

The Problem of Eros in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child*

"Your story is terrifying. You yourself are the secret that possesses me. I can free myself of it only by pressing on to the story's very end. But what will I find then? You are not the type to end a story. You're more the type to leave it open, in order to make it an endless tale."¹ These words, spoken by the lover of the unambiguously female Zahra of Ben Jelloun's *The Sacred Night*, bring back the central issue of *The Sand Child*—the impossibility of ending the plural narrations that surround the protagonist Ahmed/Zahra.² Ahmed/Zahra, whose doubled naming reflects both the span of the alphabet and the impossibility of a split androgyne, is a woman who has been gendered male in order to fulfill the perverse desire of a patriarch to beget a son. As such, he/she inhabits a narrative space that reflects the violent conflict between the containment of paternal signification and the disruption of the body. Given Ben Jelloun's sustained interest in psychoanalysis and the theories of Freud, it comes as no surprise that *The Sand Child* explores the issue of gendered subjectivity through a primarily Freudian paradigm. The novel negotiates the complex question of Woman, a question that was of central importance to

- 1 *The Sacred Night* is Ben Jelloun's sequel to *The Sand Child*. Ben Jelloun, Tahar. *The Sacred Night*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, 1989.
- 2 While *The Sand Child* is about the impossibility of endings, *The Sacred Night* is about completion. Since this paper attempts to analyse the question of Eros within narrative, it will only deal with *The Sand Child*. The "conclusiveness" of *The Sacred Night* is another subject altogether, and unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

Freud himself.³ My paper attempts to demonstrate that the problem of narrating Ahmed/Zahra is intimately linked to a reworking of Freud's theories on Eros (the life instinct) and Thanatos (the death drive), and that through this process, Ben Jelloun arrives at the core of an altogether unspeakable trauma that lurks beneath their eternal battleground.

Towards the latter portion of his career, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud's notions of sexuality underwent a most profound change in that he associated the sexual instinct with the pleasure principle, while linking the "life instinct" to the more numinous Eros.⁴ In a lengthy footnote to *Chapter VI*, Freud explains: "Eros operates from the beginning of life and appears as a 'life instinct' in opposition to the 'death instinct' which was brought into being by the coming to life of inorganic substance" (106). Eros thus, is a more complex erotic entity that is closer to the genitofugal⁵ concept of infant sexuality that he had developed in his earlier work.⁶ The term "genitofugal" which Marcuse uses in his work on memory and history, suggests that Eros needs to be differentiated from being located primarily within unsublimated notions of sexuality to being invested in the entire body—a sense of Eros that is thus based on a more complex, polyphonic sense of sexuality.

- 3 In "The Rock of Castration" Paul Verhaeghe provides an extremely lucid analysis of the Freudian/Lacanian problem of Woman. The significance of Verhaeghe's contribution to the field of psychoanalysis is that he suggests that we read Freud in dialogue with Lacan. I would suggest extending this dialogue into "trialogue" that includes Julia Kristeva. Such an implied genealogy reminds us of the continued intellectual tension that keeps reworking the heart of the problem of Freud's famous question: "What does woman want?" (Verhaeghe 229-40).
- 4 It is of interest to note the shift in Freud from a discussion of the sexual instinct per se, to a discussion of Eros, which, however, he hesitates to link to "love" which, in *The Degradation in Erotic "Life"*, he describes as "the two strains of tenderness and sensuality duly fused into one" (Freud 210). However, Freud's use of "Eros" has resonance with the numinous aspect of the Greek god of love, possibly bearing out the thesis that he was, as Jung suggested in "Lecture 3" of *Analytical Psychology*, preoccupied with demonstrating that "sexuality contains spirituality looked at from within" (Oung 21).
- 5 Term coined by Ferenczi, quoted in Marcuse 189.
- 6 Verhaeghe pithily sums up the process of infantile sexuality in the following: "Everyone is polymorphously perverse as a child, everyone goes through the motions of repression before reaching the genital end point" (51).

Describing the work of the pleasure principle and the reality principle, Freud pointed out that their libidinal energy stemmed from much the same source:

We have all experienced how the greatest pleasure attainable by us, that of the sexual act, is associated with a momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation. The binding of an instinctual impulse would be a preliminary function designed to prepare the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge./ This raises the question of whether feelings of pleasure and unpleasure can be produced equally from bound and unbound excitatory processes. (108)

Freud went on to theorize that because the pleasure principle depends on the discharge of the "intensified excitation," it is therefore also inextricably tied to the death instinct, Thanatos. In his words: "The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts. It is true that it keeps watch upon the stimuli from without, which are regarded as dangers by both kinds of instincts; but it is more especially on guard against increases of stimulation from within, which would make the task of living more difficult" (109). The "object" driven ends of the pleasure principle therefore (as distinct from that of Eros in the holistic sense) feed the impulses of the death instinct. This rather lengthy theoretical introduction on Eros and Thanatos is vital to my reading of *The Sand Child* and I will subsequently return to this struggle of Eros and Thanatos, because I believe it is a conflict that rests at the heart of the problem of narrating the misgendered Ahmed/Zahra.

The Sand Child begins with the retreat of Ahmed into a willed solitude. The chapter entitled "The Man," and the author's use of the masculine pronoun, give the reader no apparent cause to suspect that Ahmed is not a "man." As the sole male figure in the house, Ahmed has replaced his father as patriarch, but, as the narrator points out, "for some time now, his walk had ceased to be that of a dictatorial man, the unchallenged master of the big house, a man who had taken his father's place" (3). In other words, Ahmed has fallen prey to an undefined psychological disturbance, a fact collaborated by the nervous tics that disfigure his face (3). That Ahmed's melancholia has turned into a death wish becomes apparent when he begins to fantasize about his own death, conjuring up lurid images of bodily putrefaction in which "he would have burned away his masks, would be naked, absolutely naked, shroudless, buried straight into the earth, which would eat his limbs until it brought him back to himself" (4). When death arrives in the form of a familiar

old spider, rather than succumb bodily to it, Ahmed chooses a path prescribed by poetry which suggests that the ultimate cessation of being comes with the process of writing oneself: "A journal is necessary to say that one has ceased to be" (5).

These few pages introduce us to a character who wishes death, and aims to accomplish this through inscribing himself, or transforming himself into the purely symbolic. The relationship between the death drive, his perverse resistance to it, and the process of signification is thus brought to the fore. Ahmed is consumed by the death drive because it releases/discharges a tension that has possessed him from the beginning of time. By remaining alive however, Ahmed sublimates the death drive into the written word. The process of writing "himself" will be the selfsame process as killing "himself." What is singular about this death is that it can only be achieved through the process of living, and that in choosing to kill his masculine self, Ahmed is perhaps choosing to resurrect his feminine body, a body that has not as yet entered language and therefore has no subjectivity. That the process of killing the masculine self can only be achieved through the written word suggests a link between the self as constructed through paternal signification, and text as the uncanny nemesis of this self.

The story of Ahmed is told by many storytellers, though the novel is narrated by an omniscient narrator. The narrative suspense is kept alive by the seeming incapacity of the various storytellers to "end" their tales. The text of Ahmed's journal serves as a trope through which the various storytellers claim authority over their tales and their audiences. However, as each in turn remains incapable of reading the journal to its end, we see that the stories serve to increase the tension of the novel as a whole. This tension is not unlike the Freudian *Eros* which requires that the subject remain in flux and tension rather than seek discharge in death. Lacan correctly pointed out that an essential part of the problem of the feminine lies in her relation to the phallic signifier: "It is only on the basis of clinical facts that any discussion can be fruitful. These facts reveal a relation of the subject to the phallus that is established without regard to anatomical difference of the sexes, and which, by this very fact, makes any interpretation of the relation especially difficult in the case of women" (282). Lacan therefore suggests that the feminine subject's

entry into signification thus always remains a site that will elude "interpretation,"⁷ a fact that suggests that it will require frequent revision.

The relationship between text, the body's entry into gendered subjectivity and a paternalized order of language is something that Ahmed frequently returns to in his journal. Describing his childhood, Ahmed draws on the differing experiences of gendered speech he encounters as he visits the women's and the men's sections of the Moorish baths. The following example from *The Sand Child* foregrounds a peculiar "magical" quality to feminine speech that Ahmed does not encounter in men's baths. In this scene, the child Ahmed/Zahra is in the baths with his mother and is watching in fascination as the words of the women rise to the ceiling:

Words and sentences flowed on every side, and since the room was dark and enclosed, they seemed to be suspended in the steam above the women's heads. I saw some words slowly rise and hit the damp ceiling. There they melted in contact with the stone and fell back on my face as drops of water. It amused me. The ceiling was like a writing table (22).

The image is developed further as another category of words emerge—those that are considered taboo. These words take on a different physical identity:

Some words fascinated me because they were spoken seldom and softly—word; like "mani" "qlai" or "tabun." I later learnt that these pertained to secrets and that the women did not have the right to use them. Such words did not fall. They stuck to the stone ceiling, which they impregnated with all their dirt (whitish or brown imprint ... I took great pleasure collecting them secretly, like rain, in my underpants (23).

7 It is significant that in Ben Jelloun's sequel *The Sacred Night*, Ahmed's silent mother speaks, desiring that she live beyond his father's death in order to "utter just one scream" (47). She does survive her husband only to enter into prolonged dementia concluding in death. Her scream is prefigured in *The Sand Child* by Fatima's scream in Fatuma's narration of Ahmed/Zahra's story (128). Both Fatima and the mother have been forced to assume sacrificial positions within a rigidly patriarchal family. Their screams express their anguish and are their resistance to the structures they have been forced to inhabit, but, as wordless 'sound' these screams remain outside the bounds of interpretation.

Evidently, taboo speech belongs specifically to a perceived "male" domain. It is not that the women cannot speak such words, but that when they do, they assume a peculiarly male mode of articulation. Taboo speech thus has to do with a female usurpation of desired male power of expression, a power which I would argue is also primarily the power of the phallus. It is therefore not surprising that the words are "seminal" and fantastically impregnate the ceiling which Ahmed has already described as a writing table (22). What is significant about these floating words is that they belong to a primarily oral realm, a realm which seems to be exclusively, the province of women. As Ahmed eventually reaches adolescence and enters the men's baths, he does not encounter the disembodied floating words of the women's baths: "The men didn't talk much; they allowed themselves to be enveloped by the steam and washed themselves fairly quickly. A businesslike atmosphere reigned there...I spent my time sitting around and deciphering damp stones. There was nothing on them" (25). Even though the men do speak, their speech is not disembodied or magical. There is no sense of transgression here. Perhaps Ben Jelloun is suggesting, in keeping with Freud, that for Woman, the word or paternal signification is always outside her meaning.

Ahmed experiences a similar, yet inverse sense of the disembodied word when he participates in the prayers at the mosque. In this passage, rather than the words falling on him with the salty heaviness of life (22), he rises to to greet the sacred text inscribed on the carved ceiling of the mosque: "I rose to join them [the sentences of the Koran], scaling the column with the help of Koranic chant. The verses lifted me fairly quickly to the top... I set off on the back of a beautiful prayer" (25). The words of the Koran lift the soul out of the body, drawing it to their heights. It isn't difficult to see that the Koranic text is both temporal—in that Ahmed can fly on its back before it disappears, and eternal—it is physically inscribed both in the book of the Koran and on the walls of the Mosque. It belongs to an order of language that is thus, other than that of the women or the men. While the Mosque is filled with men, Ahmed's female presence, and his recognition of transcendence in the sacred text signals to us that capacity for the individual of whatever gender, to seek his/her own radical, eccentric, "reading" of the text. This radical reading of the Koran⁸ becomes a central trope for Ahmed/Zahra as the novel continues,

8 Gill Rye provides a comprehensive analysis of Ben Jelloun's use of the mystical Sufi traditions in creating radical readings of the Koran. Rye, Gill. *Neophilologus* 84.4 (2000): 531-40.

for we will discover that when many of the narrators claim to be reading his/her journal, they are in fact reading the Koran.

In *Note on the Mystic Writing Pad*, Freud postulates the notion that our mental apparatus "has an unlimited receptive capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent—even though not unalterable—memory-traces of them" (228). Freud draws on the Mystic Writing Pad as a symbolic way of demonstrating the functions of memory, perception and consciousness. The apparatus is made up of a slate, a layer of wax and a thin sheet as a surface for inscription. The Mystic Pad thus functions in a way similar to our mental apparatus of perception:

The Pad provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, like a slate, but also permanent traces of what has been written, like an ordinary paper pad... this is precisely the way in which,... our mental apparatus performs its perceptual function. The layer which receives the stimuli—the system Pcpt.-Cs.—forms no permanent traces; the foundations of memory come about in other adjoining systems. (230)

Freud's description of the Mystic Writing Pad sounds uncannily familiar to Ahmed's notebook which is the fiction on which each of the tales of the multiple narrators are based. The book may be respectively, a journal or a notebook that one discovers to be a cheap edition of the Koran (49); or the book that is retrieved from the niece of Bey Ahmed, a notebook whose contents have been "stolen by the moon" leaving only the blank page behind (165). In either case, this "fictional" text does not exist in a physical form except as a blank cipher. Neither really, does the protagonist Ahmed/Zahra, except in the collective imagination of the tellers and their followers. Whether the journal was "written" we never in fact discover, but it is narrated, and therefore it supposedly produces perception, and consciousness. But as Freud points out, memory comes from somewhere else, from other "adjoining systems." As I've mentioned before, the story of Ahmed/Zahra, is recounted through various narrators who seek to assert their authority through genealogical and associative links. However, each narrator is also denied that very authority and forced to end his/her tales without conclusions. These narratives are, perhaps, a desperate attempt to fix a character that is both male

and female, who is neither word nor flesh and therefore the embodiment of ambiguity, into the strictures of narrative.⁹

Freud maintained that the trauma of witnessing the primal scene was at the core of the inexpressible, and that the analytic process would negotiate and ultimately reveal this core, leading to eventual healing of the symptom. The pre-Oedipal primal scene exists in a prehistoric time—a time before language and thus acts as a symbolic irritation in the subject, in part because he/she desires this irritation. Ahmed/Zahra describes just such a primal scene which begins with the witnessing of the act of copulation between the parents, and which repeats thereafter, in more lurid detail, at a later stage of childhood. The passage suggests that at this point the primal scene has become a fantasy in which the child remains trapped until he literally tears himself away "leaving the skin of [his] buttocks on the wooden floor" (77). The anxiety finally develops into an almost classic symptom of castration anxiety as the child runs into the woods followed by his father's member: "I was so small and it seemed to me as if my father's huge member was pursuing me, as if it caught me and brought me back home...I could breathe at last, breathe again" (77). It is quite clear that being caught by the father's member also signifies the paternal law, and that the child desires to be subjected (brought home) under the aegis of that law. Ben Jelloun's gesture to the Freudian primal scene seems almost too heavy handed, but it unlocks the question of the desire for the phallus, albeit a desire that is already neurotic.

Lacan, following Freud, suggests that the original source of trauma lies buried in a point of origin that precedes the coming into being of the subject. Lacan is responsible for developing Freud's notion of the nucleus, or point of origin within the unconscious, as the fundamentally inexpressible "Real." Lacan's contribution lies in identifying that traumatic language springs from this point within the unconscious, and proceeds from it in a logic specific to the trauma itself. The process of analysis attempts to trace these paths back to their point of origin—a task that Lacan suggests, is ultimately impossible. In his words, "*Kern unseres Wesen*, the nucleus of our being, but it is not so much that Freud commands us to seek it as so many other before him have with the empty adage 'Know Thyself—as to reconsider the ways that lead to it' (*Eirzts*). The multiple paths that lead toward the enigma of Ahmed/Zahra

9 One has to note, that in the original French, the gendered nature of the language-accentuates the difficulties of the text, and the process of translation encourages even more slippages and ambiguities to occur.

thus give us an opportunity to analyse the need for revision in this tale. A need that can be read in two rather diverse ways—as a repetition of a neurotic symptom, or as the tension of a living memory symbolized by Freud's *Eros*. Freud's notion of trauma, is signaled by the need to return to the scene of the disturbance. This return is played out as a repetition compulsion in the dream-life or hysterical symptoms of the neurotic. Describing the working of the repetition compulsion in neurotics, Freud claims that:

The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past. (39, italics mine)

It is apparent that the difference between repetition and remembering constitutes the success or failure of the psychoanalytic process. It is also significant that in the process of "remembering," a concept of time that is linear has to be instituted. In other words, in the process of remembering, time regains the sequence of past, present and future, and it is measured (perhaps eternally) by the presence of death, by *Thanatos*. The process of remembering therefore, is also linked to the pleasure principle in that it "ends" the pain of the traumatic impulse. In the case of the neurotic repetition however, time is entirely of a different nature, depending always on the existential moment of experience, the repetition, new in each repeating signification.

The pathological nature of trauma disrupts the normal functioning of the subject's perceptive system, creating a fissure in the otherwise contained system of the conscious. In Freud's terms: "We describe as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield [the system *Pcpt.*]. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli" (56). It is not difficult therefore to draw a parallel between the way in which trauma disrupts conscious functions in the psyche, and the way in which Ahmed/Zahra's trauma of having been gendered male, while being born biologically female disrupts the flow of narrative. For Ahmed/Zahra, a single signification cannot suffice, his/her misgendered body acts as a symbolic irritation, requiring each individual narrator to return and rework the site for reasons they do not particularly understand.

As Freud suggests, healing involves the process of remembering. It is significant therefore, that each of the narrators cannot "remember" the text. This grand fallacy of Ahmed/Zahra's narrators is, on the other hand, part of narrative strategy for Ben Jelloun, which leaves us with the question—is *The Sand Child* a grand repetition compulsion?

Let us turn for a moment to the various narrations that abound in this text. What is it about Ahmed/Zahra's story that makes its telling impossible, or possible only in fragments? No record of the story exists, though many claim to be able to enunciate it and to bring it to its "natural" conclusions. Plural in every sense, not even the racial identity of Ahmed/Zahra is stable, as we discover in the chapter "The Gate of Sands," through the use of the decree "Bey Ahmed," that Ahmed/Zahra may in fact be Alexandrian and not Moroccan.¹⁰ The story itself is a surface that functions like a palimpsest—it has been inscribed, erased, and re-inscribed by narratives that intersect with each other in a complex and ultimately indecipherable web of meaning.

However, Ahmed/Zahra invites multiple meanings. One notices how the story first evolves through the Maghrebian story telling tradition. The novel is broken into chapters detailing the "seven gates of meaning," drawing on the Islamic idea of the Messiah's entry into Medina. Ben Jelloun perhaps draws on the Koranic traditions of salvation literature, and may be demonstrating interesting parallels between the transmission of Koranic testament and the tradition of storytelling within the Maghreb.¹¹ The narrative is then taken up by Fatima's brother who lays claim to the narration through references to genealogical authority. It is then taken up by Salem, Amar and Fatuma, three novice *conteurs* whose narratives reflect particular essays in the art of storytelling and who are "trumped" by the tale of the blind troubadour,

10 John Erickson discusses the complexities of Ahmed/Zahra's identity in "Metoikoi and Magical Realism" in Parkinson Zamora and Paris Ed. *Magical Realism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1995.

11 Scholars such as John Wansbrough have long suggested that the transmission of the *hadith* was influenced by the oral traditions of the *imamate*. Given *The Sand Child's* primary thematic concern—the question of gendered subjectivity within a society governed by Islamic law —the relationship between storytelling and professing the Koran are once more seen as acts that mirror each other in subversive ways. This is further demonstrated through the repeated references to Ahmed/Zahra's notebook as an imaginary text extrapolated from the Koran. For detailed arguments on the transmission of Islamic law see "Authority" by Wansbrough, John (86-87).

no less than Jorge Luis Borges in fictional form. The tale finally returns to an unknown storyteller (not unlike our first narrator) who is described as a man who has "walked for a long time through plains and centuries" (158). The multiple narrators and their varying narrative techniques demonstrate that the story is part of collective traditions and not entirely the province of the individual.

However, as the narrators attempt to bring their tales to conclusion, each tale is disrupted and denied an ending. Thus, all narratives appear to return to their point of origin, that is, a point within the unconscious. On the surface, therefore, it seems like Ben Jelloun's novel works to negotiate that point of departure that depends on endings. We are made aware of the fact that in order for the various versions of Ahmed/Zahra's life to be told, the character him/herself must already be dead. This is the premise on which authority is built, it is only through his/her death that the notebook can be re-appropriated, the contents revealed. In this sense, meaning, quite literally, depends upon the death of the body. But we are aware that this is a body that was fashioned, molded by the father. As such, its signification depends upon the word of the father for enunciation.

In "The Father, Love, and Banishment" Julia Kristeva describes the process of love as one requiring the death of the paternal body, the necessity of its metamorphosis into a cadaverous entity:

To love is to survive paternal meaning. It demands that one travel far to discover the futile but exciting presence of a waste-object: a man or woman, fallen off the father, taking the place of his protection, and yet, the always trivial ersatz of this disincarnate wisdom that no object (of love, necessarily) could ever totalize. Against the modifying whole of the father's Death, on[e] chooses banishment toward the part constituting a fallen object or an object of love (of being possessive and genitive partive). How trivial, this object of love—transposition of love for the Other. And yet, without banishment, there is no possible release from the grip of paternal Death. This act of loving and its incumbent writing spring from the Death of the Father—from the Death of the third person. (150)

Kristeva's analysis suggests that the love object is the surplus, the fallen object from the paternal signifier. To "Love" demands a transposition, one that we may see operating at two levels in *The Sand Child*. For example, we are aware that Ahmed/Zahra does in fact transpose his/her love onto "the beloved," an unknown letter writer who simultaneously acts as protector and catalyst for the protagonist's search for a gendered identity. It is the unknown

beloved who on the one hand, encourages Ahmed/Zahra to leave the confines of the Father's house, to seek that identity that had been denied him/her since the father imposes masculine gender on her.¹² And yet, it is also the beloved that admonishes Ahmed of insensitivity towards his mother and thereby protects a particularly masculine patriarchal order by requiring Ahmed to return to his duties as a son.

Nevertheless, when we probe the identity of the unknown beloved we are once more confronted with an ambiguity that mirrors that of Ahmed/Zahra. On reaching puberty and beginning menstruation, Ahmed/Zahra, for the first time counters the father's will by matching his/her own against it. He/she demands a wife as a further sacrificial victim to the gender-farce that has been enacted. Ahmed/Zahra has, therefore, pushed the father's word to its limit, he/she has incarnated it even beyond what was imaginable to the father. In his final words to his father we read an irony that also foregrounds the sense that the sacrifice, ultimately, is also of the self:

My house will be a glass cage—not much, just a room lined with mirrors, which will reflect the light and images ... First I must get engaged. But we don't have to rush things. For the time being I'm going to write, perhaps love poems for the sacrificial woman—her or me. I'll leave the choice to you. (37)

The "sacrificial woman" could be either the ill-fated Fatima, Ahmed's chosen wife, or his own feminine self. It is therefore significant that the unknown beloved's first (lost) letter surfaces shortly after this event. We will later be informed that though the beloved may sometimes write like a woman, the letters are sent by a male admirer. The narrator of the tale voices our discomfort when, describing the letters, he says "Are they from an anonymous correspondent? Or are they imaginary? Or did he write to himself in his isolation?" (41) The "real" identity of the "unknown beloved" is ambiguous. If we are to follow the hypothesis that Ahmed writes these to himself, then we understand that in doing so Ahmed has taken the first step in banishment, in separating the previous paternal signification from the self, who is now feminine, and receives the "love" letters from her masculine "othered" self. As such, of course, the beloved is the transposition of paternal meaning. However, one has to ask if he is not, in fact, the superfluous "waste object," or remnant of Ahmed's masculine self? Is his letter writing part of the

12 I use feminine and subsequently masculine pronouns according to context.

symbolic death he must endure in order for the Woman to come into being? The relationship between banishment, the death of the father and the third person narrative is one that I will return to.

Let me return to the various essays in narrative that we encounter. First, we have the tale, which is recounted by a *conteur*, or storyteller. There are obvious overtones with the tales of Scheherazade from the *Thousand and One Nights*, and the poetics are those of the Berber oral tradition.¹³ Note that we do not necessarily depend on the need for the story to be based in reality. In the hands of a *contour* the fictionality of the story is foregrounded, accepted as part of the aesthetic. However, it is when the first interruption happens that our sense of narrative gets disrupted, this happens with the arrival of Fatima's brother, who "claims" the story through filial relationship, in other words, he is setting up a genealogy of authority, he is also attempting to propel the narrative out of the imaginary into the real. Note that it is he who exposes the fraud of the notebook by claiming authority with dates and places: "I am the one who has Ahmed's diary—as you might expect I stole it the day of his death. Here it is. It is covered with a newspaper of the time, *You* can read the date—does it not coincide with that of his death?" (50, italics mine). But of course, neither the reader nor the "fictional" listeners would be able to verify such material anymore than with the old storyteller, the evocation of real authority is thus perceived as narrative device. In the hands of our various storytellers we are comfortable with what we perceive to be their attempts at creating fiction. However in the chapter "The Houseless Woman" the "original" *conteur* interrupts the tale of Fatima's brother and from this point until the chapter "Salem," we are uncertain as to who is telling the story. This disembodied voice, speaking in the third person, produces hesitation and uncertainty in the reader (and therefore anxiety) and demonstrates the uncanny sense of a form without a face. In order to arrive at some form of narrative stability therefore, the reader engages with the particularities of the narration, modes of inflection and the internal poetics that would distinguish this voice from the others. This process invites the reader to "flesh out" the text, and to give imaginary form to the disembodied voice. And yet, I would suggest that even this very exercise invokes a sense of anxiety within the

reader, a suspicion that all attempts at containing the voice within a form, or image, would be fickle.

The "*content*"¹ continues his tale until his narration is abruptly terminated in "Salem." We are informed that he is dead, his effects including the notebook are burnt, and eight months and twenty-four days (the gestation period of a pregnancy) have elapsed. Three enthusiastic followers of the story (Salem, Amar and Fatuma) convene and decide to continue the tale of Ahmed/Zahra. Salem "a black, the son of a slave brought back from Senegal by a rich merchant in the early years of the century" (104) continues the story despite the protests of his audience. His rationale for being able to continue Ahmed/Zahra's tale is the authority of experience—he has "lived and worked in a big house like the one described by the storyteller" (105) and therefore, has witnessed other narratives through which he can extrapolate upon. It is interesting to note however, that his experience does not privilege him with the other two members of the group of self-styled *conteurs*. When he begins to describe his life in the big house where he is born into slavery, the others respond "But this has nothing to do with *our* story" (105, italics mine). Salem however, insists that he can continue the story even though he may not be born into the tradition—"I may not possess his [the storyteller's] skill, but I know things, so listen" (105). The suggestion here is that Ahmed's story may be an allegory, and that "being black and a slave's son" involves Salem in a similar narrative subjectivity (with all attendant violations) as being dis-gendered by the father.

Amar takes over from Salem, using once more the strategy of invoking Ahmed/Zahra's diary. Amar's preoccupation is with re-instituting the masculine. His narrative begins with the description of homosexuality that is located as a European, corrupting, influence on Islamic society. Amar's preoccupation with "corruption" presupposes an originary Islamic presence, his style of narration also evokes an aesthetic of an older period not subjected to the decay of the present: "the Islam I carry inside me cannot be found; I am a man who has lived alone, and religion does not really interest me" (113). It is therefore significant that Amar renames our main character Ahmed. Amar thus fills in the name for the initial "A," which is, coincidentally, the same as his own; he thus re-inscribes the law of the father. It is not a surprise when his narration of Ahmed's story is highly formal, looking backwards to an aesthetic of 11th century miniatures, drawing the connection between an older form of Islam which was less resistant to an aesthetic of the body: "So many books have been written about bodies, pleasure, perfumes, tenderness, the sweetness

13 For a thorough analysis of the varied discursive traditions see Robert Harvey "Purloined Letters: Intertextuality and Interscuality in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child*" in Dominique D. Fisher and Lawrence R. Schehr Ed. *Articulations of Difference*. California: Stanford UP, 1997.

of love between man and woman in Islam—ancient books that nobody reads nowadays. Where has the spirit of poetry gone?" (123). Amar's Ahmed dies waiting for poetry "in the sweetness of the words he was writing, in the tenderness of the thoughts he cherished" (123).

Fatuma, the last of the three novices, takes over from Amar by assuming the identity of the lost Ahmed. We know, by now, that any character can assume an "authority" over the story, and Fatuma, having listened to the other accounts of the story could simply construct her conclusion accordingly—by offering herself (her bodily signification) as the last and incontestable authority. In her narrative Ahmed/Zahra becomes a woman devoted to orphans (therefore fulfilling a socially viable existence) and wiping out any hint of mystery. However, this is exactly what the followers or the readers do not want. We of course, do not desire closure and I mean this in the psychoanalytical sense. Far less do we desire Ahmed/Zahra to be reduced to reality and thus robbed of his/her polyphonic significations that exists within the imaginary. Panama's narrative is obviously concerned with the larger issues of piety, the flux of contemporary Islamic identity, and the established aesthetics of the tale. Her final words are about the distinction between the real and the imaginary that one would not, by definition, associate with Ahmed/Zahra. Fatuma concludes her narration within the identifiable and the real. In her words, Ahmed/Zahra is "afraid of getting mixed up, of losing the thread of the present and being imprisoned in that magical, luminous garden where not a word must enter" (133).

If we pause and step back from these narratives, we realize that we can quite readily identify the particular narrative strategies at work whether they be through the use of devices such as allegory or attempts at poetics that rely on familiar use of figurative language and form. The narratives invite hermeneutics and are concerned with providing conclusions to a tale that cannot conclude. As I have attempted to demonstrate, however, the conclusions provided by Salem, Amar and Fatuma are problematic because they are unconvincing. They keep open a door for the reader to desire more, to wish for something other. The reader thus recognizes that such conclusions are purely figurative. It is just as we settle into the idea of closure as artifice that Borges¹⁴ arrives as the blind troubadour, as one final flourish in the art of

the narrative: "the secret is sacred, but when it becomes ludicrous it's better to be rid of it. Now you'll probably ask me who I am, who sent me, and why I have landed in the middle of your story like this. Let me explain... No, all you need to know is that I have spent my life falsifying or altering other people's stories" (134). Readers familiar with the art of Borges recognize the creator of Pierre Menard, the most consummate fiction of his repertoire. Borges arrives therefore, to restore illusion, and the primacy of fiction. But even the blind troubadour, whose tale is of the perennial struggle between signification, death, and the body, ultimately falls asleep at the climax of his tale and leaving his listeners and the reader without a conclusion. The narration then reverts to an old, wandering storyteller who is at once reminiscent of the first *conteur* who began the tale of Ahmed/Zahra in the beginning of the novel. The path is circular, in keeping with the aesthetic of *The Sand Child* and with Borges' fiction in general. The circular path suggests once more that the core of the narrative is neurotic, and hidden behind veil of language.

What almost escapes the reader, is that the novel is related by an omniscient narrator. Each narrative voice thus acts as a blindfold that shields the narrator from the reader's eye. This is by far the greatest conundrum of the text, and we discover that the moment we turn the glare of analysis onto our narrator, we find nothing there, we can see the strings but not the puppeteer. As the first chapter "The Man" draws to a close we have our first "voice over" by the omniscient narrator:

The men and women rose in silence and, without saying a word, dispersed into the crowd in the square. The story-teller folded the sheepskin and placed his pens and ink-wells in a small bag. The notebook he carefully wrapped in a piece of black silk and put into his briefcase. Before he left, a small boy handed him a loaf of black bread and an envelope.

He walked away across the square and disappeared in the dusk. (6)

As it is the first appearance of the omniscient narrator, this passage deserves close scrutiny. We notice the absolute sparseness of the language, the attention to detail, and the absolute neutrality of the voice. We notice that the last line is separated from the rest of the passage thus emphasizing the poetic

14 For concordances of *The Sand Child* with the work of Borges see John Erickson "Writing the Double: Politics and the African Narrative of French Expression" in *Studies in Twentieth Century literature* 15.1(1991): 101-22; and Robert I Harvey "Purloined

Letters" in Dominique D. Fisher and Lawrence R. Schehr Ed. *Articulations of Difference*. California: Stanford UP, 1997.

image of the ancient storyteller wandering off into the dusk; it is a formal gesture and it is the only hint of individuality that our narrator affords us. As with the unknown beloved, we find in our omniscient narrator all the enigmas of Ahmed/Zahra. Is he/she male or female? Of what time and place? We form a sense of this character through his/her verbal conundrums. The following words are an example of such verbal playfulness: "We shall never know the end of this story. And yet a story is written to be told to the end" (104). In other words, there is an end that the narrator sees, but we, the readers, cannot comprehend it. What is abrasive, what excites our uncertainty at this kind of "ending," is that the storytellers seem possessed of endings that are perpetually beyond our reach. Even the last of the *conteurs* admits that he had read and reread the notebook, but that now he has forgotten its contents. When he adds that he will "go away and read the Koran on the tomb of the dead" (165), we are once more alert, remembering that it was precisely the Koran that the first storyteller read, counterfeiting the sacred text as Ahmed's notebook.

Let us return momentarily to the conclusion of the Freud's *Note on the Mystic Writing Pad*:

My theory was that cathectic innervations are sent out and withdrawn in rapid periodic impulses from within into the completely impervious system *Pcpt.-Cs.* So long as that system is cathected in this manner, it receives perceptions (which are accompanied by consciousness) and passes the excitation on to the unconscious mnemonic systems; but as soon as the cathexis is withdrawn, consciousness is extinguished and the functioning of the system comes to a standstill. It is as though the unconscious stretches out feelers, through the medium of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.*, towards the external world and hastily withdraw them as soon as they have sampled the excitations coming from it ... I further had a suspicion that this discontinuous method of functioning of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* lies at the bottom of the origin of the concept of time. (231)

I would like to draw the similarity between the omniscient narrator of *The Sand Child* and Freud's description of the function of the unconscious. The omniscient narrator sends out little flashes of narratives, like cathexes, each surrounding the same topic. These impulses are received by us, the readers, who function in much the same way as the conscious does. And yet, just as we imagine we are getting the picture, just as we imagine we have located the trauma, the impulses are withdrawn. Therefore, the story can resume at any time. Like a palimpsest, it is not entirely buried and keeps trying

to emerge. To answer the question I posed earlier in this essay therefore, *The Sand Child* is a grand repetition compulsion, but of what trauma we do not as yet know.

As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the process of the psychoanalytic cure involves the process of memory; it requires the patient to "re-member" a hidden trauma, and to bring consciousness to it. If we read Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child* as a grand repetition compulsion, we are in fact engaging in a neurotic reading of the text. But how, one may ask, is it possible to read it any other way? Writing in 1955, Herbert Marcuse drew upon Freud's theories for *Eros and Civilisation*, his work on the relevance of memory in history. He described the dialogic battle between Eros and Thanatos in the following manner: "The brute fact of death denies once and for all the reality of non-repressive existence. For death is the final negativity of time, but "joy wants eternity" (211). For Marcuse, the only way time can lose its power is when the individual allows Eros to penetrate *consciousness*, to take part specifically in the act of remembrance as distinct from the mostly unconscious act of repetition (213). Marcuse thus points in the direction of a life instinct that maintains tension through a lived, conscious relation to the inexpressible kernel of trauma. It is thus only through the act of a conscious erotogenesis of memory, that is, a sense of living memory rather than "revised" memory, that the power of Thanatos can be mediated.

I would suggest that the denial of closure in the multiple narrations of *The Sand Child* results in a certain playfulness that circulates while maintaining the tension of a desired conclusion within the reader. The reader's task therefore is to activate the play between the words, to suffuse consciousness of the text with the lived tension of Eros. Notice that this web of stories depends on the ability to read beyond death, beyond the fictional or actual death of Ahmed/Zahra; and the deaths/sleeps of the various storytellers and narrators throughout the course of the multiple narrations. It also depends upon the ability to understand the final demise of the narrative, and I would suggest, that of the omniscient narrator.

I have already described some of the self-reflexive games that our elusive master narrator engages in. He/she continuously invites us to multiply the significations and to engage in the metaphorical act of meaning. But the final lines of the book, spoken in the voice of one of the storytellers, alert us to a shift in the dialectics of power and desire that have been at work in the novel: "If any of you really want to know how the story ended, he will have to ask the moon when it is full. I now lay down before you the book, the inkwell, and

the pens. I shall now go away and read the Koran on the tomb of the dead!" (165). As I have suggested, reading the Koran over the tombs of the dead is an act filled with subversive power, with the quite radical suggestion of playing with a sacred text. It is also significantly an act against the homogenizing power of our illusive omniscient narrator, for in this moment, he/she relinquishes the text to the immediate real and imaginary potentials that we, the readers, will bring to it.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the quotation by Julia Kristeva: "To love is to survive paternal meaning ... This act of loving and its incumbent writing spring from the Death of the Father—from the death of the third person" (150). As Kristeva suggests, in order for "writing" to be suffused with Eros, the death of the father, the death of the third person, is required. In *The Sand Child*, one realizes that the narrator uniquely offers the reader an invitation to partake of that death, all the time suggesting that it is in fact, another game. This is the significance of reading the Koran on the tombs of the dead, the suggestion that the polyphonic word can stand against death since it can stand as the enunciation of love, of Eros, the life instinct.

Kristeva ultimately identifies this "playful" speech as belonging to woman. She goes on to add that it is possible, for a woman, to speak love, love as the object of the third person and as "a shattering of the object across and through what is seen and heard within rhythm: a polymorphic, polyphonic, serene, eternal, unchangeable *jouissance* that has nothing to do with death and its object, banished from love" (157). The tremendous significance of Kristeva's theoretical approach is that it gives us a glimpse into that problem of the feminine, which is perhaps the unspoken core of trauma in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Sand Child*. In Kristeva's conception therefore, we have collectively arrived at a moment where it is possible for woman to speak, and to speak love. This speech is musical, polyphonic and resists teleologies. Above all, it resists the assumption of the subject position that woman must bear in a myth of the feminine. In this new radical position, feminine speech is no longer trapped within the third person, but is both "beyond and within, more and less than meaning" (158).

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