

The Poetics of Sensation in J.M.G. Le Clézio's *Onitsha*

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Summary

French-Mauritian writer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2008 and has published over forty novels, is little known in the English-speaking academe where there is virtually no critical work available about his work. This article seeks to remedy this gap of knowledge through a close reading of *Onitsha* (1997), a novel illustrative of Le Clézio's literary project from the 1990s onward. In *Onitsha*, Le Clézio is primarily concerned with conveying the texture of varying sensations associated with different experiences in order to connect these experiences to the feelings related to "being in the world". Textually, this is achieved through the evocation of the main protagonist's experience of the world by way of sensation, and I will show that the quality of affect that results stands for something both contained and specific, and with far-reaching implications. The role of affect in *Onitsha* and how it is focused on sensations results in a thoroughly original coming-of-age tale, located between poetry and prose.

Opsomming

Die Frans-Mauritiaanse skrywer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, wat die Nobelprys vir Letterkunde in 2008 ontvang het en meer as veertig romans gepubliseer het, is nie welbekend in die Engelssprekende akademiese wêreld waar feitlik geen kritiese werk oor sy skryfwerk beskikbaar is nie. In hierdie artikel poeg ek om hierdie kennisleemte reg te stel deur middel van 'n noulettende studie van *Onitsha* (1997), 'n roman wat lig werp op Le Clézio se literêre projek vanaf die 1990's. In *Onitsha* is Le Clézio hoofsaaklik daarmee gemoeid om die tekstuur weer te gee van verskillende sensasies wat geassosieer word met verskillende ervarings ten einde hierdie ervarings in verband te bring met gevoelens van "in die wêreld te wees". Tekstueel word dit bereik deur die hoofprotagonis se ervaring van die wêreld deur middel van sensasie op te roep. Ek poeg om te toon dat die gevolglike affek beide beheers en spesifiek is, en verreikende implikasies het. Die rol van affek in *Onitsha* – en hoe dit op sensasies fokus – het 'n oorspronklike mondigwordingsverhaal tot gevolg wat tussen die poësie en prosa geleë is.

Introduction

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, whose work has been widely translated into English, is surprisingly little known in the anglophone world and this, even after he received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2008. Perhaps this stems from the fact that his writing has always defied classification in any particular genre, school of thought or literary trend. This is partly because the author deliberately refuses categorisation by reason of his unfaltering resistance to any ideological affiliation and his resolve to stay, at least explicitly, *non-engagé*. Yet Le Clézio is not impervious to the burning questions of our times. On the contrary, his literary project demonstrates that at the heart of his stories lies the urgent need to *bear witness* to the world and to the human experience within it.

Two distinct periods emerge in his literary production. Until the 1980s, Le Clézio embraced the ideals of modernism, resisting the insinuation of his life into his works (Salles 2006: 216). Later, however, his writing becomes anchored in “personal myth” as he draws his novelistic subjects from family lore and finds inspiration in childhood memories (pp. 216-217)¹. In the works of this second period, the author’s phenomenological preoccupation with the role of sensations in human experience is revealed. These novels are concerned with conveying the texture of varying sensations associated with different experiences in order to capture the bodily moments that ground them and give them the particular qualities and feelings which are associated with being in a particular world.

Onitsha is an especially beautiful illustration of this type of work, through the evocation of twelve-year-old Fintan’s experience of the world. The story revolves around his year-long stay in Onitsha, a small town under British rule on the banks of the Niger Delta. Fintan’s experience in and of Onitsha (and to a great extent his mother Maou’s experience as well) is related to sensory perceptions that are vital in making sense of the past and of the world. As will be shown, the evocation of affect in *Onitsha* touches all aspects of existence and functions within its own logic. It fundamentally expresses Fintan’s bond with his mother, as well as his own development and his growing understanding of the personal and the social – Onitsha is socially and racially divided along colonial lines – as well as the historical and political realities the hero and his mother face.

The fundamental purport for offering a reading of *Onitsha* is to remedy the lack of available critical writing on Le Clézio by proposing a close reading of a novel representative of his writing since the 1990s.

1. One thinks of novels such as *Le chercheur d’or/The Prospector* (2008d) and *La quarantaine* (1995b) or *Onitsha* (1991, and 1997 for the English translation from which all quotations of the text in the present article are extracted), as well as *Étoile errante/Wandering Star* (2004b) and more recently *Ritournelle de la faim* (2008b).

Importantly, I intend to show that the quality of affect in *Onitsha* will stand for something both contained and specific, and with far-reaching implications. Themes such as travel, the mother-child bond, family ties and social injustice are captured by way of sensation in order to bear witness to the characters' worlds by engaging with the realities of their own experience – not as it may be judged or understood, but, crucially, as it is immediately experienced. The important role of sensations in the novel makes it a work that is interestingly located between poetry and prose, and the traditional novelistic concern with “*Bildung*” or “formation” is presented in unexpected ways. It is, therefore, worth reflecting on the means by which Le Clézio succeeds in creating a *Bildungsroman* without relying on what is traditionally associated with this genre.

My analysis rests on an exploration of Fintan's coming of age by tracing the main protagonist's development through his sensory experiences and, in doing so, showing how they impact on him and generate meaning in the novel. I will begin with a detailed examination of the generic shifts present in Le Clézio's novel, linking my findings to the author's philosophy in as much as it affords crucial insights into the existential correlation he builds between sensations and meaning which, in the novel, he translates into poetic writing. The second part of my discussion will serve to illustrate my findings through concrete thematic and stylistic analysis of chosen passages.

Background

Before undertaking any analysis, it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the novel's plot. Divided into four parts, *Onitsha* tells the story of Fintan and the life-altering importance of his short stay in Onitsha. Set for the most part in 1948, it begins as Fintan undertakes the long journey by boat with his mother Maou to reunite with Geoffroy, his English father whom he has never met, in Nigeria.² As the *Surabaya* glides over the ocean towards “the

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2. For Le Clézio, writing serves “to explore the past” (Le Clézio 2008a: 3) and *Onitsha* is no exception. Le Clézio made a similar journey by boat to go to Nigeria to meet up with his father who, at the time, was working as a doctor in Ogoja, an isolated area in the West of the country (Le Clézio 2004a: 22). The novel contains many biographical elements and Le Clézio maintains a strong connection with Fintan at all times (Le Clézio 2004a: 11). Two interesting points emerge here: Le Clézio imparts authenticity to his novel by providing accurate historical detail and biographical references while at the same time obscuring realistic details with the aim of multiplying its signifiers and its poetic ramifications – the boat, for instance, has a fictitious name, that of an Indonesian town also known as the “City of Heroes” because of its heroic albeit unsuccessful resistance to British rule in 1945. In that sense it proposes a strong thematic parallel with the theme of

other end of the world” (Le Clézio 1997b:12)³, progressively “unravelling” (*O* 6) and erasing the child’s memory of life up until now, the “long journey” lays down the thematic foundations of the novel while preparing Maou and Fintan for Onitsha, as their perceptions of the world move towards new sets of sensations and their associated meaning. In Onitsha, Geoffroy is a low-level employee of the British administration, the United Africa, who has taken refuge from boredom and the vicissitudes of colonial life in his quest to prove that the last queen of the ancient civilisation of Meroë came down to Aro Chuku⁴ (near Onitsha) from Egypt. Maou, who has spent her time apart from Geoffroy, building up romantic fantasies of her husband and of Africa,⁵ is initially disillusioned by the reality that awaits her in the small, segregated town of Onitsha. Before long, she finds solace with the indigenous people of the town and outside of the narrow-minded colonial society which she deliberately rejects. Fintan’s adjustment happens more naturally for the most part, thanks to his friendship with Bony, a boy from the local fishing village, who initiates him into this new life. The novel ends in 1969, long after the family has returned to Europe, when Fintan is 33 years old.

In *Onitsha*, Fintan is portrayed as apprehending the world in sensory terms. Similarly, sensations guide Le Clézio in his own attempt to grasp the meaning of existence. In speaking of the power of literature and his love, as a child, for adventure novels in particular, Le Clézio openly articulates this idea:

In a mediocre life of a little provincial town dozing in the sun, after those years of freedom in Africa, those books gave me a taste for adventure, gave me a sense of the vastness of the real world, *a means to explore it through instinct and the senses rather than through knowledge.*

(Le Clézio 2008a: 2; my italics)

colonialism in *Onitsha* and with the history of the town of Aro Chuku in particular.

3. Subsequent references to Onitsha (Le Clézio 1997b) are indicated by *O* and the page number(s).
4. Aro-Chuku is the “ancient” and mythical double of Onitsha, the space where the protagonist’s father lives his own experience of Africa set in an atemporal present. This section of the novel, which is literally put into margins (the typography of the text changes completely in these sections), relates to dreams, myths, ancient times, legends, etc.
5. I use “Africa” because it is a word repeatedly used by the narrator. It obviously stands for “Nigeria” and/or “Onitsha” but it is true indeed that the name holds emblematic value for Le Clézio, who often uses it to refer to vast, foreign and far-removed places on the continent that also stand in opposition to Europe.

For Le Clézio, it is as if the senses offered the only path to, literally, “making sense” of the world. In lieu of intellectual abstraction, he professes to prefer thought in its nascent state, that is to say, at its purest and most “alive” – in that it is born out of the *life force* present in all things, “alive” meaning *genuine* and *natural* here (Ominus 1994: 61). Understanding thus resides in the immediacy of experience, apprehended before it is processed by intellectual rationalisation because our senses cannot lack integrity (p. 28). This conception of lived experience dictates that sensations are indubitably related to early, powerful ways of making sense of the world and form the basis upon which moral sentiment is built. In this light, it is unsurprising that Le Clézio’s most important characters of the stories of his latter period of literary production are often children, teenagers or very young adults.⁶ Crucially, youth is perceived as a privileged state by Le Clézio because it is untainted by rationalisation processes, which can present “an obstacle on the pathway to poetic thought” (p. 61).

It is worth reflecting, briefly, on the Proustian accents present in Le Clézio’s writing. These are evident from the thematic explorations and quality of writing in *Onitsha*. The novel is, as has been suggested, the story of Fintan’s personal growth through sensory experiences. Marcel’s – the main protagonist of *Remembrance of Things Past* – own development begins with a powerful sensory experience which famously arises from the *taste* of a madeleine dipped in tea and upon which the entire oeuvre is subsequently built (see Proust 1981: 48-51). Importantly, the sensory experience triggers memories from childhood, recreating a very particular time in the protagonist’s life, a whole world in fact, that of Combray, the small town in which he would spend his holidays when roughly about the same age as Fintan. The writing of *Onitsha* was undoubtedly triggered by the memory of Le Clézio’s own childhood experiences, and it is obvious that his novel is, like Proust’s own work, about the search for lost time, buried in childhood, but easily revived through the senses. Le Clézio’s admiration of Proust is, appropriately, expressed in purely sensory terms by the author who confesses that he was inspired to write by “one tiny little sentence! The sentence which described the timber of the ring from the garden bell each time Swann arrived for a visit in *Swann’s Way*” (Salles 2006: 217-218). Given Le Clézio’s concern with extricating meaning from sensory experience, he could not have stayed indifferent to Proust transferring his own hyperaesthesia into his literary work. Shattuck reminds us that from “his friends’ accounts, we know that Proust’s own reminiscences were so acute as to constitute a form of hyperaesthesia. By attributing this condition to Marcel, he made it crucial in the novel” (Shattuck 2000: 111).

6. As is the case of Fintan but also of Alexis in *The Prospector*, of Esther in *Wandering Star*, Laïla in *Poisson d’or* (1997a), Ethel in *Ritournelle de la faim* (2008b) as well as many of the characters in le Clézio’s latest collection of short stories, *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies* (2011).

It will become obvious, in my reading of *Onitsha*, that in many respects, this text is similarly built upon dense networks of perpetually reconstituted memories realised in sensory terms.

The Path to Poetic Thought

Instead of offering an intellectual exploration of particular themes (such as that of travel or the injustices of the colonial system), *Onitsha* explores ways of being and, more precisely, ways of being in the world. Salles calls this Le Clézio's poetic vision, a creative quest to uncover what he himself calls the "secret of secrets" and which he expresses in his writing with a lyricism that fuses images with rhythms (Salles 2006: 184). *Onitsha* certainly conveys a sense of the poetic quest and, as a novel built on sensations, it indubitably contains poetic qualities. *Onitsha* is indeed not a description of its characters' interactions as they develop but, as its title suggests, it is a text about a very specific place. Because of this, the novel reads like a particular form of poetry or, more precisely, its narrative is located between poetry and prose. Indeed, while the poetic genre is essentially concerned with the poet's affect (as in romantic, symbolist and lyrical poetry in particular), the novel, for its part, is constructed around a clearly delineated narrative. Yet *Onitsha* cannot be exclusively categorised into one or the other domain, appearing rather to situate itself somewhere in between the two.

While revealing Le Clézio's poetic vision, *Onitsha* pushes the boundaries of the novelistic genre so that the text functions within a marginal space where poetry and prose seamlessly interrelate. Much as key characters such as Fintan or Geoffroy attain powerful insights into states of alternative consciousness – such as when Geoffroy, burning with fever, realises that "[t]here is no paradise" – so is the thematic content of the text stylistically realised in a seemingly alternative genre, a sort of poem which never compromises its narrative integrity:

The sky is immense, its blueness close to black. Geoffroy feels the fire flare up again in the core of his body, and the cold water rising in waves, filling him. He thinks, It is all over. There is no paradise.

(O 160)

An example of this is Le Clézio's use of punctuation and very short or nominal sentences inserted between longer ones. Also, the sentence "The sky is immense, its blueness close to black" is typically Le Clezian. Such phrases with references to nature and particularly the sky, the quality of the light or the magnetic presence of water abound in the novel. Much like in romantic poetry where the poet can evoke his connection to nature with

detailed physical descriptions of his surroundings, *Onitsha*'s atmosphere is imbued with evocative descriptions of nature and/or of setting:

Fintan watched for lightning. He sat on the veranda and watched the sky above the river, where the storm was approaching. Every evening it was the same Fintan could survey the entire breadth of the river, could see the places where the tributaries – Anambara, Omerun – joined the river, at the large, flat island of Jersey, covered with reeds and trees There were bloodied streaks in the sky, gaps in the clouds. Then, very rapidly, the black clouds went back up the river, chasing before it the flying ibises still lit by the sun.

(O 47)

Here, where the surroundings of Ibusun, the family's home, are described, some of the poetic qualities of Le Clézio's writing surface. There is, of course, the play of light and dark, the evocative description of the river and its tributaries and that of the stormy sunset sky. The passage also illustrates Le Clézio's musical use of words or, to be more precise, the musicality of names, particularly names of places. The novel is in fact rich with enumerations of proper nouns,⁷ endowing entire passages with a particular liturgical quality. Fintan, as will be shown, is particularly sensitive to sound and loves hearing words; his mother's poems recited for him in Italian move him to tears (O 18), as do the names of places he hears mentioned around him:

Names went the rounds of the dinner tables: Saint-Louis, Dakar. There were other names Fintan loved to hear: Langue de Barbarie and Gorée, names soft and terrible at the same time.

(O 19)

A substantial part of the novel works by means of poetic structures such as the use of typography, punctuation, rhythm and even musicality of style. Repetitions as well as the high recurrence of certain words – such as “burn” and “burning” for instance – and nominal sentences or clauses – abound in the novel, as if verses and sometimes rhymes had been deliberately inserted within the prose. Another poetic quality of *Onitsha* is the fact that, apart from a few interjections, there is very little dialogue, something I will elaborate on later.

More strikingly, the book is structured around two very distinct typographies, two distinct texts that nonetheless function together. Sadly, this is less salient in the English translation where the differentiation between these texts appears, erroneously in my view, as a change of font. In the original French, the one text, which relates to the time and place(s) of the principal

7. These are too numerous to list but see, for instance, pp. 9, 23, 28.

narrative, is printed in a conventional manner. The other, set in a sort of atemporal (poetic?) present and which relates to Geoffroy's (poetic?) dream (see footnote 3), is printed with substantial margins, its unusual typography illustrating the author's poetic intent. Added to this, the book contains some drawings of tribal markings inserted within (see *O* 103 for instance), further altering its typography away from conventional fiction.

Onitsha's generic shift to something between prose and poetry defends the argument that, as we will see, sensation and affect dictate the development of its main character, Fintan, enabling the novel to be read, on some level, as a coming-of-age tale.

A Coming-of-Age Tale

Some aspects of *Onitsha* are undoubtedly reminiscent of the *Bildungsroman*. Yet, Le Clézio here too provides an unusual interpretation of a specific genre. While he retains some of its more conventional traits, he challenges some of its fundamental characteristics. *Onitsha* does deal with its main protagonist's development although the novel delves neither into Fintan's psychology nor does his personal moral development take centre stage. In a *Bildungsroman* the hero would usually attain his/her *coming of self* through a series of significant human interactions. This is not the case for Fintan, except in rare instances, during the few moments shared with Bony or at the Bath Boy's Grammar School after the family's return from Onitsha.

Although traditional novelistic preoccupations are treated in *Onitsha*, this is done by means of a focus on sensations. Through the evocation of affect (brought about by sensations), the themes treated in *Onitsha* do carry a sense of morality. Yet, the Manichean trope of moral/immoral finds equivalence, particularly through the character of Fintan, in terms of the opposition of pleasant/unpleasant sensations. This is because, apart from instances where feelings that carry a sense of morality emerge (such as when Fintan feels shame),⁸ the hero is still, as a particularly sensitive and observant twelve-year-old, at an affective stage of his moral development, where right and wrong, moral and immoral, are intuitively felt. Through the journey of its main protagonist, *Onitsha* thus proposes an exploration of the germination of moral sense as based on sentiment. On a fundamental level, *Onitsha* shows that moral sentiment emerges from pleasant or unpleasant sensations and that in this logic of pleasure versus displeasure there already exists a germinal sense of right and wrong.

8. As, for instance, on the boat, when he overhears the denigrating comments made about the black passengers (*O* 41), or when, in *Onitsha*, Geoffroy kills a falcon threatening his hens, an act which sparks Bony's anger (*O* 55).

In more traditional instances of the *Bildungsroman*, the emergence of character happens primarily through action (which includes verbal acts), to which an immediate sense of judgment is attached. As a result, description and narration tend to be dominated by events and dialogue, and characters appear highly individuated. They have personal views, express their opinions, argue with others, and reveal their flaws, all this contributing to their moral development.

This notion is inverted in *Onitsha*. Here the hero is open to the world and embraces the present but he is not depicted in a complex psychological manner. Rather, Le Clézio uses the logic of the alien place and its affective impact on his hero to build his character. The novel is indeed about “childhood and travel memories” (Le Clézio 1995: 122) but *across* spaces. Fintan says little and seems socially passive, yet he is constantly observing, listening *and* interacting with the world. In that sense Fintan corresponds to the archetype of Le Clézio’s young heroes. In his own words, the author recognises that he was aware “from very early on” of the “contradictions inherent to children’s existence: a child will cling to a sanctuary, a place to forget violence and competitiveness, and also *take pleasure in looking through the windowpane to watch the outside world go by*” (Le Clézio 2008c: 2; my italics). Fintan prefers observation to verbal interaction or abstract analysis. This is evident from the opening pages of the novel where, being on board the vessel that will take them to Nigeria, Maou and Fintan are confined, with many others, to a very specifically delimited space. Yet, Fintan *never* seems to speak to anyone but wanders alone or with his mother, listening in silence, simply observing and taking in his surroundings:

“Come and see the green flash.”⁹ Maou pulled Fintan close; he thought he could feel her heartbeat through the thickness of her coat. On the first-class deck, to the fore, people were applauding, laughing about something Fintan realized they were not alone. There were people everywhere. They came and went, busily, continually ... they called out to each other Fintan wanted to see Maou’s profile once again, a shadow against the light of the sky. But she too was speaking, to him, her eyes shining: “Are you all right? Are you cold? Would you like to go down to the cabin; do you want to rest before dinner?”

(O 4-5)

Only Maou talks in this extract. The last three consecutive questions addressed to Fintan remain unanswered. The numerous verbs relating to

9. This rare optical phenomenon is mentioned on two occasions in Part I because it evokes the beauty of the elusive and the ephemeral as well as the magic of adventure, particularly adventure at sea. It is also, of course, an intertextual homage to Jules Verne’s adventure novels, and in particular to *Le rayon vert* (*The Green Ray*) (1982) whose setting is the sea.

sounds and movements, most of which are in the continuous present (“applauding”, “laughing”, “speaking”, “came”, “went”), the many adverbs (“busily”, “continually”, “loudly”) and the long enumerations convey a sense of intense human energy. Yet, as opposed to everyone else, Fintan says nothing, seemingly daunted by the flurry of human activity and noise around him. He is obviously uncomfortable and would rather be elsewhere, looking quietly at his mother’s profile against the dusky sky. This is linked to the earlier discussion on the poetic qualities of *Onitsha* and what Ominus calls Le Clézio’s desire to “live poetically” (Ominus 1994: 25; my translation). He confirms this in stating that, for him, *all* art is ultimately “poetic” (Le Clézio 2008c: 10). For Le Clézio, living poetically means being fully present and aware. This awareness needs to be directed at everything, particularly towards all that is hidden (“the secret of secrets”) and which we forget to see, such as the quality of the light around, the beauty of one’s beloved, the poetry of the everyday. Le Clézio’s ontological argument stems from his conviction that there is *too much* consciousness in the world. Because of this, he believes that individuals need to disappear, to disperse their personality into sensations, so that the “truth” can emerge.

In some senses however, Fintan does appear to stand for a typical twelve-year-old boy. Through various anecdotal episodes in Part 2, it is evident that Fintan struggles to share his mother’s attention with his father. He also, rather naturally, befriends a boy his age with whom he shares many adventures. Fintan’s sexual awakening happens through key events which may be said to be rather typical – such as the episode where his friend Bony and he secretly watch the women bathing in the river (*O* 75) or when they see Oya and Okawho making love (*O* 110). Yet, apart from these typical moments, *Onitsha* is by no means a conventional coming-of-age story or a conventional family saga. Even if the presence of the three characters that form the family unit were relatively constant, the dynamics between Maou, Fintan and Geoffroy are subordinated to the text’s main preoccupation: Fintan’s sensory experience of the world of *Onitsha*, and to some extent Maou’s as well, and how it impacts on them. In more traditional forms of the *Bildungsroman*, travel serves to widen the protagonist’s situational and social horizons. But whereas the experience of travel serves a social and individual purpose, sometimes even political or cultural – one immediately thinks of Voltaire’s *Candide* for instance or Flaubert’s *L’éducation sentimentale* – the change of geographical backdrop is more often than not secondary in importance. The term “formation”, that is *Bildung*, still remains central to understanding the novel’s project because Fintan undoubtedly undergoes a formative experience in *Onitsha*, one that proves life-changing. The difference is, that it is not, as more classical instances of the genre entail, so much linked “to the intellectual and social development of a central figure who, after going out into the world and experiencing both defeats and triumphs, comes to a better understanding of self and to a

generally affirmative view of the world” (Hardin 1991: xiii). Fintan’s “understanding of self” is achieved through the experience of travel itself rather than encounters founded on dialectic interactions. Fintan’s stay in Onitsha shaped his “generally affirmative view of the world” which from then on would always be measured against this fundamental experience, even long after he leaves Onitsha to go back to Europe.

In *Onitsha* the main protagonist’s development is mapped out in the discovery of the world around him, first on the boat and then in Onitsha. This happens, one could say, almost organically, through sensory experience. This is because Fintan’s realisations are linked to the language of sensation and affect, located in particular places and spaces – physical as well as sensual – with each space carrying its own particular connotation.¹⁰

Bodies *Known* and *Unknown*

These observations on *Onitsha*’s genre call for substantiation through a detailed textual exploration of some of the novel’s key themes.

What is *known* or *unknown* is manifested through sensory experience, whether knowledge of the world or of people. Characters are thus brought in and constructed through the sensations they create. For instance, throughout the novel there is a striking contrast between the *known* mother and the *unknown* father.

The child exists in a space where there is not much separation of his body from that of his mother’s with whom he sometimes appears to share bodily sensations, almost as if the umbilical cord were still attached. Fintan, as we know, is twelve years old. Until now, he has been brought up solely by his mother to whom he is extremely close. However, the moment they step on board the *Surabaya*, Fintan finds himself in a transitional space between the

10. Spaces in *Onitsha* are mapped out in great detail and carry particular significance for various characters. For instance, privileged spaces relating to Fintan would be the river or the wreck of The George Shotton. For Maou, this would be the terrace of Ibusun or the District Officer’s home and the Club. Geoffroy’s journey into myths gives particular importance to Ancient Egypt and Aro Chuku. On the *Surabaya*, the cabin, the deck, the foredeck, the engines, the various classes, the restaurants and so on are clearly defined and distinguished. The same applies to Onitsha: there is the port and the docks, the town, the prison, the village, the surrounding wilderness, the river, The George Shotton, the District Officer’s residence. The mapping of the *Surabaya* introduces that of Onitsha which in fact mirrors the social structures of the colonial society depicted in the novel. While the Africans dwell in spaces specifically associated with them, such as the village and the surrounding wilderness, the colonisers living in Onitsha literally and figuratively *occupy* (often violently) particular spaces associated with them.

closeness he has known all his life and the unavoidable change to come – “They were going away, nothing would ever be as before” (O 4). When it comes to the textual expression of the complexities of the mother-child bond, sensations literally *mark* the presence of feeling, and the associative language which constructs this theme is very specific.

The quality of the surrounding atmosphere is often important in the passages that relate to the connection between Maou and Fintan. In particular, Fintan’s closeness to his mother is expressed through the sensual qualities of breath (his own and his mother’s) as well as Maou’s smell. At this stage, it is as if Fintan had not yet disconnected from his mother physically, their bodies almost inseparable for the child, her breath and her smell dominating his conception of her as a physical entity, merging with his own physical sensations. On the deck, as they are about to depart, “the air is still” (O 3) in anticipation. It is as if the air, rather than the hero, were expectantly holding its breath as the engines are about to start. Fintan cannot go to sleep until Maou comes back to their cabin and he can sense “something soft, light, *a breeze, a breath*” (O 11; my italics), which confirms Maou’s presence. When he remembers seeing his mother naked for the first time, he recalls the quality of the air at that precise moment, which is connected to their intimacy – “it had been the same gray air as now in the cabin; the same closeness” (O 11). This is then associated with breathing and the comforting sound of Maou’s breath – “He did not move, he held *his breath*, to hear Maou’s regular *breathing* despite the vibrations and creaking of the ship’s frames” (O 5; my italics). The physical closeness felt by the child is also associated with the mother’s smell and its tactile quality – “*He could smell* Maou’s perfume”, “*He could smell* her skin” (O 11; my italics); “*he could feel* her heartbeat through the thickness of her coat” (O 4; my italics), and so on.

Fintan’s love for his mother is, however, most beautifully evoked by the powerful impact the *sound* of her voice has on him, which remains long after Fintan’s newfound emancipation in Onitsha – “He wanted her to speak in Italian, to sing, but she knew nothing other than Grandmother Aurelia’s nursery rhymes” (O 93). Maou’s voice conjures up such intense emotions in Fintan that it moves him to tears – “Fintan listened to the music of the words; it always made him feel like crying” (O 11). Maou’s voice is literally music to his sensitive ears – “Fintan *listened* to the *melody* of Maou’s *voice*. He liked her Italian *accent*, its *music*” (O 10; my italics). In these two short sentences, five words relate to sound, confirming the importance of hearing in Fintan’s way of relating to and making sense of the world. Ominus suggests, and I agree, that in Le Clézio’s writing, his own sensitivity is often expressed in the preponderance of sensations associated with hearing. Although it would be fascinating to elaborate a complex taxonomy of sounds as they recur in Le Clézio’s novels, I will restrict the discussion to the most salient. The first key sounds to be identified by Ominus fall into

the category of natural sounds, such as the sound of the nightly tropical storms which Fintan and Maou experience for the first time in Onitsha and which prevail in the entire first chapter of Part 2. To those, Ominus opposes mechanical and artificial sounds. These are more often than not perturbing sounds, such as those of the *Surabaya*'s engines which slowly erase Fintan's past – "The vibration of the engines was stronger than memories; they became feeble and mute" (*O* 11), muting being equal to obliteration. Then, there is a more refined category, that of the human voice, what Le Clézio calls the most identifiable characteristic of any individual (Ominus 1994: 40-41). In a loved one, it becomes the most attractive trait of the person. For instance, both Fintan and Alexis (the young hero of *The Prospector*) are "haunted by the sound of their mothers' voices all their lives" (pp. 40-41; my translation).

Fintan undoubtedly inherits his sensuality from Maou whose own way of being and of thinking strongly relates her to the sensory realm.¹¹ It is clear that both mother and son dwell in sensations. This literally binds them as mother and child, but it also binds them textually as characters that specifically function within the same paradigm. As sensory beings Maou and Fintan are very clearly differentiated from other characters in the novel and more specifically from the white colonists of Onitsha and from Geoffroy in particular.

In contrast to Maou (who is strongly associated with the senses related to sound, smell and touch) Geoffroy is unknown to Fintan. This is, firstly, because he has obviously never met him until now – he "was a stranger who had written letters" (*O* 7). But more importantly, Geoffroy remains unknown to Fintan even after they have met because the child has no sensory access to his father.

The accessibility of Geoffroy's body to his son's is limited. Whereas every passage that figures Maou is dominated by sensory language, those concerned with Geoffroy are not. We do not learn anything about the quality of his voice or his breath, the feel of his skin. Whereas touch is, for Maou, a way to connect, Geoffroy only ever touches Fintan once in Onitsha: he shakes his son's hand when they meet for the first time (*O* 43).

Also, Geoffroy's work, his post with the colonial administration (from which Maou and Fintan will exclude themselves wilfully one way or another) as well as his investigation into the history of Meroë (from which he excludes his wife and child) cuts him off from Fintan and Maou. Their world (for Fintan it is the immediate world of the present in Onitsha and for

11. Maou relates to others through touch mostly. She constantly touches her child and holds him close when he is scared. In Onitsha, her closeness to the Africans is translated through touch as well: she lets the women of the town touch her with curious fascination; she lets her closest friend, Marima, who has guessed that she is pregnant, put her hand on her belly to say goodbye as the family is about to return to Europe (*O* 184), and so on.

Maou it is, at first, memories of life before Onitsha) and his are entirely different. Textually this is expressed by the marginalised pages that relate Geoffroy's passion, where neither Fintan nor Maou is ever present, being literally cut off from that particular narrative. In the rest of the text, the one relating to everyday life, Geoffroy never seems present, his body seemingly bound and contained. He is either at work or, when in Ibusun, he locks himself up in his library where he surrounds himself with books and maps – cold, lifeless objects (O 96-97). Yet, it is obvious, through Maou's reminiscences of life before Onitsha that Geoffroy used to be sensual (see O 66-70 for instance), which implies that Onitsha has changed him.

His distance and coldness are translated into Geoffroy's physical appearance. Fintan sees "Geoffroy's face, the cold anger that shone at times in the circle of his eyeglasses" (O 56). Even before they meet, Fintan's rejection of Geoffroy is expressed in terms of the absence of sensory perception:

The man waiting ... would never be his father. He was a stranger ...with neither wife nor child, a man they did not know, whom they had never *seen* – so why was he waiting? ...his name was Geoffroy Allen. But when they arrived, at the other end of the journey, they would pass by very quickly, there on the quay, and the man *would see nothing, recognize no one*, and would just have to go home empty-handed.

(O 7; my italics)

In this instance, the absence of sight denies Geoffroy a filial right. Firstly, the fact that Geoffroy has never been "seen" by Fintan questions his very existence. In the absence of sensory perception, a particular reality (such as one's long journey muting memories of the past or a father one has never seen), cannot be confirmed to exist. Fintan, in a non-verbalised, non-rationalised yet very *immediate* way, realises that without this he cannot grasp the world around him or, to put it as Le Clézio would: in the absence of sensations, the world does not make sense. Secondly, the use of the third-person plural ("whom they had never seen") intrinsically binds Maou and Fintan together and in doing so excludes Geoffroy. This is symbolically important because it confirms that, and this becomes clearer later in my analysis, they are indeed two "types" of characters in the novel (those who rely on their senses and those who do not) as well as two (social/political) "sides" in Onitsha.

The "Sound(s)" of Injustice

A central theme treated in narratively complex ways throughout the novel first arises in Part I and is initially strongly associated with mechanical and/or unnatural noises and the pleasant or unpleasant effect they have on Fintan. This is the theme of social injustice and the denunciation of the

unfair treatment of colonised Africans. On the boat, it begins with the revelation of the travel conditions of the African passengers that board the *Surabaya* in Senegal. These passengers are below, on the foredeck, relentlessly removing “rust from the ship in order to pay for their own and their families’ transportation to the next port” (*O* 24). This episode, which is related from Fintan’s perspective, is echoed in Part 2, from Maou’s perspective this time, during an incident that takes place at the District Officer’s home in Onitsha. The theme is further explored later on in the novel, this time from a historical perspective – the recounting of the Anglo-Aro War of 1901-1902 in Part 3 and the Biafran War in Part 4. The sensations experienced by Fintan that are linked to this theme serve to lay the foundations for what later gets refined into moral judgment. In the treatment of this particular theme in *Onitsha*, Le Clézio shows that, in his own ontology, our sense of justice/injustice is first based upon and then culminates in sensation and affect. In this particular instance, the injustice Fintan senses is conveyed through sound.

A close reading of two key passages related to the theme of injustice in the novel will elucidate this point. The first episode begins on the boat, just after Maou and Fintan’s stopover in Dakar, “this warm and violent city” (*O* 22). Fintan, who apprehends the world in terms of the pleasant/unpleasant effects they have on him, experiences an onslaught on his senses, which leaves him stunned. It all starts with sound – “a strange, disquieting sound” (*O* 23). It also comes, and this is symbolically important, directly after Fintan’s night-time reminiscence of his recent, and emotionally marking visit with Maou to the island of Gorée – one of the most notorious outposts of the Atlantic slave trade. The visit triggers strong emotions for Maou – she is “disgusted and ashamed” by the history of the place (*O* 22) – and strong sensations for Fintan – he is left with an unpleasant sensation of burning.

After a restless night haunted by nightmarish visions of Gorée, Fintan is woken by a mysterious noise, “dull, monotonous and regular” (*O* 23), which sends vibrations through the entire boat. When he investigates its source, he discovers the foredeck below “covered by the blacks ... crouched down and ... beating with hammers on the hatches, the hull, and the frames to remove the rust” (*O* 23). Sound and sight dominate these few pages which relate Fintan’s quiet fascination with these “[p]oor souls” in rags, these “Peulhs, Wolofs, Mandingos” on their way to “Takoradi, Lomé, Cotonou ...” (*O* 24). Firstly, everything happens with the incessant dull sounds of hard, repetitive, mind-numbing labour in the backdrop. After a while, when everyone but Fintan has stopped hearing the noise, it becomes “a music, a secret language, as if [these men] were telling the tale of those who were shipwrecked” (*O* 26). Faced as he is with the reality of the suffering of others for the first time, the sounds are at first painful and unpleasant for the child. Gradually, however, they turn into a mysterious melody. The melody conveys a sense of otherness and it is mysterious precisely because Fintan

does not understand it as it reaches him from boundless divides. It is a foreign language, that of a people who may be subjected to colonial domination but who do not lack (secret) means of resistance – those that are retained through language, storytelling, music and memory. Although its meaning is not clear to Fintan, he is the only one to perceive the altered quality of the noise that went from unpleasant to pleasant, because, in keeping with Le Clézio's poetic quest to uncover the "secret of secrets", Fintan has remained attentive. The idea of the inaccessibility of the ways of Africans which runs through the story, is reinforced by the tribal markings on the faces of the people (*O* 26, 73; and for pictorial representations 101, 103 for instance), and the mysterious sounds of the beating drums that can be heard at night in Onitsha (*O* 65-66). We will note, however, that as the story progresses, Fintan and Maou (as well as Geoffroy on his deathbed) do gain some access to these mysteries, if not full understanding. Textually, the passage's quasi-liturgical rhythm created by the abundant enumerations of the black passengers' multiple destinations, as well as their varied ethnic origins serves to extricate these passengers from anonymity while hinting at the richness and the extent of the mystery.

At night, the intriguing and yet not unpleasant noise becomes that of a human voice, "no more than 'ah' or 'eya-oh', not quite sad, not quite a lament, the soft voice of a man sitting against a container, clothed in stained rags, his face ridged with deep scars on his forehead and cheeks" (*O* 26). The scars on the man's face add a new layer to the mystery. As it later becomes clear (Parts 2 and 3), the scars are not wounds but tribal markings, which carry their own codified meaning:

On the cheeks, the plumes of the wings and tail of a falcon. The drawing of the sky, so that those who receive it no longer know fear, no longer fear suffering. The sign which liberates those who wear it. Enemies can no longer kill them, the English can no longer chain them together and make them work.

(*O* 73)

Clearly, these signs also belong to the mysterious language of resistance. Also, they form part of a greater semiotic mystery which, in trying to solve, Geoffroy is hoping to prove that the last queen of Meroë did indeed settle in Aro Chuku after fleeing Egypt and that the inhabitants of the region are in fact her descendants.

The importance of these early pages in treating of the theme of injustice and the exploitation of the colonial subjects in particular provides Fintan with the burgeoning capacity to discriminate between right and wrong, his sense of justice/injustice culminating from, and being built upon, sensation and affect – as conveyed through images and especially sounds.

The next powerful evocation of the contemptibility of colonial times in *Onitsha* takes place soon after Fintan and Maou's arrival in Nigeria, with

irremediable consequences. It occurs at the D.O's residence where Maou and Geoffroy have been invited to tea, along with the rest of the town's colonial society. As the guests arrive, a line of chained convicts make their way into the garden in order to dig a swimming pool:

One afternoon, less than a month after her arrival, Maou went with Geoffroy to Gerald Simpson's He had got the idea in his head to dig a swimming pool in the garden, for club members.

It was tea time, and the heat was sweltering. The black workers were prisoners that Simpson had obtained through Rally, the resident, because he couldn't find anyone else, or because he did not want to pay them. The workers arrived at the same time as the guests, bound by a long chain that was linked by rings to their left ankle; in order not to fall they had to walk in step, as if on parade.

Maou was on the terrace and watched with astonishment – these chained men were crossing the garden, the shovels on their shoulders, with regular noise each time the rings around their ankles pulled on the chain – left, left. Their black skin tone shone through their rags like metal With pick and shovel they hacked at the hard earth It was terrifying. Maou could hear nothing else, nothing but the hammering against the hard earth, the sound of the convicts' breathing, the clanking of the rings around their ankles.

(O 59)

Even though Fintan is not present during this event, as the intra-diegetic narrator, born of the split between Fintan the child and Fintan the adult, this is indeed recounted through his own subjectivity, even though the retelling is of course based on Maou's personal experience which Fintan adult would have found in her notebooks and which he knows "by heart" (O 201).

Two sets of sensory associations dominate this passage. The first is clearly related to sound. To reiterate, in the episode with Fintan and the black passengers on the boat, the metallic and mechanical sounds of hard labour dominate at first. They are then followed by softer human sounds, like those of a man singing. Furthermore, the episode was preceded by terrifying images of Goré, like that of chains on the walls (O 23). The image of chains and its related symbolic associations is made tangible here, as these now literally bind the feet of prisoners. Maou's experience of the incident at the D.O's residence is firstly expressed through her sensory "overload". It begins with the sounds of the chains, textually transmitted with the nominal repetition of "left", and climaxes when this combines with the hammering sounds of the convicts and the pained breathing accompanying it. These sounds (hard, metallic, produced by humans yet dehumanised by the glaring absence of the convicts' voices) overwhelm Maou to such an extent that all other senses seem to shut down, foretelling in a way how she in turn shuts herself off for good from the colonial society of Onitsha as a result of what happened that day.

A second set of associations which appears as particularly salient in the exploration of the theme of injustice in *Onitsha* emerges in this passage and is linked to the sense of sight. This is in keeping with the idea that Le Clézio privileges understanding that stems from meditative observation rather than from action or interaction. The visual language in this instance is rather simply, yet effectively, denoted in the obvious contrasting appearance of the different social groups involved. Whereas, on the first-class promenade deck of the boat, “the English officers, the colonial administrators in their light-colored clothing, the ladies with their hats and veils [had] looked distractedly upon the crowd pressing on the cargo deck” (O 25), among the Africans, the women had sheltered themselves, not under hats and veils, but “against rusty frames” (O 26), while the men had lain “on bits of cloth” and the “[n]aked boys played with bottles and empty cans” (O 26). At the D.O’s house, the colonial administrators are (rather unsuitably for the climate) dressed in “their black shoes and their woollen knee socks” (O 58) while their wives are wearing “pale dresses and court shoes” (O 59). They stand in the shaded terrace, whisky glass in hand or eating and laughing (O 60), “no one paying attention” (O 60) to the convicts’ pained breaths as they hack at “the hard earth” (O 59) under the sweltering afternoon sun, in nothing but “rags”. The culmination of images contrasting material abundance with destitution, leisure and indifference with pain and suffering, finds its climax in a single image which, in the outpour of Maou’s rage is so simplistic as to be laden with obvious symbolism. The image of course, is that of contrasting skin colours: those who suffer are black – “Their black skin shone through their rages like metal” – while those that watch on with cruel indifference become, in their whiteness, alien to Maou – “[S]he looked at the English officers around the table, *so white*” (O 60; my italics).

In a symbolic (and poetic) twist, Maou’s own appearance, and more precisely, the colour of her skin, differentiates her from the rest of the colonial society, as if it echoed her sentiments about them and her wilful rejection of their ways. On the *Surabaya*, Maou’s skin gets progressively darker from exposure to the sun, earning her the nickname “the African woman” (O 13) from her fellow white passengers whose company she at first delights in. This progressive darkening of her skin, which makes her less white and “more” dark, foretells the evolution of her relationship with the white society of Onitsha from which she will detach herself. It also announces, as early as during the sea voyage, that this particular character’s own *Bildung* will revolve around the choices she makes regarding her positioning in what turns out to be a highly segregated society. On a metaphorical level, Maou’s darker skin (in contrast to Geoffroy’s “too white” skin (O 72)) brings her closer to the indigenous people of Onitsha, thus realising the prediction that, on some level at least, she will integrate into the society of Onitsha, albeit in the most unexpected ways, not with her fellow whites but with the Africans. In essence, she had already chosen her

allegiance even before stepping off the *Surabaya*. Before her arrival in Onitsha, Maou had had “fervent” hopes “for this new life” in a strange place:

Onitsha, this unknown world, where nothing would be like anything she had experienced – not the things, not the people, not the *odors*, not the *color* of the sky – not even the *taste* of water.

(*O* 5; my italics)

This extract firstly confirms Maou’s own sensuality and the fact that she, just like Fintan, is a sensory being. Also, in a sense, Maou was right from the onset: Onitsha would be unlike anything she had ever known. Indeed, nothing there turned out to resemble her romanticised, exotic fantasy of Africa – she had dreamt of “long rides on horseback through the bush, of the hoarse cries of wild beasts in the evening, of ... paths leading to mystery” (*O* 58). What she found instead, initially at least, was a hostile environment (the nightly thunderstorms and the beating drums in the village genuinely frighten her at first) and a segregated society run like a private fiefdom by Gerald Simpson and his fellow white colonists. Yet, Maou’s own *coming of self* happens unexpectedly, through her being able to embrace very different experiences, captured in her own bodily moments related to the particular feeling of being in the world of Onitsha.

Conclusion

Sadly, and rather inevitably, *Onitsha* ends with violence and death, the death of the father, the death of Sabine Rodes¹² and the unspeakable violence of the oil era that followed the brutal colonial past. For the author, who sees literature’s main task as that of “bearing witness” (Le Clézio 2008c: 4), even if it means to something not personally experienced (p. 5), the situation may seem hopeless: “It’s all over The entire world has looked away” (*O* 205).

Yet, in many ways, *Onitsha* is not about a terrible past or the horrors of war. It is a novel about a small town on the West Coast of Africa set at a

12. The character Sabine Rodes has a special status in the novel, being “very different from the other Englishmen” (*O* 80). Whereas Maou does not trust him, Fintan spends a lot of time with him, listening to his stories about the place. The last lines of the novel reveal that Rodes, whose real name is Roderick Matthews, was in fact an Officer of the British Empire (*O* 206) who meets his death in a bombing raid in Onitsha during the Nigerian-Biafran War. He is the only character in the novel to appear to have been aware of Nigeria’s rich oil resources and the advent of the (devastating) postcolonial oil era.

crucial historical juncture that emerges with its own particular set of associations. At the heart of the story resides that of individual characters, Fintan's in particular, because, even in wars, it is not the historical moment that concerns Le Clézio, but his characters' personal experiences within it.

Fintan's experience of Onitsha has been life-changing. Whereas the memories of his life in Europe "before Onitsha" were being devoured by the *Surabaya*, nothing of his experience in Onitsha is forgotten "after Onitsha". In Part 4 Fintan writes to his sister Marima (conceived in Onitsha but born in Europe) that he has "forgotten nothing". The memories are so powerful that Fintan, twenty years later, remembers what Onitsha *felt* like with intense sensory clarity. He ends his letter thus:

I've forgotten nothing, Marima. Now, so far away, *I can smell* the fish frying at the river's edge, *I can smell* the yams and the fougou. I close my eyes and *I can taste* the sweetness of groundnut soup. And *I can smell* the smoke as it rises slowly in the evening above the fields of grass, *I can hear* the children's cries. Must it all disappear forever?

Not one instant have I lost *sight of* Ibusun, the grassy plains, the tin roof baking in the sun, the river with its islands – Jersey, Brokkedon.

(O 199; my italics)

In rejecting the self-indulgence of abstract ideas, Le Clézio creates stories mostly devoid of ideology. This is why, from the 1990s onward, his novels often privilege the outlook of the young on the world (Ominus 1994: 25).

In *Onitsha*, he uses sensations to evoke different worlds and that is where he stops. He does not propose any resolutions or offer any criticism of any sort, precisely because a complex engagement on that level would be outside of what is truly important: to bear witness to human experience yes, but in ways that are meaningful to him, that is to say through sensory experience. In the end, Le Clézio is convincing in showing that moral sentiment ultimately only emerges from the senses if it is to be consequential in any way, and this, he poetically illustrates in telling Fintan's story.

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