stability, will always return because of what Derrida calls "hauntological" instability. The phantasmagoric production required for mourning exceeds its own purpose and comes back to destabilize the already fixed dead with its own haunting presence.

These burials demonstrate that, in spite of his being buried many times, Napoleon still haunts New Orleans. In saying this I mean to suggest something more than "Napoleon's legend *lives on* in the city." It is through Napoleon's uncanny presence that history is performed. The various towns, hotels and streets that have been named for Napoleon hint at what I am suggesting here. This is especially true in the case of the "Napoleon House" which is still holding a table and a room for the emperor, should he ever decide to visit. This house is thus haunted by

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<sup>472</sup> Derrida 97.

Napoleon, but not in the conventional sense of haunting. Napoleon's spirit has not *returned* to the house; it has never been there. The house's claim to fame--"Refuge Offered Napoleon, 1821" reads the plaque on the door--does not involve Napoleon's presence in the house, a presence that his ghost or *revenant* might use as an excuse to return. Napoleon House is haunted, rather, by the future presence of Napoleon. The invitation stands, and Napoleon's ghost lingers in this place to which he might one day have been welcomed.

This study has focused on Spiritualist and Vodou literary ventriloquism in an attempt to understand the process of Creole cultural transmission, but, as we see with Napoleon's persistent ghost in New Orleans, these modes of cultural transmission are not the only ways that cultures interacted in the Atlantic world. However the ventriloquism of spiritualism and Vodou possession allow us to see the ways in which a Creole culture can threaten the power structures that place demands upon it.

To read Creole cultural history is to listen for the persistence of these ghostly voices, for they, like the ghost of Hugo that we encountered earlier, return periodically to beat the drum of their persistent presence. The Creole cultures of Haiti and Louisiana are, to borrow a term from Antonio Benítez-Rojo, supersyncretic. In the intensely hybrid space of the Caribbean, heterogeneous cultural elements clash and blend together in diverse ways--syncretism. But the many elements that go into making up Caribbean culture are themselves hybrids, and any attempt to work backwards by unraveling this complex cultural patrimony will necessary fail. This supersyncretic culture is chaotic in that it resists and exceeds external structures and historical patterns. But, as contemporary chaos theory has discovered, out of this chaos comes a certain order. Benítez-Rojo sees in the performative nature of this chaos certain "repeating" patterns and rhythmic dissonances that destabilize the binary, martial rhythms of Western

metaphysics--presence, (absence), presence, (absence)--with a dissonant "polyrhythmic ensemble."<sup>473</sup> In this way, the imitation involved in Spiritualism and Vodou can be read for the difference inherent in its repetition, the way that it riffs and improvises in relation to the dominant metronome of colonial culture. The Spiritualist séances in New Orleans, the literary possessions in Haiti, and the repetitive reburials of Napoleon in Louisiana all describe a pattern of colonial imitation that both repeat and defeat the colonial cultural order.

In this way, to pay attention to ghosts like Napoleon's is an ethically essential task. In Spectres de Marx Derrida listens after ghosts that continually return to supplement and problematize the Western ontology of presence, for in welcoming ghosts one can speak with the Other. Thus to attend to the deep historical injustices in the Atlantic world, we must attend to the ghosts that haunt this space. In the Creole world we can recognize a further layer of rhythmic complexity in Derrida's "hauntology," for to read for the dissonance created by imitated identities is to speak with the ghosts already lingering in these copied identities. Thus in the "supersyncretic" Creole culture we might read for a "super-hauntology" that continually exhibits the already haunted and fractured presence of Western authority. The variously named strategies for attending to the ghosts in Creole culture--Roach's "surrogation"; Benítez-Rojo's "supersyncretism"; Bhabha's "mimicry,"; Glissant's "opacité"--all share the ability to destabilize Western narratives of dominance and presence, narratives that, as Derrida has pointed out, were themselves already haunted.

Napoleon is present in New Orleans, and his rhythmic *revenance* beats in sympathy and syncopation with the cultural memory of the city. Rather than forget or repress Louisiana's colonial past, we see in the city a tendency to let these ghosts speak. In a similar way, Haiti's

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<sup>473</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, The Repeating Island (Durham: Duke UP, 1992) 26.



cultural memory tends to accumulate its own ghosts. And so we end with one more appearance of Napoleon's ghost. Shortly after the slaveholding Southern regime was overthrown in New Orleans L'Union, the city's first black newspaper, published a spiritualist message gives a voice to Napoleon's "Pensées D'Outre-Tombe."

Pensées D'Outre-Tombe De Napoléon I<sup>er</sup>

Non, la terre n'est pas au premier occupant. Non, nul royaume n'est pas au plus fort ni au plus puissant. Non, chacun est le maître de ce qu'il possède légitimement et honnêtement, et celui qui, oubliant les lois de la probité et de la morale divine, empiète sur les droits d'autrui, celui-là, quel qu'il soit, est coupable. Les fanfares de la victoire, les enivrantes, les vaines et flatteuses paroles des courtisans, l'humilité des grands, peuvent en instant donner une apparence d'équité aux torts, et faire taire un instant, au fond de la conscience cuirassée, la voix de la justice, mais tôt ou tard, dans un monde ou dans un autre, il vient un instant où le remords reprend ses droits et règne en tyran inflexible dans la conscience jadis criminelle.

Ah! quand parfois, les regards fixés sur ce globe où j'ai laissé l'empreinte de mes pas, je vois encore les ornières des roues des canons que je faisais traîner à ma suite; quand je considère que je pouvais soulever le monde et le pousser endormi sur les larges ailes de la liberté; quand je puis voir dans le passé, que je me reporte à toutes ces scènes diverses de ma vie mortelle, je vois des flots de sang dans les sillons tracés de mon artillerie; au milieu du bruit et de la fumée des batailles, j'entends d'affreuses malédictions des gémissements qui viennent me torturer jusqu'au lieu où je suis.

Oh! comme il m'en coûte pour vous faire ces aveux. Mais maintenant je puis, de temps à autre, vous en faire de semblables; et croyez que le souvenir de mes actions terrestres vient, la plupart du temps, attrister les rapides instants de ma vie actuelle. Il est vrai que, même à présent on m'appelle "Grand." Mais à quoi sert la grandeur? À quoi servent les honneurs, la puissance, quand ils ne reposent pas sur le bien? Ah! j'en ai malheureusement maintenant la triste expérience! Oh! si je pouvais encore revenir sur cette terre que j'ai remplie du bruit de mon vain et triste nom, que de biens! Que de tyrans je renverserais par des moyens plus humains, que d'esclaves à qui je ferais rendre la liberté! Insensé que j'étais! Ceux-ci, je les persécutais, tandis que je voulais la liberté pour moi et ensuite pour quelques-uns de ceux que la fortune avait attaché à mon char. Je faisais forger des chaînes pour maintenir les hommes sous ma dépendance.

C'en est assez, seulement laissez-moi m'écrier : "Quelle sauvage et ridicule anomalie!"

Réfléchissez avec moi

NAPOLÉON.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>474</sup> "Pensées D'Outre-Tombe De Napoléon I<sup>er</sup>" L'Union, 15 Oct. 1862.

While the earlier attempts to bury and memorialize Napoleon in New Orleans arose from the impulse among white Creoles to lionize him and thereby celebrate Louisiana's colonial connection to France, this message from Napoleon's spirit does quite the opposite. Here Napoleon expresses regret at his current state in the afterlife, and admits his own culpability in the history of infamy. But, in as much as they imported Napoleon's absence into Louisiana's Creole culture, the earlier burials and eulogies contributed to this confession. Louisiana's Napoleon nostalgia also arises from an alternative subversive agenda; we keep him close so that we can hear him apologize. Napoleon haunts our history as the spokesman for the evils of colonialism and slavery.

By giving space to Napoleon's voice in this newly inaugurated newspaper, the editors, like many of the nineteenth-century Creole writers that we have examined in this study, are both subverting and appropriating the power of this famous voice. But in so doing they are able to break the very chains that Napoleon himself helped to forge. To listen to such ghosts, whether in a Spiritualist séance or a Vodou ceremony, is to respond to the ethical demands of the post-colonial world.

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## Vita

A native of New Orleans, Louisiana, Jean-Marc Allard Duplantier graduated *magna cum laude* from The Colorado College in 1996 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in comparative literature. In 1996, Duplantier took a job in the Special Collections department of the Newberry Library in Chicago. In 1998 he moved to Haiti to live and work in the Port-au-Prince area. He returned to Louisiana in 1999 to begin his graduate work at Louisiana State University, accepting a Board of Regents Fellowship to study in the Department of French studies. Duplantier received the departmental award for the outstanding incoming graduate student in 2000, and earned a master's degree in 2003.

In 2001 Duplantier served as co-curator for a library exhibition at LSU entitled "Résonances Créoles: Musique et Littérature Francophones de la Nouvelle-Orléans au XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle." The exhibition, drawn from the rich collections of the LSU Libraries Special Collections, highlighted the historical importance of Louisiana's Francophone culture. The online version of the exhibition was awarded a Certificate of Commendation from the American Association of State and Local History in 2003.

In 2003 Duplantier again moved to Haiti to pursue research for his doctoral dissertation. He was awarded a Fulbright Grant and an International Dissertation Research Fellowship from the Social Science Research Council to study in the libraries and archives of Haiti. He presented some of his initial Haitian findings in a paper entitled: "Joseph Colastin Rousseau et la littérature de la diaspora haïtienne en Louisiane" at the International Colloquium Relire l'histoire littéraire et le littéraire haïtiens in Jacmel, Haiti.

Upon his return to Louisiana in 2004, Duplantier continued to present conference papers on his research into connections between Haiti and Louisiana. He also served on the advisory

board for "Common Routes--Saint Domingue and Louisiana" an exhibition organized by the Historic New Orleans Collections.

In November 2006 Duplantier successfully defended his doctoral dissertation entitled: "Nos Frères d'Outre-Golfe": Spiritualism, Vodou and the Mimetic Literatures of Haiti and Louisiana." He was awarded a PhD in French in December 2006. He is currently living in New Orleans.