

John and Abel in  
Michel Tournier's  
Le Roi des Aulnes

ROMANIC

REVIEW

May 1999 (90) 3: 417-434

Author's Copy

## **John and Abel in Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des Aulnes***<sup>1</sup>

By Vladimir Tumanov  
Western University

### **Introduction**

Many critics have pointed out the importance of Revelation by John of Patmos as an intertext in Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des Aulnes* (cf., for example, J. Poirier 8, Jean-Bernard Way 82-6, Susan Petit 1991:37 and Colin Davis 56). They normally refer to the apocalyptic ending of the novel as the most obvious link with the Johannine text. This connection is obvious not only because the final scene is the destruction of Kaltenborn castle with all its inhabitants (and by extension the destruction of the entire Third Reich), but also because there are direct references to Revelation in Tournier's text (e.g., Tournier 539). However, the importance of Johannine discourse goes well beyond this overt intertextuality.

In his discussion of Tournier's use of the Bible in general, David Gascoigne writes: "[The biblical] intertext becomes a narrative generator in its own right, when the Biblical analogy is at the root of the construction of a character, as indicated by the symbolic nomenclature (Abel, Thomas etc.), or central to the conception of an event (the fall of the Third Reich as Apocalypse)" (98). I would argue that this is the very mechanism at work in the relationship between *Le Roi des Aulnes* and Revelation: John's text is the kind of 'narrative generator' that Gascoigne is talking about. The 'fall of the Third Reich as Apocalypse' is the event that projects Revelation backwards to the entire novel. And as a result 'the Biblical analogy is at the root of the construction of a

---

<sup>1</sup> Published article here: <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/french/romanicreview/1999.html>  
and here: <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=5001898272>

character': Abel Tiffauges. As I intend to demonstrate, this is the key point of contact between the two texts. The "apocalyptic weight" of *Le Roi des Aulnes* stems as much from the connections between John and Tiffauges as from the calamitous events in question. Tiffauges is John's antitype primarily because both visionaries assume a certain moral stance toward life in society and then allow this stance to govern their whole existence.

### **Apocalyptic Fiction**

David Bethea argues that certain works of literature are so fundamentally indebted to Revelation that they form a class which he calls "apocalyptic fiction." Although Bethea develops this notion with respect to examples from Russian literature, his concepts apply equally well (if not even more so) to Tournier's novel:

an apocalyptic fiction is not an apocalypse, but a modern equivalent of one, a kind of sacred text or version of the Book through which the character and the narrator and, by implication, the reader — all in their separate, self-enclosed realms — are made privy to a "secret wisdom" from another space-time. [...] An apocalyptic plot [has] a 'deep' or mythological structure in modern novelistic terms that it is a recapitulation of the essential movement of the Johannine text (Bethea 33-4).

The extension of Bethea's understanding of apocalyptic fiction to Tournier is justified, among other reasons, by the historical subject matter of *Le Roi des Aulnes*: World War Two and the destruction of Nazi Germany as a civilization. Most of the material discussed by Bethea centers around equally cataclysmic events in Russian history: the wars and revolutions of the first two decades of the twentieth century that cost millions of lives, destroyed an entire way of life and put an end to a social order that had existed in Russia for a thousand years.<sup>2</sup> Bethea's argument is based on an analogy with two key notions from the Johannine text: The End and Revelation.

The End has to do with a termination so final that nothing of the previous state remains in the new state. And Revelation has to do with information about The End. The result is a division of a modern novel into two parallel universes or zones: "We are invited to view the mythic 'zone' of novelistic space (i.e., the themes, figures, and passages taken from Revelation) and the realistic 'zone' of novelistic space (i.e., the openness and contingency of contemporary life and history) as being in profound dialogic interaction" (Bethea 34).

The analogy with The End in John's Apocalypse is especially obvious when modern cataclysmic events are described. However, the scale need not be so enormous: "The reader of [apocalyptic] works is drawn to see a connection between personal death and the end of national, even world history. Not for nothing does each of these novels conclude, and most begin, with a crucial death" (Bethea 39). Thus, as will become clear from the upcoming discussion, Tiffauges's demise in the bog of East Prussia is not an isolated death but a structurally apocalyptic *mise en abyme*. As for the Revelation aspect of Bethea's analogy, the entire path of Tournier's protagonist has to do with the reading of signs that reveal the course of future events. Just like John of Patmos, Tiffauges is on a semiotic quest: "An understanding of history, which all apocalypses profess to provide, is possible only by looking for signs — in artistic terms, symbols — of God's will in the otherwise baffling 'text' of current events. Such 'revelations' normally involve a conflation of narrative's mythical and realistic 'zone' " (Bethea 41).

### **Messenger**

Apocalypses are texts which normally rely on a greater authority for credibility, i.e., the authors of apocalypses do not claim to have access to privileged information through their own means. Instead, there is usually a messenger from the transcendental realm who conveys the information to the author. As

John J. Collins writes, "the apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world" (1984: 4; also cf. Bethea 41). In the Johannine text the signs and symbols disclosing information about future events come to John from an angel who receives his information from Christ who receives his information from God. And John is very careful to point out that he himself is not the source of the revelation (Thompson 178-9). We find a similar situation in *Le Roi des Aulnes* where Tiffauges does not claim to access the signs on his own. As Gascoigne points out, "[John of Patmos] is giving an account of the genesis of his own writing, just as Tiffauges did at the start of his *Écrits sinistres*, and in so doing both authors claim supernatural authority" (110-111).

Tiffauges's "angel" is Nestor, the strange boy at St. Christophe who initiates the protagonist into the secret knowledge: "Au demeurant, s'il me fallait la preuve irréfutable qui fait de moi le légataire de Nestor, il me suffit de regarder ma main courir sur le papier, ma main gauche tracer les lettres successives de ces [ ... ] écrits sinistres qui sont ainsi notre œuvre commune" (Tournier 54--55; also cf. 116-117 and Degn 101). Since elsewhere Tiffauges says that his left hand is his "consignataire de vérités apocalyptiques" (Tournier 514), by guiding the protagonist's hand Nestor plays the same revelatory role as does the angel in John's text. Thus, all the signs that Tiffauges deciphers throughout the novel are attributable to Nestor's mediation. Already at St. Christophe Nestor reveals Tiffauges's special destiny to the latter (Tournier 62) and alludes to the notion of the "great tribulation" so central to John's Revelation (cf. 7:14): "Du calme, Mabel, retiens ta colère, fais taire tes imprécations. Tu sais bien maintenant que la grande tribulation se prépare, et que ton modeste destin est pris en charge par le Destin!" (Tournier 194). The key information that comes to Tiffauges from his "angel" Nestor is the hero's phoric function.

Nestor, in his superhuman way, arranges for Tiffauges to act as *recitator*, even though the protagonist is not scheduled to do this. As a result Tiffauges recites the legend of St. Christopher to the assembled children, thereby receiving the most important revelation of his destiny and of The End (Tournier 68).

Although Nestor is not an overtly supernatural being in what Bethea calls the novel's "realistic zone", in terms of the novel's "mythic zone" Nestor's capacities are superhuman enough to suggest connections with John's angelic messenger. His status at St. Christophor is eery and inexplicable since, for unknown reasons, Nestor seems immune to the power of the adults who run the institution: "Seul Nestor pouvait impunément bouleverser cet ordre, et substituer sa volonté à la sienne" (Tournier 52). Thus, Nestor can exempt others from punishment, as he demonstrates by lifting the threat of a *colaphus* from Tiffauges when the latter is scheduled to be slapped for an offense (Tournier 48-49). Nestor can even procure and transform into toilet paper the text of a speech read previously by the director of the college (Tournier 88 and 97). The supernatural connotations of this particular exploit are suggested, among other things, by the protagonist's reaction: "[Nestor] dégagea la poche arrière de son pantalon et en tira trois feuilles qu'il déploya sous mes yeux. Je lus avec épouvante les premières lignes [ ... ]. C'était le sermon du père supérieur redigé de sa propre main!" (97). And so, this angelic aura created around Nestor's personality makes his intervention in Tiffauges's life from beyond the grave quite natural and to be expected.

### **Destiny**

The notion of destiny conveyed to Tiffauges through Nestor's mediation makes the protagonist's world-view absolutely egocentric. Tiffauges is convinced that the world revolves around him and therefore views various events as signs that concern him alone: "Personne n'avait autant que lui la conscience de son

destin, un destin rectiligne, imperturbable, inflexible qui ordonnait à ses seuls fins les événements mondiaux les plus grandioses" (Tournier 249). This egocentricity can be linked to Tiffauges's child-like mind which causes him to reject the world of adults and become obsessed with the prepubescent state (cf. Milne 18, 93-95; Cloonan 1986: 67). However, in terms of the novel's mythic zone we have a link with John's line of reasoning in Revelation. John was inspired by prophetic literature from the Old Testament, e.g., Isaiah and Daniel. And in these writings the counterpart of Tiffauges's egocentricity is the ethnocentrism of Israel: "With the rise of prophecy and a deeper awareness of the totally demanding moral will of Yahweh, the foreign nations take their place in the historical process as the weapons of Yahweh's judgement on Israel. Outside of this they are irrelevant; unlike Israel, they have no destiny in history. Hence, much of the preexilic literature is parochial in its treatments of other peoples" (McKenzie 1304; also cf. Bethea 4). Thus, in Isaiah the conquest of the Babylonian empire by the Persians is viewed as God's way of liberating Israel from Babylonian captivity, rather than an event in the history of Persia and Babylonia.

Such thinking is inherited by John of Patmos who views the righteous Christians as the new chosen people, i.e., the new Israel (Cohn 14). This is clear from John's notion of predestination, i.e., he argues that the elect have been destined for salvation since the beginning of time, since their names were entered even before creation into the Book of Life (Rev 13:8, 20:12). This means that all the cataclysmic events of The End, as well as the rise of the great empires and the upcoming persecution of Christians, are merely tools in God's hands meant to vindicate the new Israel. Thus, Rome's military victories are not events in the destiny of the Roman Empire but rather God's way of raising the empire to great heights and splendor in order then to cast it down that much more forcefully and bring about the triumph of the faithful (cf. Yarbro Collins 1984:121-122). And it is this radically and paradoxically self-centered position that Tiffauges shares with his archetypal counterpart when

he speaks of his "relation privilégiée avec le ressort de l'univers" (Tournier 105). This is the epitome of mythic thought so fundamental to Tiffauges and John of Patmos (see below): the notion of meaningless coincidence is rejected in metaphysical terms. Therefore, every element of the universe is related to every other element, which means that no random events occur, and everything signifies. The result of such thinking is "world reading": both John and Tiffauges do not merely live in the world but read it, like a text. The price that they pay for this stance is absolute social isolation.

### **Outcast**

Social marginality is the most important link between John of Patmos and Abel Tiffauges. As John J. Collins points out, "the sense of alienation from the present order is fundamental to many apocalypses" (1984:19). And in this respect John of Patmos is a typical case. John preached radical exclusionism, i.e., the absolute refusal to take part in any aspect of mainstream life within the Roman empire. Whereas "some Christian leaders advocated Christian participation in civic life to counter the antipathy [of the gentiles]," John condemns any kind of social integration (Yarbro Collins 1984: 98). Economic integration is rejected in Rev 13:16-17 and 14:9-11 where anyone using the emperor's coins is associated with the Beast (Yarbro Collins 1984:124-127). In Rev 14:4 John rejects sexuality and therefore family bonds, advocating absolute abstinence for the Christian faithful (Yarbro Collins 1984:129). Even the religious institutions among moderate Christians are not part of John's vision which involves no formal attachment to any Christian community (Yarbro Collins 1984:137). In fact, John's radicalism is so extreme that he wants no *physical* bonds with society in that he advocates death as the only acceptable state for the righteous (Rev 14:4). Thus, one's very life on earth is rejected as a form of social integration!

A possible explanation of John's social radicalism may be that he was an itinerant prophet with no economic resources, family or any other kind of social bonds, i.e., he was a social outcast, a marginal individual that saw no place for himself in mainstream life (Yarbro Collins 1984:46-50, 134). Thus, his resentment of wealth, as is evident from his dirge for the ruined Roman merchants in Rev 18:11-17, would stem from his utter poverty (Yarbro Collins 1984:123). Wealth is a sign of social integration, which was the opposite of John's own social marginality (Yarbro Collins 1984:132-133). And John's stance on sexuality (and by extension — family bonds) reflects his personal rootlessness. He could not even find a place among mainstream moderate Christians (presumably the majority), which is why he condemns integrationist Christian leaders (e.g., he calls one of them "Jezebel") and rejects the church hierarchy.

Social marginality and powerlessness as key elements in apocalyptic thinking preceded John and followed him. For example, one of the apocalypses that formed the cultural background for Revelation is Trito-Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66). This text was produced by a "powerless group at the fringes of postexilic society. This much can be inferred from a passage like Isa 65:13: 'Lo, my servants shall eat, but you shall go hungry; my servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty...' evidently in the present the 'servants' are the ones who are hungry and thirsty" (John J. Collins 1990: 300). The apocalyptic fervor inspired by John's Revelation in the Middle Ages retained the appeal to the marginal and powerless members of society. As Norman Cohn points out in his study of medieval chiliasm, millenarian movements, inspired by the Johannine text, sprung up periodically in various parts of Europe according to the same pattern. Such movements would attract marginal and displaced people: usually peasants who flocked to the growing urban centers but could not find work or any kind of social status there (Cohn 29-32, 314).

All this applies to Abel Tiffauges in *Le Roi des Aulnes*. He is an outcast right from childhood, finding no place for himself in the society of St. Christophe: "Je devais avoir quelque trait fatal qui me désignait aux attaques même des plus lâches, aux coups même des plus faibles" (Tournier 25). When he grows up, Tiffauges, like John, is completely outside of society with no ties to anyone or anything. The novel opens with the protagonist's failure at maintaining a relationship with a woman: Rachel. She accuses him of being an ogre, i.e., the folkloric incarnation of antisocial behavior, and then leaves him. Tiffauges's sexual failure is underscored by his painful awareness of being a "microgénitomorphe" (Tournier 114). Thus, unable to integrate himself in any way, Tiffauges begins to seek emotional fulfillment in perversely indirect ways. He assumes the role of ogre assigned to him by Rachel, combines it with his view of himself as a St. Christopher antitype, and begins to cultivate a latent and rechanneled kind of pedophilia, i.e., his phoric function (cf. Cloonan 1992: 33).

This form of compensation conceals his underlying need for normal social bonds that he cannot attain:

L'image que j'évoque avec le plus de douceur, c'est celle de la famille de Martine [ ... ]. Moi qui n'ai jamais eu de famille, comme j'aimerais m'asseoir parmi eux, m'enfermer dans cette cellule close dont l'atmosphère doit être d'une qualité particulière et d'une densité admirable! Il est remarquable que mes chasses — photographiques ou autres — dont le gibier est forcément un individu particulier débouchent toujours pour moi sur une communauté fermée (Tournier 184-5).

As Inge Degn points out, in this passage we see an indication that Tiffauges is expressing "sa nostalgie de l'intimité et de la tendresse familiales qu'il n'a jamais connues" (105). However, society does not accept Tiffauges's "love": he is accused of raping a little girl and imprisoned. Thus, like John of Patmos who has been banished to a tiny island in the Aegean for his beliefs (Yarbro Collins 1984:102-104), the protagonist of Tournier's novel feels that he is persecuted and hounded by mainstream society: "Comment ai-je été assez fou pour croire

que cette société exécrée laisserait vivre et aimer en paix un innocent caché parmi la foule? Avant hier la racaille s'est acharnée à me souiller et a me désespérer [ ... ]" (Tournier 194).

Tiffauges's attitude to this society is as uncompromising as John's. John's reaction to his marginalization is the conclusion that the world is being ruled by Satan which is how he qualifies the Roman Empire and mainstream society in general: "The beast [out of the Sea] was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise authority for forty-two months. [...] And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast — all whose names have not been written in the book of life [...]" (Rev 13:5-8). The Beast out of the sea, the Harlot (Rev 17:4-6) and the Dragon (Rev 12:3) are all figures that represent the splendor, wealth, peace and stability of Rome, i.e., all that is incompatible with John's radicalism and social status.

In the same manner Tiffauges views society as completely evil and ruled by Satan. Tiffauges rejects the mainstream church in overtly apocalyptic terms: "Luther avait raison de dénoncer la présence de Satan sur le trône de saint Pierre. [...] Ces cardinaux attifés dans leur pourpre comme la Putain écarlate de l'Apocalypse [...]" (Tournier 117; also cf. 162). The same Johannine stance and rhetoric are present in Tiffauges's condemnation of all social institutions: "Satan, maître du monde, aidé par ses cohortes de gouvernants, magistrats, prélats, généraux et policiers présente un miroir à la face de Dieu. Et par cette opération, la droite devient gauche, la gauche devient droite, le bien est appelé mal et le mal est appelé bien" (Tournier 123). Thus, Tiffauges follows the Johannine logic of absolute reversal. John takes everything that society considers to be its pillars (empire, trade, paganism, justice system, *Pax Romana* etc.) and turns it upside down: everything becomes its moral opposite. Hence, the divine Emperor becomes the satanic Antichrist under John's fiery quill (cf. Thompson 184-5). The reasoning of absolute moral

reversal necessarily leads to an absolute response. And so, just as John demands that God wipe out the totality of Roman society, Tiffauges wants the European social order blown off the map:

De son enfance piétinée, de son adolescence révoltée, de sa jeunesse ardente — longtemps dissimulée sous l'apparence la plus médiocre, mais ensuite démasquée et bafouée par la canaille — s'élevait comme un cri la condamnation d'un ordre injuste et criminel. Et le ciel avait répondu. La société sous laquelle Tiffauges avait souffert était balayée avec ses magistrats, ses généraux et ses prélats, ses codes, ses lois et ses décrets (Tournier 250).

As Liesbeth Korthals-Altes puts it, "entre l'individu et la société, il n'y a pas de compromis possible, semble conclure le [Roi des Aulnes]" (215).

### **Role Reversal**

Yarbro Collins argues that in the face of his situation, John of Patmos experiences cognitive dissonance: a feeling of discomfort at the discrepancy between reality and expectations. There is Rome, as magnificent as ever, in no danger of being destroyed by anyone, and that — in spite of the Messiah's promised return and vindication of the righteous. John remains poor and alone, powerless and banished, frustrated and furious. His response is to mythologize the conflict (Yarbro Collins 1984:141-142). To do this, John resorts to the combat myth paradigm so common in ancient mythology: a chaos monster (representing death and sterility) threatens the deity (representing life and fertility). We see this in the conflict between Marduk and Tiamat in Babylonian mythology, between Leviathan or Rahab and Yahweh in the Old Testament and in many other similar myths. Thus, John does not just condemn Rome in sociopolitical terms, but rather casts Rome in the guise of a chaos monster: the Beast out of the Sea with its seven heads and ten horns (13:1). The chaos monster may defeat the god, as in the Egyptian myth of Seth and Osiris, but

his triumph is temporary, for the god will rise up and kill the monster, thereby reestablishing life, order and fertility on earth. Because the outcome of this mythological paradigm was so well-known in antiquity, John's mythologization of his conflict in a way guaranteed the triumph of his marginal group (Yarbro Collins 1984:148-150).

Tiffauges's identification with the mythical ogre figure serves a similar function in *Le Roi des Aulnes*. The protagonist feels that the ogre myth gives him immense power placing him far above mere mortals: "Un Ogre? [ ... ] Je crois, oui, à ma nature féérique, je veux dire à cette connivence secrète qui mêle en profondeur mon aventure personnelle au cours des choses, et lui permet de l'incliner dans sons sens" (Tournier 13). Thus, however marginalized he may feel in society, Tiffauges, as ogre, affects the course of the world's events ("l'incline dans sons sens"), and it is this mythologization of his own marginality that gives Tiffauges the idea that he is at the centre of everything. Thus, he can see the burning of the place where he is persecuted (St. Christophe) as an event brought about for his benefit. World War Two begins for the sole purpose of freeing Tiffauges from prison where society has unjustly put him. And, as an ogre, Tiffauges need not fear all that mainstream society fears from war, especially war with Nazi Germany. Therefore, both John and Tiffauges feel empowered at the thought that a supernatural entity, God and Destiny respectively, is on their side in a mythic struggle with mainstream society. The mythologization of reality not only endows the world with meaning but makes the "seer" master of the world. As William Cloonan puts it, for Tiffauges "the myth's function is to exalt the cosmic at the expense of the concrete" (1992:34).

Thus, the ultimate aim of this position is role reversal which is a paradigmatic feature of apocalyptic thinking. As Norman Cohn points out, "one can recognize the paradigm of what was to become and to remain the central phantasy of revolutionary eschatology. The world is dominated by an evil, tyrannous power

[...] until suddenly the hour will strike when the Saints of God are able to rise up and overthrow it. Then the Saints themselves, the chosen, holy people who hitherto have groaned under the oppressor's heel, shall in their turn inherit dominion over the whole earth" (4). Cohn calls this "collective megalomania" and points to the apocalyptic visions in the Book of Daniel as the most typical pre-Johannine example (Cohn 3). John inherited the megalomaniac role reversal pattern from his predecessors (especially from Daniel) and passed it on to all the medieval millenarian movements inspired by Revelation (cf. Cohn 4, 15-17). John does not just want society punished; he wants to take its wealth and power, change places with Rome and the Jews and then enjoy everything that has been denied to him all his life.

Therefore, even though he condemns wealth, he does not condemn wealth as such but only in the wrong hands. The Harlot, i.e., Rome, "was dressed in purple and scarlet [royal colors], and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with the abominable things and the filth of her adulteries" (Rev 17:4). However, in New Jerusalem where John places himself and the righteous after The End, the same opulence (even greater opulence!) is by no means associated with sin: "The [city] wall was made of jasper and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city were decorated with every kind of precious stone [etc.]" (Rev 21:18--19). In this manner John wants to compensate for his own poverty and rootlessness (Yarbro Collins 1984: 134). And at the political level, too, John does not want merely to be free of Roman domination but rather to become the dominator. The Jews who have turned away from the Christians will bow down at the feet of the righteous (Rev 3:9). And perhaps the most typical of this role reversal tendency is the following statement: "To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations — 'He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery (Rev 2:26-27).]"

As Yarbro Collins points out, John wants to revel in his upcoming triumph, to "rub it in," to make sure that not only is society put under his boot but that this is a public act for all to see (1984: 152). For this reason, even though he has said elsewhere that the nations and kings of earth have been destroyed in the final battle (Rev 19:21), these same former oppressors are inexplicably brought back to life for the sole purpose of witnessing the glory of New Jerusalem and John's group (Rev 21:24). Perhaps the most famous assessment of John's mentality in this respect comes from D. H. Lawrence:

Only the great whore of Babylon rises rather splendid, sitting in her purple and scarlet upon her scarlet beast. She is the Magna Mater in malefic aspect, clothed in the colours of the angry sun, and throned upon the great red dragon of the angry cosmic power. Splendid she sits, and splendid is her Babylon. How the late apocalypticists love mouthing all about the gold and silver and cinnamon of evil Babylon! How they want them all! How they envy Babylon her splendor, envy, envy! How they love destroying it all! The harlot sits magnificent with her golden cup of wine of sensual pleasure in her hand. How the apocalypticists would love to drink out of her cup! And since they couldn't: how they loved smashing it (quoted in Yarbro Collins 1984: 169).

The key point is that John's visions are entirely exclusive. Only his in-group, the 144,000 saints, are meant to have it all. Everyone else, the millions of people all over the world are written off as scrap, and everything seems to indicate that in the Last Judgement no one but John's kind of Christians will escape the fiery pit: "The dualist division of humanity in the Apocalypse is a failure in love. [...] One's enemies, including large numbers of unknown people with whom one supposes oneself to be in disagreement, are given a simple label, associated with demonic beings, and thus denied their full humanity" (Yarbro Collins 1984:170).

This denial of humanity to practically everyone in the world except himself, this exclusionist need to reverse roles characterizes the mentality of Abel Tiffauges. Like John, he wants to turn the tables on mainstream society:

Et je prends patience parce que je sais qu'un jour viendra où le ciel, lasse des crimes des sédentaires, fera pleuvoir le feu sur leurs têtes. Ils seront alors, comme Caïn, jetés pêle-mêle sur les routes, fuyant éperdument leurs villes maudites et la terre qui se refuse à les nourrir. Et moi, Abel, seul souriant et comble, je déploierai les grandes ailes que je tenais cachées sous ma défroque de garagiste, et frappant du pied leurs cranes enténébrés, je m'envolerai dans les étoiles (Tournier 58).

What appears most striking in this passage is the jubilation of the protagonist. It is not enough for him to be free of social pressures. He actually wants to revel in his triumph and in the humiliation of society as a whole. For all his talk of love and tenderness, Tiffauges views human beings as clumps of moral matter to be placed at his feet. Thus, the marginal garage mechanic, all alone, unloved and rejected by the world, wants domination because he cannot have social integration. And just as it is John's supernatural sponsors who inspire him to wish for domination over society (Rev 2:26-27), so too Tiffauges receives his dominator's impulse from Nestor: "L'exigence de domination. Rien ne cerne mieux la personnalité de Nestor que ces deux mots" (Tournier 145; cf. Degn 125).

Tiffauges's wish to turn the tables on society and dominate it is fulfilled in his own "New Jerusalem": Kaltenborn. This shift from marginality to "power over the nations" is discussed by Inge Degn in terms of the dichotomy between two "cities": "À l'univers clos de Saint-Christophe correspond l'univers clos de Kaltenborn [...]. Il ne régnait pas en souverain à Saint-Christophe [...]. A Kaltenborn Tiffauges devient maître absolu." (128; also cf. Korthals-Altes 78). So just like John, Tiffauges receives his city of glory at the end of the apocalyptic journey. Of course Tiffauges enjoys every minute of it, as he contemplates the agony of the world that used to marginalize him: "Parce qu'il s'effondre, ce pays me touche de plus en plus près. Je le vois tomber nu à mes pieds, faible, réduit à la plus extrême indigence. [...] Ci-gît le grand corps sans défense de la Prusse, toujours vivant et chaud, mais étalant ses parties molles et vulnérables sous mes bottes" (Tournier 533-534). And just as it is the

mythological ogre paradigm that allows Tiffauges to hope for triumph in the very beginning of his journey (see above and Tournier 13), it is the same mythic deep structure that allows Tiffauges to become master at the end. Because Tiffauges reaches the peak of the role reversal paradigm when he begins to bring children to Kaltenborn, it is as an ogre, i.e., the mythical kidnapper of children, that he acquires the power he seeks while the world is crumbling (cf. Degn 127-129).<sup>3</sup>

All this indicates that the very plot of *Le Roi des Aulnes* reflects the triadic structure of John's visions in Revelation. As Yarbro Collins point out, John's text is organized around three key stages of development (1984:112). First comes the persecution of the faithful that John expects in the near future, e.g., the actions of the Dragon, the Beast and the Harlot. To this corresponds Tiffauges's experience in St. Christophe and his imprisonment in Paris. Then comes the punishment of the persecutors: the cycles of plagues, the great battles at the end and the Lake of Fire. In *Le Roi des Aulnes*, this is the fury of World War Two prefigured by the burning of St. Christophe some twenty years earlier. And finally John is promised the salvation and triumph of the persecuted during the Millennium and at New Jerusalem, which in Tournier's novel is translated into Tiffauges's status at Kaltenborn. To quote Liesbeth Korthals-Altes: "Enfin, l'enchaînement des événements lui-même est également (dé)chiffré selon des modèles bibliques familiers. Tout d'abord le roman exploite largement le schéma narratif et axiologique de l'élu de Dieu, injustement opprimé par les hommes, auquel Dieu apportera la délivrance et la gloire" (170).

### **Signs**

Yarbro Collins points out that in Revelation the marginality of the powerless is compensated by the notion of privileged information (1984:152). John alone is privy to the visions that indicate what is to come and what The End will be like.

In this respect he possesses a kind of power that lifts him above his miserable status and allows him to transcend the confines of Patmos, as well as the Roman Empire itself. Much of the information that John receives is coded, i.e., he does not see a straightforward "movie" of future events but rather a series of symbols. Thus, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev 6:1-8) most likely refer respectively to: an upcoming invasion of the Roman Empire by the Parthians (6:2), civil war (6:4), famine (6:5) and death (6:7) (Yarbro Collins 1990: 1004). The Beast out of the Sea with its seven heads is Rome with its seven hills (Rev 13:1-10), and one of the heads is Nero, the Antichrist, who will return from the dead at the head of a Parthian army to invade Rome (Rev 17:8) (Yarbro Collins 1990:1012).

Tournier's protagonist is also given signs that prefigure the future and point to his destiny (cf. Roberts 42-43). And Tiffauges is just like John in that he derives great comfort from all this privileged information, which compensates for his marginality even before his actual triumph. This is how he perceives the signs that he manages to cull out of all that is happening to him:

Tout cela lui était donné par le destin, comme lui avaient été donnés l'incendie de Saint-Christophe, la drôle de guerre et la débâcle. Mais depuis son passage du Rhin, les offrandes fatidiques avaient cessé de revêtir la forme de coups de boutoir dans les œuvres vives d'un ordre exécré, pour devenir pleines et positives. Déjà les pigeons d'Alsace avaient été un avant-goût — combien modeste et presque dérisoire, mais dont le souvenir lui demeurait doux — de la fortune à laquelle il était promis. [...] Et voici qu'il avait la révélation que la Prusse-Orientale tout entière était une constellation d'allégories, et qu'il lui appartenait de se glisser en chacune d'elles (Tournier 282).

Thus, the three impaled pigeons prefigure the three impaled boys at Kaltenborn in the apocalyptic battle, while the lone sick fourth pigeon found by Tiffauges prefigures Ephraim. And the bog man with his companion symbolize Tiffauges who will sink into the bog with Ephraim.

What makes the signs and symbols given to Tiffauges so similar to those seen by John is the extent to which they are morally severed from their referents. Having chosen the combat myth paradigm, John makes his semiotic system independent of the actual Roman Empire. The sociopolitical order that gave peace and prosperity to most of the world for the first time in human history is cast in the role of the chaos monster. And since the chaos monster has to be vanquished, the signifier takes on a life of its own and is severed from the signified. It no longer matters what real Roman society is like at the end of the First Century CE. Once Rome is the Beast, the massacre at Armageddon is morally bound to take place, the Millennium is inevitable and the New Jerusalem is just beyond the horizon. That is how the combat myth worked with the absolute approval of ancient society. Tiffauges's semiotic system works the same way in that it is divorced from the real world and especially from real human beings. In this connection Degen talks about the "processus par lequel Tiffauges lui-même et ses objets deviennent des «mythes», ne sont plus des êtres vivants ayant leur vie propre [sic], mais des symboles qui se figent, se vident de leur humanité et de leur vie [...]" (129; cf. Purdy 25). This is how Tiffauges can mythologize himself into the ogre figure, the enemy of society and children, and yet sincerely believe in the following statement: "Si [les hommes] me connaissaient parfaitement, ils m'aimeraient infiniment. Comme fait Dieu, Lui qui me connaît parfaitement" (Tournier 202). The bloodthirsty John is equally convinced that he is misunderstood by society and yet beloved by God.

The apocalyptic rift between signifier and signified is revealed to Tiffauges by the Kommandeur at Kaltenborn shortly before the destruction of the napola.

Les signes sont forts, Tiffauges, ce sont eux qui vous ont amené ici. [...] Votre vocation vous a fait découvrir la phorie, l'inversion maligne et la saturation. Il vous reste à connaître le comble de cette mécanique des symboles, l'union de ces trois figures en une seule qui est synonyme d'apocalypse. Car il y a un moment effrayant où le signe n'accepte plus d'être porté par une créature, comme un étendard est porté par un soldat.

Il acquiert son autonomie, il échappe à la chose symbolisée, et, ce qui est redoutable, il la prend lui-même en charge. [...] Lorsque le symbole dévore la chose symbolisée, lorsque le crucifère devient crucifié, lorsqu'une inversion maligne bouleverse la phorie, la fin des temps est proche (Tournier 473).

Although Tiffauges does not realize this yet, his reliance on the ogre myth paradigm has severed the link between what he reads into the signs on his path and the moral connotations behind the meaning of these signs. The implied author, through the Kommandeur's mouth, suggests that the semiotic grid behind Tiffauges's phoria is an independent entity. Although Tiffauges contemplates the sleeping children in the napola "ailé de tendresse" (Tournier 521), his phoric tenderness serves the apocalyptic machine that will massacre these innocents. As Susan Petit puts it, "what seems heavenly reveals itself to be diabolical" (1986: 234) in Tiffauges's attempt to solve the puzzle of signs.

Through his misunderstanding of phoria, Tiffauges attempts to reconcile his need to act out the ogre paradigm with the act of carrying and protecting a child in the steps of St. Christopher. Even though everything indicates more and more, as the action of the novel progresses, that the ogre must bring harm to the child, and even though Tiffauges appears to admit this himself in his musings on the horse and Erl-King (Tournier 469), the protagonist still views all signs indicative of his ogresque vocation as child-friendly and prosocial:

Quant aux enfants, c'est tout simplement admirable comme je sais les prendre! [...] Avec eux, mes gestes les plus bourrus sont secrètement capitonnés de douceur. Ma destinée surnaturelle m'a doué d'une connaissance infuse du poids de l'enfant [...]. La chatte emporte sans précaution le chaton par la peau du cou. Comme un paquet. Mais le petit chat ronronne de plaisir, car ces apparentes bourrades recouvrent une entente intime et maternelle (Tournier 503).

The mother cat is not supposed to bring her kitten to its doom, but then the mother cat does not view her relationship with her offspring in terms of a mythological paradigm. She simply cares for her young. Tiffauges, on the other

hand, is obsessed with his "destinée surnaturelle" which ends up governing his actions as an independent semiotic entity and inevitably brings the mother cat to the altars of the Third Reich. As William Cloonan points out, "the greater significance of his activities constantly 'outdistances' the literal import of his hunting boys" (1992:34).

### **Third Reich**

The notion of being carried away by one's own semiotic system amounts to the same thing in the case of Tiffauges and John of Patmos. Both seers perceive themselves as positive, appear to be concerned with "love" and want something good to happen. However, both end up victims of malign inversion. And it is the Third Reich that acts as a bridge over two thousand years of history, linking the moral failure of Tournier's ogre myth and John's combat myth. As Cohn has illustrated, John's lasting contribution has been not justice but a history of horrific violence associated with millenarian thinking. Perhaps the most famous millenarian author was Joachim of Fiore (1142-1202) who came up with his own notion of the Millennium known as the Age of the Spirit when "all men would be contemplative monks rapt in mystical ecstasy." This became known as The Third Reich that was to last a thousand years (cf. Cohn 101, 309-110), and it constitutes the most obvious of the many connections between Nazi ideology and medieval chiliasm. And so, it is very appropriate for Tiffauges, who has acted out the Johannine paradigm so strikingly, to end up as the unwitting servant of the very Third Reich that John's writings inspired.

The realization that the ogre in Tiffauges has led him not to pursue his own special destiny but to serve the Nazi system comes to the protagonist through a new revelation. When Ephraim tells Tiffauges about Auschwitz, it becomes clear that New Jerusalem is in fact Satan's dwelling, and the ogre is the chaos monster. This is the anti-Johannine apocalypse of *Le Roi des Aulnes*, and it constitutes Ephraim's response to Nestor's valorization of ogresque phoria.

Ephraim helps Tiffauges to reconnect all the signifiers with their real signifieds. And so Tiffauges's salvation lies in his repudiation, with Ephraim's help, of everything that the Johannine tradition stands for. Ephraim does something that was not done by the eager chiliastic followers of Revelation: he simply reveals the implications of seeking to create a utopia by destroying the world on the basis of mythology and semiotics. Those who build a Kaltenborn must necessarily build an Auschwitz, i.e., the New Jerusalem and the Millennium are erected on human skulls.

The fact that this anti-Johannine voice is a Jewish one turns out to be very important with respect to the link between John of Patmos and the Third Reich. John's writings have played a crucial role in the cultivation of anti-Semitism as a key aspect of millenarian thought. The already virulent demonization of the Jews in Revelation was further developed by medieval millenarians in connection with John's reference to the battle with Gog and Magog (Rev 20:7-10). The satanic armies of Gog and Magog were identified with the ten lost tribes of Israel who were to be wiped out the way Gog and Magog are burned by fire from heaven in Rev 20:10 (cf. Cohn 63). In short, John's text legitimized what became a typical feature of many millenarian uprisings in the Middle Ages: massacres of local Jews (cf. Cohn 49-50, 61-2). The culmination of millenarian anti-Semitism came with the Book of a Hundred Chapters by an anonymous German fanatic known as the Revolutionary of the Upper Rhine. His writings, dating from the early sixteenth century, advocate the destruction of the Jews as a whole and the purification of the German race for the Millennium: "The result is almost uncannily similar to the phantasies which were at the core of National-Socialist 'ideology'. One has only to turn back to the tracts — already almost forgotten — of such pundits as Rosenberg and Darré to be immediately struck by the resemblance" (Cohn 122). In fact, Cohn points out that "a Nazi historian devoted a whole volume to interpreting the message of the Revolutionary of the Upper Rhine" (309).

Therefore, the Johannine legacy must be repudiated by a Jew if justice is to triumph completely: the counter-revelation must come from one of John's indirect victims. And the ogre has to serve Ephraim as a way of atoning for his Johannine delusions. It is very significant that Ephraim does not allow Tiffauges to kill an SS officer encountered while the Jewish boy is in Kaltenborn (Tournier 566). The Johannine legacy is one of absolute vindictiveness, and it motivates Tiffauges to wish for the chastisement of mainstream society for all his pain. Ephraim's refusal to follow this line of reasoning constitutes a radical reorientation of all the values in Tiffauges's life. And it is through this redemptive process that phoria changes qualitatively in Tiffauges's life: Tiffauges carries Ephraim for Ephraim's sake. All the children carried up to this point have been perceived as abstract signs and therefore consumed by Tiffauges's Johannine semiotic system. With Ephraim's appearance, Tiffauges becomes a true antitype of St. Christopher and ceases to be the antitype of John. As a result, Tiffauges's death and the destruction of Germany acquire a new meaning as apocalyptic events. In the novel's mythic zone the world does come to an end but in a way that does not imply the upcoming Johannine Millennium and merciless Last Judgement. Instead, as Tiffauges sees the turning Star of David above his head and sinks into the bog, he escapes once and for all from the shadow of John's bitterness, hatred and pride.

### **Conclusion**

Saul Friedlander argues that Nazism was a profoundly irrational phenomenon that cannot be grasped by conventional means of historiographical scrutiny (119-36). Its main impulse was the cult of self-sacrifice and death, "not real death in its everyday horror and tragic beauty, but a ritualized, stylized, and aestheticized death" (Friedlander 43). These are the very foundations of John's discourse in Revelation where the combat myth paradigm helps to turn the expected death of Christian isolationists into a glorious and desirable image.

This image anesthetizes one's natural revulsion in the face of the gruesome reality of physical death. And in this respect Tournier captures the unique essence of Nazism as a mystico-religious phenomenon rather than a modern political movement: "Until now, organized societies or stable power structures were never attracted to apocalypse, only terrified by the prospect of it. This is where the difference from Nazism stands out" (Friedlander 134). Therefore, just as John does not seek to replace the Roman empire with another earthly political structure but rather to destroy everything, the Third Reich's project was nothing more than a "revolt against modernity" (Friedlander 29) aimed at sweeping away all that society was about. In such a moral context, John's martyrs in their white robes and Nazi heroes with their swastikas have no option but to die if they are to remain pure: "God calls home to Him all the entirely pure beings, who are much too pure in some ways to stay long on this earth. It is this traditional image of the lives of saints, the central axis of a whole religious education: 'purity' is an absolute criterion of value" (Friedlander 32).

However, to what extent is Friedlander justified in suggesting that Tournier's novel actually betrays an attitude of fascination with respect to Nazi discourse and its cult of death (Friedlander 26)? Does Tournier merely mimic the vision of the Third Reich by placing a Johannine personality at the centre of *Le Roi des Aulnes*? Anthony Purdy argues that this is not the case: "D'après une telle lecture [celle de Friedlander], le roman de Tournier obtiendrait ses effets par une simple reprise des techniques de séduction et d'envoûtement mises à l'œuvre par le discours du nazisme lui-même. Et pourtant, nous l'avons vu, *Le Roi des Aulnes* contient entre autres une réflexion critique suivie sur la mobilisation des symboles par le régime nazi et une interprétation de l'Apocalypse en termes précisément de la mise à mort du sens effectuée par la saturation symbolique" (28; cf. Cloonan 1992:32). In Friedlander's argument an example of Tournier's "simple reprise des techniques de séduction et d'envoûtement mises à l'œuvre par le discours du nazisme" is the scene where

Halo, Haro and Lothar are impaled in a perfectly symmetrical manner (as if by no one) during the Russian assault on the napola. This purely esthetic image does in fact exemplify the cult of death so fundamental to the Third Reich and the discourse of Revelation. However, it must be stressed that the scene with the three impaled boys appears in the context of what Ephraim tells Tiffauges about Auschwitz. Thus, whatever "beauty" the boys' martyrdom may possess in a purely Nazi context, is rendered grotesque by association with references to the Anus Mundi. In Bakhtinian terms this is a truly polyphonic device where Tournier's moral vision mobilizes Nazi discourse for its own purposes. The "highjacking" of the Third Reich's apocalyptic voice in *Le Roi des Aulnes* means that the cult of death is not affirmed but rather exposed as a bankrupt notion. And in the end, the path of Abel Tiffauges serves to show Armageddon for what it is: horror and ugliness-nothing more.

### Notes

2. Interestingly, Tournier's novel is dedicated to Rasputin, a man closely associated with the apocalyptic events that lead to the downfall of imperial Russia.

3. The idea that the marginal type can be fulfilled only in a world upside down is also suggested by Tiffauges's double (cf. Bouloumie 135), crazy Victor. Victor is mentally ill and thus the most marginal of all possible marginals in peacetime French society. However, when the apocalyptic events of World War Two destroy the social structure that dismissed Victor, suddenly, in East Prussia this former marginal is an important official in the city hall of Seegutten! And of course the basic paradigm at work here does not escape the ever perspicacious Tiffauges: "Mais surtout il m'était pénible de constater que c'était à la folie même que Victor devait [cette réussite insolente], et je me rappelais une fois de plus le diagnostic que Socrate avait porté sur Victor et qui m'avait si vivement impressionné: un déséquilibre auquel un pays bouleversé par la guerre et par la défaite offre le seul terrain qui convienne à son plein épanouissement. Ne suis-je pas finalement un autre Victor [...]?" (Tournier 398-399).

### Works Cited

Bethea, David M. *The Shape of the Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Bible: New International Version. East Brunswick, NJ: New York International Bible Society, 1978.

Bouloumie, Arlette. "Germanic Variations on the Theme of Phoria in the Erl-King (the Influence of Nietzsche, Bach and Mithraism)." In *Michel Tournier*. Ed. Michael Worton. London: Longman 1995.

Cloonan, William. "Le Roi des Aulnes: Myth as Fiction, Fiction as Myth." *Romance Languages Annual* 3 (1992) 32-6.

Cloonan, William. "World War II in Three Contemporary Novels." *South Atlantic Review* 51 (May 1986), 65-75.

Cohn, Norman. *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. New York: Harper and Row, 1961.

Collins, Adela Yarbro. *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984.

Collins, Adela Yarbro. "The Apocalypse (Revelation)." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 996-1016)

Collins, John J. "Old Testament Apocalypticism and Eschatology." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 298-304.

Collins, John J. *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity*. New York: Crossroad, 1984.

Davis, Colin. *Michel Tournier: Philosophy and Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Degn, Inge. *L'Encre du savant et le sang des martyrs*. Odense: Odense University Press 1995.

Friedlander, Saul. *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. Trans. Thomas Weyr. New York: Harper and Row, 1984.

Gascoigne, David. *Michel Tournier*. Washington: Berg, 1996.

Korthals-Altes, Liesbeth. *Le Salut par la fiction? Sens, valeurs et narrativité dans Le Roi des Aulnes de Michel Tournier*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992.

McKenzie, John L. "Aspects of Old Testament Thought." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 1284-1315.

Milne, L. *L'Évangile selon Michel: la Trinité initiatique dans l'œuvre de Tournier*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993.

Petit, Susan. "Fugal Structure, Nestorianism, and St. Christopher in Michel Tournier's *Le Roi des Aulnes*." *Novel* 1986 (Spring) 19:3, 232-245.

Petit, Susan. *Michel Tournier's Metaphysical Fictions*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1991.

Poirier, J. *Approche de Le Roi des Aulnes*. Dijon: Éditions de l'Aléï, 1983.

Purdy, Anthony. "Séduction et simulation: l'empire des signes dans le *Roi des Aulnes*." *Revue des Sciences Humaines* 232 (1993-4) 21-33.

Roberts, M. *Michel Tournier: Bricolage and Cultural Mythology*. Saratoga, CA: Anma Libri, 1994.

Thompson, L. L. *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Tournier, Michel. *Le Roi des Aulnes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

Way, Jean-Bernard. *Michel Tournier et l'Écriture seconde*. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1997.