

CAMILLE DE TOLEDO, *We Have Never Been Postmodern. The Mourning of Modernity Never Occurred*

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Camille de Toledo,\* pen name of Alexis Mital, born in 1975, is one of the key figures on the contemporary French and European literary scene, living in Berlin since 2005. He is also a visual artist, video maker and teacher at Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Visuels in Brussels. The ethnic diversity of his genealogy (Jewish, Indian, Spanish, French) helped him acquire a worldly historical consciousness and reject the idea of roots, as he shows in his latest novel, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle* (*Theseus, his new life*, 2020, the Académie Française's creation prize and the Franz Hessel prize). Taking his cue from Bruno Latour's idea of a "Parliament of Things" (which dates back to 1995), he orchestrated the (fictional) process instituting *Auditions pour un parlement de Loire* (2019-2020), which led to the publication of a book called *The River that Wanted to Write*, an account of what he calls "the legal uprising of the Earth." In 2008, de Toledo founded the *European Society of Authors* to promote "translation as a language", echoing another Latourian major concern (inaugurated by Michel Serres and then developed by Michel Callon), the "sociology of translation". Translation and Things are two key notions for an earthly philosophy of modernity as a planetary era in which things and people have to come along together in order to make life on Earth sustainable. His work is important not only for Latourians, but also for literary scholars keen on literary Modernism as a trans-historical preoccupation for devising new forms of literary psychological writing, and for East-European intellectuals trying to make sense of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's modernity mirrored in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Some of his books can be read as "counter-fictions" trying to get through the "closing fictions" of the last century (communism, neoliberalism, nationalism etc.). His last book, *Une histoire du vertige* (*A History of Vertigo*, 2023) is an essay of literary criticism and theory whose initial version Camille de Toledo defended as a PhD thesis in 2019, written under the supervision of Dominique Rabaté.

**Alexandru Matei:** You are part of a generation that, back in 1989, was too young to offer a critical perspective on the fall of the Berlin Wall and on a specific ideological climate that we now commonly refer to as postmodern. I would say age, a postmodern age, because I think that the biological, the historical and the ideological are intertwined in the various theoretical discussions that circulate within academia. However, in the 1990s, you realised that this fall was not without its problems: the East remained poor and wars raged there, while the West was no longer interested in the fate of the people now camped within 'democratic' regimes. Certain values of modernity – emancipation, equity – were still being fought for. Nonetheless,

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during the 1990s, you came to understand that the aftermath of this fall was not without its challenges either: the East continued to struggle with poverty and ongoing conflicts, while the West seemed to lose interest in the well-being of those living under 'democratic' governments. Certain values of modernity, such as emancipation and equity, were still under contention. Does this mean that you realised that "we have never been post-modern," to paraphrase Latour, because you felt that "the spectacle has derealised the world and, in this derealisation, it has taken away our capacity for indignation" (*Archimondain Jolipunk*, 2002)? After the fall of the Wall, have we still remained "modern", for better (the need to fight, to "progress", but also to invent, to make "possible" things happen) and for worse (thirst for accumulation, forcing the limits of a sustainable ontology, etc.)? Since the Wall's collapse, have we continued to embody the essence of "modernity," both in positive ways (the drive to strive, progress, invent, and make the seemingly impossible a reality) and in negative ways (a relentless pursuit of accumulation, pushing the boundaries of a sustainable ontology)?

**Camille de Toledo:** I believe in the long-term nature of history, the 'long time' referred to by a historian like Fernand Braudel. Postmodernity, as we see every day, is merely an acceleration of modernity, its intensification. From the age of 15, I saw the 'Fall of the Wall' with different eyes, those that see continuities behind the so-called great ruptures. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I paid close attention to what was being summed up and extended from the ghosts of war and destruction. Behind all my books, there is a certain philosophy of history that has only grown stronger with time. We are the name of a catastrophe, one that Walter Benjamin described so well in his last writings: it presents itself to us every day under the name of 'progress'. We are introducing imbalances everywhere, and in an increasingly tragic and industrial form. That is why my research and doctoral thesis focused on the motif of *vertigo*. The continuum of the modern epic is an ever-increasing production of *vertigo*: all the anthropological supports that have served humanity to hold on in the chaos, in the *tohu bohu* of time, we have succeeded in surpassing, upsetting and eroding: the distinction between true and false has been surpassed and turned upside down. The separation between reality and fiction, pierced and shattered. Biological and sexual differences disturbed and overwhelmed by the performativity of gender, self-narrative and transformative pharmacopoeia. We are moving towards even greater *vertigo* with narratives of deterrestration, to go and extract rare metals on other planets. Something in our species is trying to leave the body. The arrow of emancipation, of freedom, brings with it as many wonders as monstrosities. And yet, we insist on believing that we can separate our blessings from our curses. The nature of modernity did not change when the Marxist hypothesis was abandoned, when socialism was extinguished as a principle of government. What was in fact at work, in an underlying way, was the constant increase in the power of states over bodies, the strengthening of executive roles, over parliaments, over deliberative bodies. On both sides of the old Iron Curtain, something was already converging. These are the fifty shades of grey of oligarchy, of the hold of the few over the many. We live in a world where the 'great powers' have taken control of resources, land and human, plant and animal bodies. Only the capitalist political economy manages to

maintain the illusion of choice and enjoyment, with the help of drugs and concept stores. What do we see in the long term? I am talking about several centuries... The reinforcement of state structures, the modern stubbornness of a single hypnosis of progress. We have never been postmodern, because we have never mourned the passing of modernity. With anthropology, critical philosophy, the traces of deconstruction, the discoveries of paleoanthropology, the terrifying and brutal verdicts of the Anthropocene, we have all the pieces we need to build another narrative, one that redirects the arrow of progress. But the various entities that maintain the fictions of the world to come seem to have found ways of putting off the time for this inventory. The time when, alongside the graveyard of communism and the graveyard of Marxism, the graveyard of capitalism finally appears.

**AM:** Your literary and theoretical contributions can be interpreted as an analysis of memory, juxtaposing two different forms of memory. There exists a recollection of all the human and historical tragedies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a memory that spawns a "vertigo" upon which we must construct our futures. In addition, there is another form of memory, one for which every nascent utopia is condemned, referred to as "hontologique," a term you coined from the words "shame" ("honte") and "ontos", "being". The latter increasingly assumes the authority to pass judgment and enforce a notion of 'justice' at any expense. This concept of justice is formulated at the conclusion of what I would describe as a conflict of narratives, championed by the victorious narratives, including neoliberalism, anti-communism, and the sanctity of property. Now, literature and the arts can, through their concern with form, rebalance the scales that, immediately after 1989, tipped towards the second type of memory, in favour of the first. It seems to me that these two types of memory overlap with the two types of fictions postulated in *Les Potentiels du temps*: "fictions that reinforce the old world' and 'narratives of transformation, of incompleteness."<sup>1</sup> However, I would like to pose a different question: Ultimately, could stating this be seen as a contemporary challenge to the traditional 'old world'? Moreover, if the second form of memory succeeds in broadening our perception of reality, might we consider it as a type of memory shaped by the literary techniques often referred to as "modernist"?

**CdT:** Your question continues with this one: at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in what direction are the dead, the spectres, the disappeared, the ghosts moving? What direction is necropolitics taking? How are the living of the 21<sup>st</sup> century making use of the dead? What is Europe doing with the dead of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? What is the United States doing with the destruction of the past, the slaves, the massacre of the natives? What is Russia doing with the old spectres of the empire and the disappeared, the deportees of communism? What are the former metropolises doing with their colonial memories? *Les Potentiels du temps* is a book in which the spectres of destruction are used to revive the powers of life. Arrows for the future. The

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<sup>1</sup> Camille de Toledo, Aliocha Imhoff, Kantuta Quirós, *Les potentiels du temps. Art et Politique* (Paris: Manuella éditions, 2016), 46.

invisible, the disappeared, the dead are called upon, in some way, to revive the future. Conversely, the necropolitics at work everywhere usurp the meaning of death. Nationalisms - what I also call zombie narratives - do just that, by sustaining old morbid and sacrificial prides. The imperialist aims of a country like Russia seem to use the spectres of empire as a kind of drug to send kids on a killing spree. It seems to me that never before have the living become the intercessors of death: in one case, to pursue the various projects of destruction; in the other, to hope, to desire to redeem the times, and to aspire to equity, to justice, in an infinite way. That's why you're right, memory, memories, are at the heart of all the ongoing battles. But our concern is that the memories that call for justice, metamorphosis and less destructive futures will never be able to come to terms with each other. We are in a world of perspectives that can no longer converge. Everyone seems to be carried away by their own little story of suffering. It was in this sense that, from my first book, I was looking for a way to make memories converge, a story of hope and transformation. Before Bruno Latour's landings, I was talking about moving towards new incarnations (in *Archimondain Jolipunk*), to get closer to matter, to bodies, to life.

**AM:** In *Le Hêtre et le bouleau. Essai sur la tristesse européenne*<sup>2</sup> [The Beech and the Birch. An Essay on European Sadness] you deal with the possibility of inhabiting the modern world before the epiphany of the inescapable reference to Gaia: "In other words: to make the non-place (the utopia) of our crossed, mixed origins, the in-between of languages, this interstice of errors, misunderstandings and untranslatables (the translator's properly human effort to try to bring the foreigner into the language), the focus of the house of being, its unstable, uncomfortable lair, like the rope on which the tightrope walker springs." Could we argue that, in contrast to the seemingly straightforward, realistic, and positivist literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modernist literature, or literary modernism, serves as a literary expression of living within language akin to a tightrope walker's precarious balancing act?

**CdT:** The question I was asking myself when I was writing *Le hêtre et le bouleau* was this: what is the poetic and political space of Europe after the twentieth century, after the long history of the destruction of the world, of genealogies and forms of life? A related question for me, from that time on, particularly after writing *Visiter le Flurkistan*,<sup>3</sup> whose subtitle was for a literature of strata, of sediments, was also formulated as follows: what language does the 'Weltliteratur' speak? How can we think about this Weltliteratur from the place of minor literatures, of minor

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<sup>2</sup> de Toledo, *Le Hêtre et le bouleau. Essai sur la tristesse européenne. suivi de L'Utopie linguistique ou la péda: Essai sur la tristesse européenne suivi de L'utopie linguistique ou la pédagogie du vertige* (Paris: Seuil, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> *Visiter le Flurkistan, ou, les illusions de la littérature monde* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2008) is a polemical essay published by Camille de Toledo in 2008 as an answer to a anti-francophone literary manifesto, literary manifesto published by *Le Monde* on 15 March 2007, at the heart of the presidential campaign that would lead to the election of Nicolas Sarkozy, defending the concept of world literature to the detriment of the concept of francophone literature.

languages, against the trace of past dominations? This is where the central motif of 'translation as language' emerges for me: that place of 'in-between languages' that I also call the lair of languages. Continuing on, the book *Une histoire du vertige*<sup>4</sup> [A History of Vertigo] further underlines this proposition: to start from the instability of the link between the sign and the thing, between the letter and the world, to return to that fragility, to stand in that trembling. I absolutely do not recognise this more or less conservative position of the novel. I sincerely believe that the 'Houellebecquian era' is a small reactionary, conservative wave, in which the nineteenth-century novel comes back in response to reading habits and a certain zeitgeist: that of white nostalgia, the nostalgia of white men. This is also where Bret Easton Ellis finds himself. Like Philip Roth, in his own way, who announced it, notably in *The Human Stain*. This is the current that saves the book from a sociological and commercial point of view. But it says nothing about the deeper links that lie in a search for forms appropriate to the present time; that lie in a work on language, on spectralities, on the place of images, on the way texts are put together and the increasingly blurred relationship between reality and fiction, document and imagination. This is, of course, where my research lies: defining the coordinates of the present day, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so as to propose the right forms for books and language. Among all the new, accurate data I'm trying to pin down is the instability of the link between language and life.

**AM:** In *Les potentiels du temps* you elaborate on the imperative to liberate ourselves from the constraints of a memory characterized by victimization, which effectively arrests our existences in fixed stances. However, your character Theseus (in *Theseus, his new life*<sup>5</sup>) cannot manage to be modern: no matter how "stubbornly modern he may be, aiming for the future, fleeing the past"; "launching himself into this existence towards the East with only the force of oblivion, he swears to himself that, despite everything, he will remain a modern, even if his foundations have been shaken", he cannot manage it. Is Theseus echoing Walter Benjamin's essay *Angel of History (Theses on the Philosophy of History, 1942)*? If that is the case, can literature serve as a means of contemplating this prospective future, envisioning it, and subsequently raising questions and challenges about it?

**CdT:** The thoughts, traces and fragments left by Walter Benjamin are scattered everywhere in books. Translation, the relationship with childhood, the question of transmission, the challenge of messianism, the relationship with a spiritual Marxism, the wounds of History, the very clear awareness of the 'catastrophe' that is progress. In *A History of Vertigo*, you know, I even present a particular cut-out of Paul Klee's canvas, which, at one point in his life, was owned by the philosopher who was close to Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt. I also learnt, from my early reading of Michel Foucault, that to write is to choose the place of enunciation. I am

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<sup>4</sup> de Toledo, *Une histoire du vertige* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> de Toledo, *Theseus, his new life*, transl. by Willard Wood (New York: Other Press, 2023). Original: *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 2020).

thinking here of what he found by thinking from the history of madness, from the place of abnormality, or that of confinement. I apply this clear lesson to the question of focus in literature. *Herzl, une histoire européenne*<sup>6</sup> is written from the point of view of a man without a world, a shtetl lout from Russia, who lost the use of his language in a traumatic shock, a pogrom. *Vies pøtentielles*<sup>7</sup> [Potential Lives] is written from the point of view of a narrator, Abraham, who loses his family. Thésée's place of enunciation, his new life, is no exception to my rule; I am looking for the place of the "I", of a "he", and the name that will most accurately carry the story of this trans-genealogical investigation, through the various shocks of twentieth-century history: the Great War, the Second World War, post-war growth. Theseus is the one who speaks, in particular, of liberation from the 'debts' of the past: the debt that Athens must pay in fresh flesh, in young bodies, to deliver them to King Minos and the Minotaur. To free the present from the debts of the past, to authorise the future, is the work of Theseus. But it is also, of course, the mystery of identity - in philosophy, Theseus' boat is the paradox of what is always the same while being entirely different, always undergoing metamorphosis. Theseus is about opening up to the "monster", in this case the "monster of history", never far removed in European history from the "monster of nationalism" and Germany in particular. Theseus is also the man who makes a mistake and precipitates his father's suicide. He is therefore a figure of the survivor who carries the meaning of history to come. We find again the articulation that I was working on in a more theoretical way in *Les potentiels du temps*: how can we turn the spectres, the hauntings of the past, into forces to reinvent and fork future history? How can we take spectres that take on the power of life, and turn them into companions for future times?

**AM:** A question of poetics now: your stories and essays, which are often written in the first person, are not made up of a textual continuum, but of fragments – or verses, they are poems, sometimes psalms. Does this result from a resurgence of self-reflexive literature that employs syntactic disruptions to establish a critical gap between the text and the reader, with the aim of engendering a thought that simultaneously engages with both the world and literature through this interface?

**CdT:** In my writing practice, formal questions are always unanswerable. Often, from the outside, from a critical point of view, too much or too little meaning is projected onto the formal composition of books. The work is that of a craftsman. You search, you sculpt the text, you compose the page, you edit - like a documentary film editor - the various fragments of writing, you knead, until it comes to life, until it becomes stratified... The books take shape, you end up seeing them. I suppose you can read intentions into them... but with me, there are no formal intentions. It does not work like that. There is a quest, a strong desire to give form to a thought in action, or a narrative, or a story, and this form has to express a certain state of

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<sup>6</sup> de Toledo, *Herzl, une histoire européenne* (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> de Toledo, *Vies pøtentielles* (Paris: Éditions Points, 2014).

reality, of life, of things. For *Vies potentielles*,<sup>8</sup> I wanted the imposition of the texts on the pages to reflect the instability of the text, of the book, of the relationship between fiction and life, so that everything moves. In *Thésée*, I spent a long time arranging and cutting, and I realized that I had found this form that gives continuity and tension, but from fragments, texts arranged one inside the other. The choices are made right at the workbench, in the course of the work. For *Une histoire du vertige*, for example, the 'you' in the address came into its own in the final bends, two weeks before the book was finally published. I have a way of thinking that structures my work, a relationship to philosophy, to the history of science, to politics, to current events... But when I'm working on a book, or an installation, or any other form, I 'let go' of the way I think. And then everything becomes much more material. In fact, I have come to define myself as a materialist, a materialist of animation. Things have to come alive, thoughts and their stiffness have to spill over everywhere. Language, text and form have to completely overwhelm meaning.

**AM:** A question about your project titled *The River that Wanted to Write*, and your shared path with Bruno Latour. When did you come across his work?

**CdT:** In 2008, I founded a fictional institution devoted to translation. The idea was to rethink politics beyond national edifices and identity barriers. In its relationship with the natural non-human world, our species also maintains links of translation. We are constantly translating the forms and manifestations of nature. It is in this sense that in *L'inversion de Hieronymus Bosch*<sup>9</sup> [Hieronymus Bosch's Inversion] and in *Vies et mort d'un terroriste américain* [Lives and Death of an American Terrorist],<sup>10</sup> I create the character who gives meaning to catastrophes, tornadoes and hurricanes. Translation is the language of languages; it is, in fact, the language spoken by the scientists Bruno Latour studied. So, we have converged, starting from this language of translation. *The European Society of Authors* – the fictional institution I had created – needed sponsors. I could not possibly name them all. But Héléne Cixous, Umberto Eco, Claudio Magris, Javier Cercas and so many others were with us. We then invited Bruno Latour to talk about translation, beyond human languages. And, as I was working in parallel on the "rights of nature", we began to talk. Then, years later, I invited him to take part in the auditions the "Loire Parliament", which resulted in the book you mentioned.

**AM:** One last question concerns the concept of the contemporary. Between an 'arraisonnante' modernity that hierarchises the world's actors by elimination, the perplexing 'postmodernism' we have already discussed, and 'speculative' realism, or quite simply the 'speculative' content of any discourse that calls for vertiginous temporality, is there room for a discourse of the

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<sup>8</sup> *Vies pøtentielles* (*Pøtential lives*, 2011), labelled as a "novel", is a collection of short stories, each of them being followed by an "exegesis", a sort of commentary. The form of this book is an allusion to the Jewish tradition of glosses. The "ø" from "pøtential" signifies the infinity of the possibilities of forms of life.

<sup>9</sup> de Toledo, *L'inversion de Hieronymus Bosch* (Paris: Verticales, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> de Toledo, *Vies et mort d'un terroriste américain* (Paris: Verticales, 2007). .

'contemporary'? Is it the 'potential thought' that "redefines the modern not as that which cuts with the past, but as the sum of all that connects"<sup>11</sup>? Does the concept of the contemporary lend itself more to philosophical conceptualization, or artistic representation? Is it something to be encountered as an 'entity'? Can we identify a pivotal moment for the contemporary within the realm of the human sciences?

**CdT:** This is a question that my friend Lionel Ruffel and I often discussed a few years ago, but it seems to me that, like 'postmodernism', the motif of the 'contemporary' is now obsolete; it is no longer a question. The platform that was at the back of our 'contemporary concerns' came from various states of affairs, notably the instrumental and erroneous diagnosis of the end of History, or the historiographical significance of the analyses of an intellectual like François Hartog when he described our era as stricken by presentism, that hypnosis of the present. The potentials of time and performance, in Leipzig in 2016, around the exhibition "Capitalist Melancholia", by the duo Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quiros the government of time, or pieces like the Bartleby of new times, or the cemetery of future times, or the battle of present and past, were my response. The present is now saturated with scripts from the future. In a way, it is the return of futures, with an emphasis on apocalyptic futures, which of course open the door to various more or less messianic calculations, scripts that surf on the "need for hope". My work deliberately treads a fine line, starting with a phrase I wrote a few years ago: "There is no alternative but hope". For future generations, for my children, there is no alternative but to work on scripts for the future that might redeem the past, keep us away from disaster. But, at the same time, at the same time, I'm deepening my conviction that we *sapiens narrans*, our species, are the name of the disaster, the catastrophe. We are an emergence, the manifestation of imbalance, and this stems from our physico-chemical dysfunction. We produce separation, we reproduce life by destroying it. We need to work, to try to save what can be saved, but never to over-promise. On the contrary, we need to multiply this effort, this hope, precisely because we know that the irreparable is growing

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<sup>11</sup> de Toledo, Imhoff, Quirós, *Les Potentiels du temps*, 51.