

Tuché, The Unnamable Evil in Emmanuel Carrère's *La Classe de neige*

Insook Webber

Washington State University

Considered in and outside of France as one of the most original and important authors in the contemporary French literary scene,¹ Emmanuel Carrère has developed a trait that may be his most singular: his protean experimentation with genres, ranging from deep reporting to essays, fiction, nonfiction, and even cinema. Defying category, he has come to be best known for the nonfiction novel.² But before arriving at nonfiction, Carrère wrote what may be called “pure” fiction, among other works, until the pivotal *L'Adversaire* (2000). This article proposes to analyze the “last” of such fictions, *La Classe de neige* (1995), before the author devoted himself more or less exclusively to nonfiction novels or *réçits*. In my view, however, this analysis cannot be fairly carried out without placing the fiction in relation to the nonfiction so uncannily intertwined as they are. Or as Carrère puts it: “*L'Adversaire* est à la fois une espèce de pré- et de post-scriptum à *La Classe de neige*. Pour moi, ce sont des livres jumeaux. L'un exploite l'imagination littéraire, l'autre l'exactitude du document” (*L'Express* 2000). Though not explicitly stated, what is implied in this statement is that there is a slippage of boundary between fiction and nonfiction.

Recent critical works on Carrère, such as a collected volume entitled *Emmanuel Carrère: Faire effraction dans le réel* (2018),³ take this uncertain frontier between reality and fiction as a hinge from which to explore the extraordinarily diverse facets of his corpus encompassing four decades now. In *L'Adversaire*, the author posing as the first-person narrator “documents,” as he puts it, the Affaire Romand.⁴ *La Classe de neige*, on the other hand, is a fiction written during the author's yearslong impasse, as he expressed it in numerous interviews, over how he might recount, or rather “enter into” the mind and life of Romand, whose crime seems so beyond the imaginable or the limits of the representable.

L'Adversaire may be thus considered a nonfiction featuring the incarnation of perhaps a most extreme manifestation of evil and *La Classe de neige* its fictional counterpart. More broadly, evil is a theme, though not the only⁵ one, that traverses Carrère's oeuvre like a *basse continue*. This theme is evidently not new since literature is thought to be nourished by, even “the expression” of, evil, according to Bataille (*La*

Littérature et Le Mal 8). What makes Carrère's treatment of evil so original and impactful, however, may be owed to, among other factors, his uncovering of the way the imaginary evil "breaks into" or contaminates reality and vice-versa, as illustrated by the permeability of evil across the borders between fiction (*La Classe de neige*) and nonfiction (*L'Adversaire*), as I will try to show. Furthermore, in nonfiction, the author positions himself principally as the first-person narrator, not as an omniscient narrator à la Balzac or a disinterested observer, but as if implicated, even complicit, in the evil. This aspect is suggested by Carrère himself: "Ce qui m'intéresse et souvent m'effare, c'est évidemment ce que je dis de moi" (*Le Royaume* 66). It is as though he fears that his supposedly dispassionate enquiry into the evil might act like a boomerang, the evil turning out to be self-referential and intimate, as opposed to remaining a radical stranger, safely outside of him.⁶ This may explain, at least in part, the empathic way he presents his characters without judging them, including the most malefic a priori.⁷

The "evil" characters in question in both *La Classe de neige* and *L'Adversaire* are, for instance, portrayed not in a Manichean fashion; on the contrary, they are treated as subjects that are "moralement délicats," in Houellebecq's words (*Faire effraction* 455). In the case of Romand, while there is no denying that his crime is heinous, Carrère's depiction of him, according to Houellebecq, is far from "une image crédible du mal" to the point of rendering him "proche, et même sympathique, sans jamais se permettre la moindre compromission sur la question du mal" (*idem*). This view may be extended to the father as well, the fictional equivalent of Romand, in *La Classe de neige*, especially in the way he tries to protect his son Nicolas, however clumsy, even bizarre, as we shall see.

The idea of evil residing not outside of but within the self – inseparable from the act of abstaining from morally judging his characters – is further bolstered by what critics regard as his "pure" prose, be it compared to a "scalpel" or a "rivière limpide."⁸ One is tempted to draw an analogy between Carrère's prose and the yoga poses he practices and aspires to, set forth by an ancient book of divination: "La grâce suprême n'est pas dans l'ornement, mais dans la forme simple et pratique" (*Yoga* 109). This very grace, simplicity and surgical precision that characterize his writing seem to contribute to, as paradoxical as it might sound, heightening the horror of the evil at the moment of its revelation. This is perhaps why Jérôme Garcin, speaking of *La Classe de neige*, could qualify Carrère as a "mathématicien de l'horreur" (*L'Express* 1995).

In the Preface of the aforementioned *Faire effraction*, Dominique Rabaté and Laurent Demanze, for their part, observe that Carrère's unornamental writing grazes the limits of language, connoting that language fails when confronted with evil. The author must therefore "à la fois intervenir par les mots et répondre de ce qui excède le symbolique [et] se confronter aux limites de son pouvoir, à tout ce qui du réel reste fatalement *en souffrance*" (*Faire effraction* 8, original italics). Interestingly, Rabaté and Demanze use here, intentionally or not, the same expression – "en souffrance" – as Lacan does in connection with the concept of "tuché," introduced in the seminar *Tuché*

et automaton (1973, 66). By “en souffrance,” Lacan implies what Rabaté and Demanze describe above as “ce qui excède le symbolique.” Lacan adopts the term “touché” from Aristotle (more on this below) to elucidate his conception of the real as that which, exceeding the language, cannot be said or represented.

While excellent studies already exist on *La Classe de neige* examined under various angles, including the uncanny (Connon), secrets (Bordas) or fear (Huglo), this article will focus on the problem of evil. I argue, through the prism of what Lacan calls the “touché” or the real, that in the novel evil is rendered as that which is beyond the namable, grazing indeed the limits of language, which has the effect of augmenting its horror. Throughout my discussion, Lacan’s triptic Imaginary-Symbolic-Real will serve as the guiding theoretical support.

Home: A Nest of Secrets

Plus tard, longtemps, jusqu’à maintenant, Nicolas essaya de se rappeler les dernières paroles que lui avait adressées son père. Il lui avait dit au revoir à la porte du chalet, répété des conseils de prudence, mais Nicolas était tellement gêné de sa présence, il avait tellement hâte de le voir repartir qu’il n’avait pas écouté. Il lui en voulait d’être là, d’attirer des regards qu’il devinait moqueurs et s’était dérobé, en baissant la tête, au baiser d’adieu. (7)⁹

The three adverbial expressions of the incipit of *La Classe de neige* (“Plus tard, longtemps, jusqu’à maintenant”), or what one might call a temporal *in medias res*, unmoor the reader immediately; the lack of a precise temporal (and spatial, for that matter) location plunges the reader into an uncertain terrain, even causing a vague dread. The subsequent lines of the passage are no less reassuring as to the reasons for Nicolas’s embarrassment with his father’s presence and his fear of ridicule by his classmates. Éric Bordas describes this inexplicable dread that hangs over the novel from the incipit on as “non pas du péril lui-même, mais du sentiment de ce péril” (Bordas 1). This dread portends the tragic denouement, I shall argue, after an unremitting suspense¹⁰ maintained throughout the novel, in which the father’s monstrosity will be confirmed. I would even posit that Nicolas’s trauma had already taken place even before the ski trip that serves as the ultimate *huis clos* in which all the diffuse telltale signs that had been contained within his home coalesce into the paroxysmal event, actualizing¹¹ what Nicolas has always already known and feared with a fatidic prescience.

The 10-year-old Nicolas is painfully timid and fearful, which is reinforced by his parents’ overprotection, isolating him from his schoolmates. He is not permitted, for example, to have his lunch at the school cafeteria “où survenaient souvent des bagarres,” resulting in his alienation from his peer group, like a perpetual stranger:

Pendant son absence on s'était envoyé des petits suisses à la figure, on avait été puni par les surveillants, on avait conclu des alliances et chaque fois, quand sa mère le ramenait, c'était comme s'il avait été nouveau et devait reprendre à zéro les relations nouées le matin. (21)

To cap it all, and despite the school mistress's concerns about "son intégration dans le groupe" (13), his father insists on driving Nicolas to the ski slopes rather than having him ride the bus with the other children, isolating him further from his social milieu. At home Nicolas spends most of his free time consuming voraciously *Histoires épouvantables* (26), especially those involving dismembered body parts, which feeds his hyperactive imagination. He is fascinated in general with human anatomy and collects Shell petrol coupons in the hopes of accumulating enough of them to win a plastic figure whose body opens to reveal its internal organs (9). And one Christmas, his parents offer him a small box as a gift, his father telling him "pour tes petits secrets" (8) as if to encourage him to collect secrets. His father, a traveling salesman of plastic prostheses and surgical instruments, is taciturn, mostly absent from home due to his work. At the rare times he is home, he seems disoriented as if he were a stranger to his own family, sleeping most of the day to wake up in the evening with "l'air surpris, et désagréablement, de se réveiller là," and asks Nicolas "des questions bizarres," such as what grade he is in (38). Often his father's sparse speech and gestures come across as brusque, even brutal, reflecting what Nicolas, seated in the back of the car en route to the ski resort, senses in him: "le souci, une fureur amère et butée" (9).

Intrigued by the mysterious nature of his father's job and unable to pinpoint exactly why, deep down Nicolas simultaneously fears and is ashamed of his father, as illustrated above by the scene of their arrival at the ski resort. His mother, a minor presence in the novel, appears as cowed as Nicolas and as secretive as her husband. While on the ski trip, Nicolas remembers, for instance, the family's sudden decision to move to a different town. On the day of the move, the father was again absent, "parti pour une longue tournée," explained his mother. Nicolas, with his little brother, felt locked in a "climat de siège, de catastrophe et de secret." Not knowing the reasons for moving, Nicolas began to cry, sensing "quelque chose d'affreux qu'on ne comprend pas." And despite his mother's efforts to console him, he knew that "elle lui cachait quelque chose, qu'il ne pouvait pas se fier à elle" and that "elle ne lui disait pas la vérité" (139). For Nicolas, home then means not a comforting, secure place, but one enveloped with unsettling secrets, a nest of secrets, a home "at once familiar and strange [...] something *unheimlich*" (Connon 172).

Symbolic Phase, Interrupted

These secrets and hushed truths at home, aggravated by his isolation from his peers, impede, I shall contend, Nicolas's accession to the symbolic phase and subjecthood by prompting him to retreat into his imaginary stage, or what Lacan calls the mirror phase (*Écrits I*),¹² as a refuge. According to Lacan, the subject is determined by the signifier and its entry into the language determines its accession to the symbolic and eventual subjecthood ("Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse", *Écrits I*, 235-321). In this optic, the child must lose "son image protectrice d'enfant dans l'attente d'une nouvelle subjectivité" (Hoffmann 91). Luis Izcovich further elucidates this transition from the imaginary to the symbolic as follows:

L'effet du langage sur l'organisme est une mortification, un silence des organes. Au fur et à mesure que le sujet fait son entrée dans les défilés du signifiant, il passe du cri à la demande, ce qui réduit les manifestations du corps. La parole prend la relève. (Izcovich 36)

As mentioned, Nicolas is fascinated with *Histoires épouvantables* and human anatomy involving organs and dismemberment. Fragmented body fantasy occurs at various moments throughout the novel, including one early scene in which, upon passing by a minor car accident with his father, Nicolas is disappointed at not seeing "les corps sanglants qu'on emportait sur les civières dans le tournoiement des gyrophares" (11). This fantasy of "les corps sanglants" may exemplify what Izcovich calls above "les manifestations du corps," which prevents Nicolas from "silencing the organs" in order to progress from the "cri" to the "demande" via the "parole." Nicolas thus remains at the pre-symbolic imaginary stage, unable to advance to a proper subjecthood.

His encounter on the ski trip with Hodkann, the class bully, proves to be fateful for this reason; Hodkann provokes, wittingly or not, Nicolas's unraveling of his hyperbolic imagination and capacity for fabrication to compensate for, as it were, his weak subjecthood. At first, Nicolas regards Hodkann as if through a mirror in which he sees the image of his own puny self next to a quasi-mythical giant, a kind of impossible "ego ideal," to use Freud's term (*On Narcissism* 1914). Hodkann is "le plus grand, Nicolas un des plus petits" (19) and displays "une aisance presque déplacée," "une richesse et une précision de vocabulaire surprenantes pour son âge" (20). The very idea that someone like him even existed at all "avait quelque chose d'à la fois improbable et de mystérieusement attirant" (21). Then, Nicolas discovers his hitherto unsuspected power

to enthrall Hodkann with his invented stories. “Grisé par son récit” (115), Nicolas becomes more daring, telling Hodkann that his father was a solitary hero fighting the organ traffickers and the corrupt police and that his little brother was a victim of organ trafficking. Eventually Nicolas realizes, however, that his out-of-control fabrications led unwittingly – via Hodkann’s betrayal of his confidence – to his father’s arrest for abducting and murdering the village boy René. Nicolas knows now, however obscurely, that his imagination can no longer shield him from the encroaching reality.

Nicolas’s failed, or interrupted, symbolic accession and subjecthood may be traced to his murky relationship with his father. He both fears and fantasizes about, for instance, his father’s death in a car accident: “Il ne voulait pas que ce soit vrai, bien sûr,” but at the same time “aurait aimé tenir vis-à-vis des autres ce rôle de l’orphelin, héros d’une tragédie” (50). Nicolas’s ambivalent sentiments toward his father, shown from the incipit, suggest a broken “loi de l’alliance,” of which Lacan speaks in this passage:

ce n’est pas seulement par une assomption symbolique que la parole constitue l’être du sujet, mais que, par *la loi de l’alliance*, où l’ordre humain se distingue de la nature, la parole détermine, *dès avant sa naissance*, non seulement le statut du sujet, mais la venue au monde de son être biologique. (“Variantes de la cure-type”, *Écrits I*, 353, my italics)

Lacan implies here that the accession to the symbolic order is a vital element in helping each new member of the human race to move from infancy to a wider engagement with the outside, cultural world. In this light, Nicolas is far from being helped along on this path, as we saw. Moreover, it is easy to conceive that Nicolas’s father himself comes from a similar familial milieu and that, by a paradoxical or perverted “loi de l’alliance,” he passed his own failed subjecthood¹³ onto his son “dès avant sa naissance,” instead of the *Name of the Father* founding signifier, the law.¹⁴

The filial resemblance or succession is in fact explicitly evoked in the novel such as the father and son’s common fascination with or nonchalance toward the gruesome. This is illustrated by, among other examples, the father remarking, after a roadblock is cleared: “ce devait être juste un accident” (9), and by Nicolas, though shocked by his father’s blasé comment (as if an accident were a good thing since it caused only a short traffic jam), being disappointed nonetheless by not witnessing a bloody scene. Furthermore, a fitful sleeper, Nicolas “tenait de son père” (38). It is tempting to argue, with Abraham and Török, that there is a transgenerational repetition of trauma as if by a phantom, including the transmission of failed subjecthood from father to son; and that via what Abraham calls “a nescience” (17),¹⁵ an unconscious knowledge, Nicolas has always known that his father was a “monster,” even before the actual crime. But what he “knows” is ultimately beyond the imaginable, beyond the language; it conjures an infinite regress of “derrière encore, le noir” (143) into which Nicolas, paralyzed by terror, stares after he learns of Hodkann’s betrayal of the sworn secrets about his father. Failed by his

imagination and with impoverished subjecthood, Nicolas is confronted with a brute, fathomless darkness which resonates with, I shall argue, what Lacan conceives as the real or the tuché.

(Missed) Encounter with the Tuché

On the first night at the ski chalet, unable to sleep due to the fear of wetting the bunker bed above Hodkann, Nicolas remembers his father taking him and his younger brother to an amusement park. After having gruffly refused Nicolas's plea to ride the caterpillar, the father explains his refusal by telling him a "true" story about the abduction of children by organ traffickers. The younger brother, too young to be allowed to ride the caterpillar, would have to be left behind on the ground in the care of a stranger, who might be one of the organ traffickers preying on children left unwatched, like his brother. "Il y a des gens qui font ça, figure-toi. Des gens méchants. Ça s'appelle du trafic d'organes" (36), says the father who has Nicolas swear secrecy about this information. Afterwards, Nicolas has a series of nightmares taking place in the same park where he does ride the caterpillar. Upon waking, Nicolas remembers the dream as:

une horreur sans nom, dont il risquait de ne pas se réveiller. La carcasse métallique de la chenille s'élevait au-dessus des baraquements du parc, et le rêve l'attirait vers elle. L'horreur était tapie par là. Elle l'attendait pour le dévorer. (37, my italics)

Echoing "derrière encore, le noir," this "horreur sans nom" evokes the Lacanian real. In his 1964 seminar called "Du réseau des signifiants," Lacan posits that there is a limit beyond which "thought" cannot reach and equates this limit with the real to which thought returns for this very reason:

*Le sujet chez soi, la remémorialisation de la biographie, tout ça ne marche que jusqu'à une certaine limite qui s'appelle le réel. [...] Une pensée adéquate en tant que pensée, [...] évite toujours [...] la même chose. Le réel est ici ce qui revient toujours à la même place—à cette place où le sujet en tant qu'il cogite, où la *res cogitans* ne le rencontre pas. (*Les quatre concepts* 59)*

The real is then that which is situated beyond the limits of Cartesian thought and defies what can be thought, the "res cogitans." In the subsequent seminar entitled "Tuché et automaton," alluded to above, Lacan pursues this theme further. Freud had conceived the theory of the death drive based on his observation of the repetition of trauma in his patients' dreams, which undercuts the pleasure principle he previously viewed as the dominant drive in all living organisms.¹⁶ Building upon this idea, Lacan advances the notion of the real in terms of repetition, but simultaneously injects something new into

Freud's thesis by distinguishing two aspects of repetition: a symbolic aspect that depends on the compulsion of signifiers ("automaton") and a real one ("tuché") that denotes the interruption of automaton by trauma. Lacan thus reframes, through the structuralist prism, the Freudian pleasure principle as automaton and repetition as the tuché:

D'abord la *tuché*, que nous avons empruntée, [...], au vocabulaire d'Aristote en quête de sa recherche de la cause. Nous l'avons traduit par *la rencontre du réel*. Le réel est au-delà de l'*automaton*, du retour, de la revenue, de l'insistance des signes à quoi nous nous voyons commandés par le principe du plaisir. Le réel est cela qui gît toujours derrière l'*automaton*, [...] la rencontre première, le réel, que nous pouvons affirmer derrière le fantasme. (TA 64, original italics)

Viewed thus, the function of the tuché, the real, as "rencontre" or rather essentially "la rencontre manquée" (TA 65), is to make us aware of the existence of trauma by its return. Lacan's question, like Freud's before him, is then how the dream which is supposed to realize the subject's desire makes the trauma resurge, if not in an identical form, at least as "le fantasme" or "l'écran qui nous l'indique encore derrière?" (TA 66)

To answer the question as to what lies still behind the fantasy screen, Lacan references Freud's dream analysis of *The Burning Child*. In the dream as told to Freud by one of his patients, a grief-stricken father dreams of his dead child standing at his bedside and whispering to him: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" Freud argued that, in line with his theory that dreams are wish fulfillments, the purpose of the dream was to prolong the sleep of the father for a few moments more because in it, his dead child was still alive (Freud 1900, 509-10). Lacan, however, does not regard this dream as the confirmation of Freud's such thesis, but rather that this particular dream satisfies only the need to prolong sleep. For Lacan, the crucial question is: "*Qu'est-ce qui reveille? N'est-ce pas, dans le rêve, une autre réalité?*" (TA 68, original italics); it is a reality "beyond" both the noise of the burning in the room next door where the dead child is laid and the child's reproaching words. Žižek has argued that the father wakes into reality to escape from the real – the child's reproach to his father, implying his fundamental guilt – which announces itself in the dream more terrifyingly than any supposed external reality (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 45).

While Žižek thus highlights the horror of the real, the reason for the dreamer to wake, Lacan maintains the dimension of repetition in the dream as the cause for the dreamer to wake: "Où est-elle, la réalité, dans cet accident? – sinon qu'il se répète quelque chose, en somme plus fatal" (TA 69). It is not that in the dream, the child is still alive, as Freud suggested, but that

l'enfant mort prenant son père par le bras, vision atroce, désigne *un au-delà* qui se fait entendre dans le rêve. Le désir s'y présente de la perte imagée au

point le plus cruel de l'objet. C'est dans le rêve seulement que peut se faire cette rencontre vraiment unique. Seul un rite, un acte toujours répété, peut commémorer cette rencontre immémorable – puisque *personne ne peut dire ce que c'est que la mort d'un enfant—sinon le père en tant que père— c'est-à-dire nul être conscient.* (TA 69-70, my italics)

This vision accompanied by the child's reproaching words ('Father, don't you see I'm burning?') points to an *au-delà* because the father in fact does not *see* the child, according to Lacan, but only *hears* his words because his burning body is obscured by the flames. The flames, however terrifying they might be themselves, serve as "l'écran qui nous l'indique encore derrière," the still worse horror "behind and beyond" them. And it is this behind and beyond which causes the return of the dream (TA 69). To apply this to Nicolas's situation, being the son of an organ trafficking murderer, belongs to the realm of the impossible, behind and beyond the thinkable. Hence, the "horreur sans nom" – the caterpillar ride serving as a screen hiding the still worse, unnamable thing – can be experienced only in the dream, and repeatedly, since no conscious being can endure such a thing. One could imagine substituting, without altering its sense, the last lines of the Lacan passage above with these: "personne ne peut dire ce que c'est qu'être le fils [Nicolas] d'un meurtrier – sinon le fils en tant que fils – c'est-à-dire nul être conscient."

Repetition and Jouissance

If the dream returns us to the place in which we may re-live the trauma, the dream images themselves reveal nothing; however, as mentioned, they are only a "tenant-lieu" whose function, like the flames in the Burning Child, is to obscure what lies still beyond it. We must therefore search beyond the dream images to apprehend the real, as Lacan puts it:

Le réel, c'est-à-dire au-delà du rêve que nous avons à le rechercher—dans ce que le rêve a enrobé, a enveloppé, nous a caché, derrière le manque de la représentation dont il n'y a là qu'un tenant-lieu. C'est là le réel qui commande plus que tout autre nos activités. (TA 71).

In this optic, Nicolas's terrifying caterpillar ride is still only a "tenant-lieu" since the real is still behind what is shown in the dream. In other words, how could a child represent his father being "un monstre" (165), a headline Nicolas glimpses from a newspaper stand on the precipitous and unexplained ride back home with Patrick, his ski instructor?

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud advances that there is what he calls "the dream's navel" and that it is a limit point where the unknown emerges (525). Reprising this, Lacan argues that the real is located at the root of every dream and that it is here, at the dream's navel, that the real hooks up with the symbolic. Put differently: "Ce qui n'est

pas venu au jour du symbolique, apparaît dans le réel” (*Écrits I*, 386). Viewed thus, what escapes the symbolic shows up in Nicolas’s dreams, which moreover take him always to the same place, that is, to the caterpillar ride in the same park. Again, then, why return to the same traumatic scene in the dream? Why commemorate the immemorable, the unbearable, the unthinkable?

Reconceptualizing Freud’s hypothesis of repetition and the death drive, Lacan pursues this question in later seminars and begins to consider repetition in terms of *jouissance*.¹⁷ It is *jouissance* that drives repetition, or rather repetition strives for *jouissance*, by producing a “défaut”, an “échec.” Lacan continues :

La répétition c’est une dénotation, dénotation précise d’un trait [...] en tant qu’il commémore une irruption de la jouissance. / Voilà pourquoi il est concevable que le plaisir soit violé dans sa règle et son principe, pourquoi il cède au déplaisir; [...] pas la douleur forcément - au déplaisir qui ne veut rien dire que la jouissance. (L’Envers de la psychanalyse 19 & 35, original italics)

Lacan differentiates here the “ordinary” pleasure from *jouissance*, giving the latter a particular resonance; *jouissance* is less a positive experience than an intensely negative one (“défaut,” “échec”) due to the “marking” of the body (“dénotation précise d’un trait”), conjuring stigmata. Trauma manifests itself as a symptom via the signifier, which inserts itself in the body, as Izcovich puts it : “Le signifiant fait coupure dans le corps et ce sont les bords tracés par le signifiant qui sont cause de jouissance” (40). Repetition of trauma thus concerns not only the actualization of a scene but the return of *jouissance*. In Lacan’s words : “la répétition est fondée sur un retour de la jouissance” (*L’Envers de la psychanalyse* 19).

In *La Classe de neige* there are numerous oneiric instances that seem to illustrate this: the return of trauma and the return of *jouissance*. In one notable dream, Nicolas returns again to the park, this time accompanied not by his father but by his ski instructor Patrick, whose youth, genuine warmth and “façon détendue de bouger et de plaisanter” (62) embody everything that his father is not, and who is someone he would like to become as an adult. While riding the caterpillar, Nicolas experiences “l’horreur merveilleuse de la descente,” tinged with strong erotic sensations (73). At the precise moment when the caterpillar reaches its peak, however, he witnesses to his horror his little brother on the ground being led away by someone whom he believes to be an organ trafficker. Nicolas wishes that time had stopped forever just before he saw the abduction, an eternity in which he would stay nestled securely against Patrick, “out of reach”¹⁸ of all further danger, anguish or fear. This desperate desire, closer to a prayer, is rendered palpable for the reader by a single, breathtaking sentence:

Il n’y aurait plus que cela dans la vie, la chenille qui tournait de plus en plus vite, la force centrifuge qui les projetait dans le ciel, très loin, les collait l’un

contre l'autre, très fort, et ce trou qui se creusait dans son ventre, l'aspirait de l'intérieur, se comblait un instant, se creusait à nouveau, fouillait de plus en plus loin, et le ventre de Patrick contre son dos, ses cuisses autour des siennes, son souffle dans son cou, et le vacarme, et le creux, le ciel. (75)

Nicolas is awakened from this dream by a sensation of wetness. He believes he has peed while sleeping, his worst fear, although in fact he had a wet dream, which he does not yet understand. Should one consider this "event" a form of *jouissance*, the oxymoronic "horreur merveilleuse" is the key to, I shall contend, apprehending it as the horror of the real causing what Lacan calls above "*déplaisir* qui ne veut rien dire que *la jouissance*," in violation of and beyond the pleasure principle.

One can discern in the novel further instances of *jouissance* linked to extreme danger or terror, dreamt or not. In one such instance, after being rescued from what the ski instructors believe to be Nicolas's somnambulant crisis in the freezing outdoors, he is pampered with warm attention. Tucked in bed under a mound of blankets, he hallucinates by seeing the foot end of the bed transformed into a gigantic dune at whose crest he notices "une boule noire," at first a little speck, then growing rapidly and becoming an enormous ball tumbling down the slope, about to crush him. He then realizes that

il pouvait à volonté faire reculer, d'un coup la renvoyer au sommet, condamnée à une nouvelle descente qu'il saurait de nouveau interrompre avant d'être écrasé. Juste avant : *tout le plaisir* était de la laisser venir le plus près possible, de lui échapper le plus tard possible. (91-92, my italics)

This hallucinatory episode illustrates Nicolas's penchant for "playing with fire," as it were, since it procures him intense (dis)pleasure or *jouissance*. It recalls his compulsive fabrication about his father being a solitary hero tracking down the organ traffickers, his inventions swelling like a "boule noire" indeed, unable to stop since he felt "grisé" by his stories intended to captivate Hodkann. But he does become "un peu effrayé," wondering "où l'entraînait la folle surenchère de cette nuit, cette cascade d'inventions sur lesquelles il ne pouvait plus revenir. Si Hodkann parlait, ce serait une catastrophe épouvantable" (117). Indeed, it was too late this time since reality was already "breaking into" fiction.¹⁹

Chapter 26 seems to provide another example of a cause-effect relationship between terror and *jouissance*. Situated toward the end of the novel, this chapter is radically out-of-sync with the otherwise linear narrative up to chapter 25 and continued by chapter 27. By its fantastical aspect, chapter 26 is also ambiguous as to whether it relates Nicolas's dream or the actual events of 20 years after the ski trip. It opens with: "Vingt ans plus tard, une nuit décembre, Nicolas remontant des jardins traversa l'esplanade du Trocadéro déserte et s'entendit appeler par son prénom" (144). The temporal jump, as well as the spatial one from the Alpine region to central Paris, and the

irruption of the fantastical in the narrative suggest that chapter 26 concerns Nicolas's dream while still at the ski resort.

In the dream Hodkann is seated "au pied d'une statue dorée représentant un héros de la mythologie grecque," echoing the younger Nicolas's idea of him as an "empereur romain" (22), except that now he resembles a tramp or an ogre (144), clutching a bottle of wine and a knife. Seeing Hodkann intent on killing him, Nicolas runs narrowly to safety while hearing behind him Hodkann's "rire qui donnait le frisson" (145). Whether it is a dream or a reality flashed forward to 20 years later, this seemingly disorienting chapter serves to illustrate, I would argue, the repetition of his initial traumatic encounter with Hodkann, followed by *jouissance* from a "successful" escape from the terror.

Conclusion

Trauma is repeated thus in the dream, according to Lacan, followed or driven by *jouissance*. But the traumatic images or scenes themselves serve only as a "tenant-lieu," as said, because the real – the unsymbolizable, the unspeakable – remains hidden, "encore derrière." And repetition is an attempt at the real hooking up with the symbolic, except that this linking fails due to something in language that makes "a hole [*un trou*] in the real." As Jacques-Alain Miller explains it: "Lacan fait du trou désormais la caractéristique essentielle du symbolique," and that the subject speaks in order to fill, cover up, or dress, this hole and language is in a sense a reaction formation to trauma (Miller 2005, 168).

It is interesting to note in this regard that *La Classe de neige* has at once a symmetrical and circular structure by way of the incipit and the excipit, both of which are dominated by "paroles," or rather "paroles manquées" in the manner of Lacanian "rencontre manquée." Nicolas's trip to the ski slopes with his father at the beginning is retraced by the return trip home with Patrick, like a mirror image. The novel opens, as we recall, with "Plus tard, longtemps, jusqu'à maintenant, Nicolas essaya de se rappeler les *dernières paroles* que lui avait adressées son père" and the last chapter begins with "Le reste du voyage, Nicolas se demanda quelles avaient été ses *dernières paroles*" (my italics). Both show Nicolas's difficulty with remembering his father's last words, but more significantly, they suggest the failure of communication between father and son. Their dialogue is constantly broken off, obscured or effaced, as illustrated by: "Avant, dans la voiture, ils avaient dû parler. Nicolas, assis à l'arrière, trouvait difficile de se faire entendre à cause du bruit de la soufflerie, poussée au maximum pour désembuer les vitres" (7). This seemingly trivial anecdote foreshadows the pattern of their verbal exchanges, a failed transmission of, as discussed earlier, the symbolic from father to son, leading Nicolas to resort to the imaginary as a phantasy screen. But the recourse to the

imaginary fails in the end to protect him, as Nicolas realizes too late, against the horror of his father's evil act. He decides thus never to speak again:

Il avait décidé de ne plus parler, plus jamais. C'était la seule protection qu'il pouvait à présent imaginer. Plus un mot, on ne tirerait plus rien de lui. Il deviendrait un bloc de silence, une surface lisse et pluvieuse contre quoi le malheur rebondirait sans trouver de porte. (169)

Language has failed and betrayed him, only encircling the "hole" that could not be filled. It is this "défaut" or "échec" that marks the body with "une dénotation précise d'un trait" (quoted above), causing jouissance and its return. In other words, jouissance is provoked by the real as "hors du symbolique" (Miller 1999). And "Ça ['hors du symbolique'] ne cesse jamais d'écrire" since it causes the return of jouissance (Lacan 2001, 535). Carrère has stated that "Le propre de la peur, c'est l'absence de visages, on ne sait pas de quoi on a peur" and that he writes, or never ceases to write, one might say, for "leur donner des visages" (*L'Express* 2000). These "visages," I shall contend, correspond to the Lacanian "tenant-lieu" that serves to hide or perpetually defer the real, which causes Carrère to repeat, or never to cease to write. Huglo's observation is apposite: "Le récit circonscrit et nomme 'la chose sans nom' sans la figer" (107). To this I shall add that Carrère's repeated attempt at naming the unnamable, aiming as if at a perpetually moving target, triggers in him, it seems reasonable to assert, "déplaisir qui ne veut rien dire que la jouissance."

Not only, though. The reader too experiences this "déplaisir," not dissimilar to catharsis. The novel ends with Nicolas thinking: "dans cette vie, pour lui, il n'y aurait pas de pardon" (171). The reader may feel overcome by pity and fear for the child at the same time as a sensation of coming out alive, with Nicolas, from a journey that had teetered over an abyss, whose suspense was unrelenting from the first to the last word of the novel. Éric Bordas notes that "Carrère a besoin de se mettre en danger dans chacun de ses livres : c'est une nécessité plus ou moins incontrôlable pour lui, une pulsion de désir sans laquelle il n'y a pas d'écriture" (*Faire Effraction* 363). And the reader joins Carrère willingly in this dangerous journey, much like Nicolas's caterpillar ride, which promises less happiness than horror, that is to say jouissance.

Referencing Stendahl's *promesse du bonheur*, Adorno writes that

art does its part for existence by accentuating what in it prefigures utopia. [But] because all happiness found in the status quo is an ersatz and false, art must break its promise in order to stay true to it. [...] Scars of damage and disruption are the modern's seal of authenticity. (*Aesthetic Theory* 311 & 23)

The “scars of damage” of which Adorno speaks echo, in my opinion, the Lacanian real as the “dénotation précise *d'un trait*,” or the denotation of trauma etched in the body.²⁰ And for Lacan, such corporeal incision caused by trauma, just like the scars of damage for Adorno, can be not only a source of creation for the writer, but that literature is authentic insofar as it deals with trauma or its scars, that is to say the real. It is suggested in Lacan’s well-known “Hommage fait à Marguerite Duras” that rather than the analyst paving the way for the artist, the artist precedes the psychoanalyst by virtue of dealing with the real (2001, 193).²¹ In this optic, *La Classe de neige* belongs to such literature since it too deals with the real, the unnamable evil, the tuché.

Notes

¹ Susannah Hunnewell, for instance, writes: “there are few great writers in France today, and Emmanuel Carrère is one of them.” (“Emmanuel Carrère, The Art of Nonfiction No. 5,” *The Paris Review*, Issue 206, Fall 2013). For Karl Ove Knausgaard, Carrère is “[t]he most exciting living writer.” <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/111/1113027/97-196-words/9781784705824.html>.

² Wyatt Mason, in fact, credits Carrère for reinventing nonfiction or renovating “the idea of what nonfiction writing can be” (*New York Times* 2017).

³ Henceforward *Faire effraction* in the text.

⁴ This Affaire that shocked and riveted France concerns Jean-Claude Romand who pretended to be a medical doctor for 18 years and committed a spree of killing his wife, his children, and his parents on 9 January 1993 when he was about to be exposed.

⁵ Since in such work as *D'autres vies que la mienne* (2009), Carrère explores, with as much moral openness and bafflement as he does more macabre subject matters, the human capacity for goodness and resilience faced with tragedies caused by a natural catastrophe or physical failings.

⁶ This idea – that the evil is at once outside of and within us – resonates with the thesis Kristeva develops, with Freud’s “inquiétante étrangeté” as its axis, in *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Gallimard 1991).

⁷ Besides Romand, one may consider, among others, the eponymous protagonist in *Limonov* (2011).

⁸ Patrick de Saint-Exupéry and Hervé Clerc in *Faire effraction* (402 & 464).

⁹ Henceforward, all quotations from *La Classe de neige* will be followed only by the page numbers in the text.

¹⁰ Noël Carroll (1990) has linked suspense to a sense of doom: “Specifically, suspense in fiction generally results when the possible outcomes of the situation set down by the story are such that the outcome that is morally correct, in terms of the values inherent in the fiction, is the less likely outcome (or, at least, only as likely as the evil outcome)” (138).

¹¹ Huglo argues that in the novel the “actualization” of the father’s crime transforms the “latent” dread of the rumor into an “active” horror (111).

¹² During this phase, the child perceives its body on the specular register as whole but experiences it as fragmented. The ego is formed through identification with the complete specular self, giving rise to narcissism. Even after the construction of the ego, the subject continually oscillates between these images of wholeness and fragmentation, between the unified image and the real body in pieces. This frustrated sense of fragmentation may be expressed in images of mutilation, castration, the bursting open of the body and dismemberment (“Le Stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du ‘Je’” and “L’Agressivité en psychanalyse” 92-123).

¹³ I speculate this based on Carrère’s statement: “Romand m’a dit qu’il avait l’impression que *La classe de neige* était un récit de son enfance. Pas littéral, mais qui le touchait de près. En sorte que j’ai souvent pensé au personnage de *L’adversaire* comme s’il était un peu l’enfant de *La Classe de neige* grandi. Quelqu’un de replié depuis longtemps dans une espèce d’autisme, enfermé en soi” (*L’Express* 2000).

¹⁴ Lacan developed the role of the father in the Symbolic Order by highlighting the way the Name-of-the-Father (his speech, his authority) is reserved “dans la promotion de la loi” (“Du traitement possible de la psychose,” *Écrits 2*, 9-61 (57)).

¹⁵ Abraham and Torok trace repetition to familial trauma, which is transmitted via the phantom: “Should the child have parents ‘with secrets,’ ...he will receive from them a gap in the unconscious, an unknown, unrecognized knowledge – a nescience.... The buried speech of the parent becomes (a) dead (gap), without a burial place, in the child. This unknown phantom comes back from the unconscious to haunt and leads to phobias,

madness, and obsessions. Its effect can persist through several generations and determine the fate of an entire family line.”

¹⁶ Freud formed this theory after observing, among others, ex-soldiers’ repeated dreams of war trauma. While considering it a work of “far-fetched speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 24), he nonetheless maintained the death drive as a return to “the quiescence of the inorganic world, [...] an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at once time or other departed” (56 & 32, original italic).

¹⁷ See Izcovich (op. cit.) and also, Deborah Gutermann-Jacquet, “L’Impossible à écrire et l’illisible,” *Recherches en psychanalyse* 19:1. 43–49.

¹⁸ The theme of “out of reach” recurs in Carrère’s oeuvre, fiction and non-fiction, including the novel entitled *Hors d’atteinte?* (POL, 1988).

¹⁹ The theme of “reality breaking into fiction” or vice versa was evoked earlier with *Emmanuel Carrère: faire effraction dans le réel*. See also Hugueny-Léger, Élise, “Faire entrer le réel en collision avec le romanesque.” The expression – “faire effraction dans le réel” – is by Carrère himself, used on the back cover of *Roman russe* (P.O.L, 2007).

²⁰ Adorno’s well-known criticism of psychoanalysis in *Minima Moralia* (1974) is aimed primarily at the American therapeutic practice of emptying psychoanalysis of its European “pessimism” and instead seeking “happiness” rather than a mere “cure.”

²¹ Lacan further discusses the relationship between literature and the real, notably in *Littérature* (1971) and *Le sinthome* (1975–1976).

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