

5-5-2008

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Colonizing Voices
in Maurice Ravel's "Chansons madécasses"

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May 3, 2008

This paper represents a partial completion of my honors project on Maurice Ravel's *Chansons madécasses*. The other component was a performance of the song cycle for an invited audience on April 28th, 2008, in which I sang the vocal part. Rehearsals and outside performance preparation accounted for a substantial portion of the time and effort spent on this project over the course of two semesters.

Anna Sutheim

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my advisor, Mark Mazullo, for his expert guidance in the completion of this project, his patience, and his devoted attention to details of writing.

Thanks also to Laura Nichols for a sound vocal education which enabled me to perform the cycle, for lending a keen ear to ensemble rehearsals, and for serving on my defense committee.

Thanks to Cary John Franklin for his participation in my defense committee, and for suggestions on final edits and additions to the thesis.

Thanks to Miriam Larson, Kirstyn Martin, and Ian Boswell, excellent flautist, cellist and pianist respectively. Their hard work and artistry in preparing the *Chansons madécasses* for performance was deeply appreciated.

Introduction

In April of 1925, the composer Maurice Ravel received a commission from the noted American patron-of-the-arts Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge for a chamber work scored for flute, cello, piano, and female voice. Ravel was at the time in the midst of reading a short collection of poems entitled *Chansons madécasses* by the 18th century elegiac poet Evariste de Forge de Parny, and he selected three of these as the text for his commission. Though professing to be a translation of actual song lyrics collected by the author during his travels in Madagascar, the *Chansons madécasses* were in fact probably Parny's own invention. (He did not speak Malagasy, and likely had never even really visited the island, though he may have encountered some native Madagascans in Bourbon, where he was born.)¹ Taking his cue from the themes of eroticism, exoticism, and racial tension threaded throughout Parny's work, Ravel produced a song cycle that stands apart from any of his earlier chamber or vocal works in both the provocative subject matter of its text and the dramatic, emotionally charged nature of its musical setting.

The songs are sparse in texture yet strongly evocative in their innovative use of instrumental timbres, highly dramatic and text-driven, frequently chromatic and periodically bitonal. These qualities render the work exemplary of the preoccupations that characterized Ravel's career -- his fascination with the exotic, his desire for technical clarity and perfection, the drive to explore new possibilities in timbre, harmony, and

¹ Marmarelli, 62

rhythm. Still more than this, however, the *Chansons madécasses* represent a puzzle. Ravel himself characterized them as containing "a new element, dramatic -- indeed erotic, resulting from the subject matter of [Evariste] Parny's poems."² Ravel had never before dealt so explicitly with the erotic in any of his works; although the exoticism which appeared in many of his compositions may be said to contain an intrinsic erotic element, his choices of subject matter and of poems for his vocal works are largely asexual, or at most abstractly romantic. Moreover, the influences for Ravel's exotic compositions came overwhelmingly from Spain and to a lesser extent from East Asia, with occasional input from Eastern Europe. The *Chansons madécasses* thus represent a clear departure from the composer's 'comfort zone' in both their textual and musical matter.

But apart from a general consensus concerning their unique status in Ravel's work, the songs have received remarkably little critical attention when compared with some of his other vocal works, notably the *Trois poemes de Stephane Mallarmé*. This latter work incited a flurry of comment, both at its premiere and in subsequent scholarship, largely as a result of its striking atonality and its unusual text-setting.³ (Ravel's choice not to set unstressed final 'e' syllables to notes, thus creating a more realistic, conversational sound to the diction, was particularly remarked upon by contemporary critics.) Moreover, the strong association of Ravel with Spanish and far Eastern exoticism has led to an apparent tendency to treat the *Chansons madécasses* as an

² Ravel, 1928, p. 32.

³ "An attentive audience listened in absolute bewilderment to some of the strangest exercises in ultramodern cacophony which it would be possible to imagine. . . . Now and then the divergence between the voice part and the accompaniment seemed so pronounced as almost to suggest that Mme. Bathori-Engel was singing one number while the instrumentalists were playing another." Quoted in Gonquist, 510

outlier when considering their significance in his career.

Disagreement and even discomfort regarding aspects of the *Chansons madécasses* seem to pervade descriptions of the work, both in general Ravel biographies and in the somewhat limited scholarship specifically related to the songs. Roland-Manuel, Ravel's good friend and first biographer, described it as having "a lovable simplicity, a pure and fervent lyricism that smiles through tears and offers, at the last limit of tension and aridity, a touching message of tenderness."⁴ Contrast this with a characterization of the *Chansons madécasses*' "atmosphere of savage exultation... primitive barbarity... stark realism"⁵, its "austere violence"⁶, its "greater degree of sensuality... an uninhibited, almost brutal directness"⁷, and one may perhaps have gained an accurate impression of the depth of contrast in feeling and motive presented in this brief work. We are offered erotic transport and youthful adoration in the first song, genocide and terror in the second, and in the third a lazy pastoral sensuality, almost mundane after the fervor and fear of the previous two movements. All writers seem uncertain as to which of the three songs -- utterly different in tone, content, and sound -- ought to be considered to contain the primary statement of the cycle, which of them to 'take seriously'.

Confusion over how exactly to characterize the work extends likewise to its purely musical aspects. Primary among these is the question of how exactly the musical exoticism of the *Chansons madécasses* is achieved, and from whence Ravel might have drawn his inspiration. Was he acquainted with Malagasy music, and if so, did this have any influence, conscious or unconscious, in his process of composition? Early Ravel

⁴ Roland-Manuel, 111

⁵ Myers 148

⁶ Orenstein (1969), 139

⁷ Myers, 146

biographers Roland-Manuel and H.H. Stuckenschmidt describe in quasi-mystical terms Ravel's ability to 'empathize' with the 'spirit' of the cultures from which he drew inspiration for his exotic works. Stuckenschmidt, without any apparent consciousness of irony, recalls Debussy's much-quoted remark that Ravel was capable of composing Spanish music more typical of Spain than that of composers from that region.⁸ More recently, scholars such as Richard S. James, Stephanie Ann Reuer, and Peter Kaminsky have demonstrated the possibility that Ravel was in fact acquainted with Malagasy folk music, and that aspects of his knowledge strongly influenced his use of ostinato and bimodality, as well as unusual instrumental colors and tessituras. Indeed, most of the aspects of the work which signal its exoticism are traced by these scholars back to various characteristics of Malagasy music. Some of these connections seem abstruse, a few extremely so, but nonetheless they have made the case that Ravel consciously sought to evoke, or at least reference, a 'real' Madagascan sound, rather than simply painting a fantasy exotic realm, as he did in 'oriental' works like *Shéhérezade*.

Conflicting portrayals and theories regarding this landmark cycle become all the more interesting when viewed in the context of some of the paradoxes of Ravel's own life, both professionally and personally. Biographers' attempts to convey Ravel's character have been surprisingly unsuccessful, at least insofar as the aim of such work is to produce a clear, consistent, camera-ready portrait of its subject. Ravel was described by some contemporaries as cold, unfeeling, aloof, consummately polite; by others as lively, demanding, even childlike. He was a noted dandy, yet scorned commercial success and disliked public attention. He delighted in the artificial and the mechanical (his house

⁸ Roland-Manuel, 96; Stuckenschmidt, 203-204

was filled with sham antiques, copies of paintings, and knockoffs of exotic objets d'art, as well as windup toys and clockwork knick-knacks). Yet he took seriously the injunction of Edgar Allen Poe (whose writings on the creative process Ravel always named as a strong influence upon his own compositional ethos) that all the superficial technical perfection in the world is insufficient to create beauty without "some undercurrent, however indefinite, of *meaning*."⁹ Ravel obsessed over details in his compositions, constantly seeking a greater perfection, to the point that he would continue to make revisions to scores that had already been published. Yet as a pianist he was often terribly insufficient and under-prepared, even when playing his own works: the music critic Paul Stefan recalled him simplifying the piano part to the *Chansons madécasses* just before a performance, saying 'No one's going to notice'.¹⁰ By turns shy and loquacious, reserved and candid, serious and playful, Ravel was an enigma in life and remains so today, despite recent biographies such as Benjamin Ivry's, which seek to rebuild the portrait of one of France's most popular composers with all his quirks, flaws, and secrets included.

The *Chansons madécasses*, with its paradoxical sparsity and lushness, is both Ravel's most passionately emotional work, and yet also his most enigmatical. Within the small sphere of this brief song cycle lies a wealth of contradictions, some of them paralleling similar contradictions in the rest of Ravel's life and work. The volume from which he took his texts was authored by a white colonist attempting to write in the voice of a black islander. What, then, are we to make of the violent statements of racial tension in the second song? Though the perspectives in the first and third poems are overtly erotic and plainly from a male perspective, Ravel selected them for this commission for

⁹ quoted in Kaminsky, 171

¹⁰ quoted in Nichols, 93

soprano voice, rather than any of the Parny poems containing female viewpoints. How, if at all, does this affect the way we hear the objectifying descriptions of female bodies? The explicit sensuality of 'Nahandove' is unique in the oeuvre of a composer widely noted for his sexual reticence, while the impassioned anti-slavery statement of 'Méfiez-vous des blancs' strikes an unusually forceful political chord for a man who, though liberal in his views, rarely if ever took any sort of stand outside of the context of art. How is an audience (or a Ravel scholar) meant to react to such forceful and demanding statements?

In a work composed upon commission, in an exotic idiom with which he had never before worked, and to a text whose themes diverge widely from any he had previously set, Ravel delivered one of the most viscerally dramatic and musically original compositions of his career. As Stuckenschmidt puts it, in attempting to come to grips with the contradictions of the *Chansons madécasses*: "[Ravel] stepped, as it were, over the limits of his own nature. Emotion appears simultaneously with the stripping from the music of all ornamental accessories."¹¹ How does this 'stripping' work, and what does it accomplish? What does the laying-bare reveal about the dramatic content of the *Chansons madécasses*, and perhaps about the composer himself?

¹¹ Stuckenschmidt, 203

On Evariste Parny

Evariste de Forges de Parny was born in 1753 on the Isle of Bourbon to a wealthy and prominent family, one of the first to colonize the island. His nominal career as an army officer was overshadowed by his writing, mostly elegiac poetry and religious satire. His first work, published in 1778, was an anthology entitled *Poésies érotiques*. Apart from a provocative anti-church satire in verse, *La Guerre des Dieux*, it is for the *Poésies érotiques* and other love poems that Parny received the most attention, and which likely won him his seat in the Academy in 1780.

Today the erotic poems, like much of his other work, seem rather trite. Indeed, formal literary criticism since Parny's day has been harsh concerning the poet's legacy: his entry in twenty-second edition of the *Histoire de la littérature française* is limited to a footnote in the article on the elegy before the Romantic era, on 'La Poésie sans poésies', in which the author claims that within Parny's poem's "one encounters no glimmer of passion, no impression, no image: ultimately no fresh hint of nature or of life."¹² Scholarly attempts to resurrect Parny's reputation and carve a place for him in the history of French poetry therefore rest not on the erotic and elegiac poetry for which he was best known during his life, but rather on his slim volume of 'translations', the *Chansons madécasses*, published in 1787.

Parny claimed to have collected these examples of native Madagascan poetry directly from their source. His brief foreword implies an immediate familiarity with both

¹² "On ne rencontre pas un éclat de passion, pas une impression, pas une image: aucune trace fraîche enfin de la nature ou de la vie."(quoted in Derbyshire, 360)]

the language and customs of Madagascar. In fact, the poems were almost undoubtedly entirely his own invention; there is no evidence that he ever visited the island, nor any hint that he spoke the language.¹³ Assuming that they are Parny's original work, these pseudo-translations may thus be numbered among the forerunning examples of the prose-poem in French, a movement which sought to free poetry from the stultifying effects of decades of strict classicism and adherence to metrical form. It is on this formal innovation that Parny's potential claim to fame mainly rests.

The unusual interest Parny displayed in the lives of colonized subjects in the *Chansons madécasses* has also been identified as worthy of scholarly scrutiny, and perhaps of a renewed place among the influential poets of the 18th century. Parny was profoundly anti-slavery, and gave voice to his sentiments both in the introduction to the *Chansons madécasses* and in numerous private letters. He was likewise anti-colonialist, despite the fact that his inheritance and social standing was dependent on the spoils of the colonized Ile de Bourbon. During a visit home, he wrote to a friend:

I cannot take pleasure in a country in which my gaze cannot but fall on the sight of servitude, where the noise of whips and chains dizzies my ear and resounds in my heart. I see nothing but tyrants and slaves, and I do not see my fellow man. Every day a man is swapped for a horse: it is impossible for me to accustom myself to such a revolting oddity.¹⁴

This egalitarian sentiment is a strong presence in the *Chansons madécasses*, in which three of the twelve songs decry slavery.

¹³ Marmarelli, 62

¹⁴ "Non, je ne saurais me plaire dans un pays où mes regards ne peuvent tomber que sur le spectacle de la servitude, où le bruit des fouets et des chaînes étourdit mon oreille et retentit dans mon cœur. Je ne vois que des tyrans et des esclaves, et je ne vois pas mon semblable. On troque tous les jours un homme contre un cheval: il est impossible que je m'accoutume à une bizarrerie si révoltante." (quoted in JOUBERT 334)]

Parny possessed a demonstrated tendency to invent artistic portrayals of his perceptions of the world, particularly where he felt his imagined reality could convey a strongly felt point, as with the anti-colonial sentiments in the *Chansons madécasses*. In an undated letter quoted by Derbyshire, Parny recounts an anecdote regarding a dying slave who asks for baptism:

He looked at me, smiling, and asked why I put water on his head: I explained the thing as best I I could; but he turned on his side, saying in bad French: After death everything is finished, at least for us Negroes; I want none of this other life, if there I might still be your slave.¹⁵

Although the story conformed to Parny's own feelings on the subject of Christian missionaries' failure to positively impact the lives of colonial slaves -- which he voiced many times in letters to friends -- it is highly unlikely that the event, or anything like it, actually took place. A very similar story had appeared in a number of works before, including Voltaire's *Essai sur les moeurs* and Raynal's *Histoire des deux Indes*, either of which Parny might well have read. (He was particularly fond of Voltaire, as demonstrated by his *Guerre des Dieux*, which strongly resembles Voltaire's *Pucelle* in style.) Moreover, the belief indigenous to the Isle of Bourbon was that, after death, one returned to the land of one's forefathers, and Parny elsewhere demonstrated that he knew of this tradition. The story is therefore, like the *Chansons madécasses*, a reality of feeling sublimated within a fictional account, thereafter disguised as a literal truth.

That Parny felt free to fictionally appropriate and [mis]represent the lives of those

¹⁵ "Il me regarda en souriant, et me demanda pourquoi je lui jetais de l'eau sur la tête: je lui expliquai de mon mieuz la chose; mais il se retourna d'un autre côté, disant en mauvais français: Après la mort tout est fini, du moins pour nous autres Nègres; je ne veux point d'une autre vie, car peut-être y serais-je encore votre esclave." -- quoted in Derbyshire, 363

whose freedom he so fervently espoused is obviously problematic for those like Derbyshire who would portray Parny as an enlightened humanist. Parny's feelings and his means of representing them poetically were certainly unusual and progressive for his time, and therefore deserve their place in the history of exoticism and prose-poetry in French literature. But this legacy nonetheless remains rooted in the colonialist tradition from which it sprung. Trina Marmarelli, one of the very few to publish anything significant on Parny in the past several decades, sees in the poet's *Chansons madécasses* a "willingness to let himself be inhabited by other voices and consequently other rhythms."¹⁶ But the reverse could be argued with equal validity -- namely that Parny the wealthy white colonialist is, despite his fervent sympathy for the real-life counterparts of his fictional slaves, inhabiting the voices of others. That his intent is humanitarian does not necessarily render his act of literary colonization any less of an appropriation.

Some writers on other subjects have touched upon this idea. Jean-Louis Joubert, in a 1989 survey of colonial literature around the time of the French revolution, finds "in the texts of Parny... all the contradiction of the literature of Réunion of the past century, and up to recent days. At the same time the desire to relate in its terrible reality the nightmare of slavery, and the temptation to flee."¹⁷ Ravel's biographer Benjamin Ivry, writing on the musical settings of the *Chansons madécasses*, astutely remarks in a similar vein that "The 'Madagascar Songs'... really have nothing to do with Madagascar. Like Klingsor's poems for Shéhérezade, they express a desire to flee the constraints of Western social structure."¹⁸ It is significant that both of these authors touch upon the idea of

¹⁶ Marmarelli, 65

¹⁷ Bourbon was renamed La Réunion in 1793. Joubert, 335

¹⁸ Ivry, 135

'fleeing', and cite Parny's poems as a partial mechanism of escape, for the majority of the *Chansons madécasses* present an idyllic African pastorate, in which nubile young women cavort freely and tribal kings welcome foreign guests with open arms and feasts of fruit. It is only when the idea of slavery intrudes that the calm sensuality is interrupted. Indeed, Parny's foreword to the anthology expresses clearly that he believed this to be true:

The princes [of Madagascar] are constantly in arms, one against the other, and the purpose of all these wars is to take prisoners to sell to Europeans. Thus, without us, these people would be tranquil and happy. They combine skill and intelligence; they are good and hospitable. Those who inhabit the coasts are wary with reason of strangers and take in their treaties all those precautions dictated by prudence and shrewdness. The Madagascans are naturally gay. The men live in idleness and the women work. They passionately love music and dance... They have no verse; their poetry is only an elongated prose: their music is simple, sweet, and always melancholy.¹⁹

His representation of the Madagascans as an intelligent, cultured, basically peaceful people is certainly enlightened for an 18th century colonialist. But the idyllic scene he offers of what their world 'would be' without colonists is purest Rousseau, both idealizing and infantilizing. Truly, as Ivry claimed, the poems have less to do with Madagascar than they do with Parny, whose mediocre military career and passionate erotic poetry proved in life what is hinted at in these songs -- a desperate longing for the potentiality of a world in which the senses rule and violence is all but unknown. Parny's intent may be an

¹⁹ "Ces princes sont toujours armés les uns contre les autres, et le but de toutes ces guerres est de faire des prisonniers pour les vendre aux Européens. Aussi, sans nous, ce peuple serait tranquille et heureux. Il joint d'adresse à l'intelligence; il est bon et hospitalier. Ceux qui habitent les côtes se méfient avec raison des étrangers et prennent dans leurs traités toutes les précautions qui dictent la prudence et même la finesse. Les Madécasses sont naturellement gais. Les hommes vivent dans l'oisiveté et les femmes travaillent. Ils aiment avec passion la musique et la danse... Ils n'ont point de vers; leur poésie n'est qu'une prose soignée: leur musique est simple, douce et toujours mélancolique." Parny, 5

abstract humanitarianism, but the result is deeply personal, albeit cloaked in terms of 'translation', which keep the fundamental motive of the poems hidden and safely at bay. Indeed, Marmarelli touches upon this mechanism of distancing, though with regard to the avante-garde prose form of Parny's poems, rather than their content:

This practice [of pseudo-translation] enacted a sort of invented otherness that allowed poets to experiment with new kinds of poetic language while keeping a safe distance from the appearance of impropriety. Through prefaces, subtitles, and other kind of disclaimers, poets staged themselves as intermediaries who bore no responsibility for the form or content of their works; they were simply transmitting a discourse produced by others.²⁰

It is in this mechanism of distancing -- the appropriation of a voice for the purposes of speaking in code that which cannot be said directly -- that Parny's antislavery ideals meet Ravel's exotic music. Ravel was fond of all that was constructed, artificial, and deceptive; yet in the *Chansons madécasses* he voluntarily tackles subject matter he had previously eschewed, using a stripped-bare instrumentation which nonetheless carries the listener, it would seem, directly to the heart of the poetry's meaning. Is Ravel 'letting himself be inhabited by other voices', as Marmarelli claimed with regard to Parny? Or is there some more complex interaction of voices and intentions at work in this cycle?

²⁰ Marmarelli, 59

Analysis of the *Chansons madécasses*

Writers on Ravel have had difficulty in coming up with words to describe the *Chansons madécasses*, as the conflicting descriptions quoted in the introduction demonstrated. The startling divergences among various writers' characterizations of the work can be traced back to the near impossibility of reconciling the moods of the three parts of the cycle. The first song, 'Nahandove', presents a passionate tryst in the woods at dusk, closing on a note of tender longing. This is followed, with no warning, by a sharp, cacophonous, and frankly terrifying battle cry at the opening of 'Méfiez-vous des blancs', which carries the listener through a saga of treachery, enslavement, and bloodshed. This second song ends on an unresolved chord and a chromatic descending line in the voice part, leaving tension and apprehension in its wake. Then, as if to offer a lullaby to a child waking from a nightmare, Ravel closes the cycle with a return to the sensual intimacy and simplicity of the work's opening, as the narrator lazily watches a group of women dance beneath the setting sun. The cycle ends on a moment of almost comic mundanity, as the singer tosses off the nonchalant 'Allez, et préparez le repas,' unaccompanied by the ensemble. In roughly a quarter of an hour we have been carried from erotic transport to terrifying genocide to cheerful pastoral laziness -- a heady scrambling of the dramatic arc of most song cycles or opera plots, and a bewildering variety of emotional states to have evoked in so short a time from such a sparsely scored, small-scale work.

“Nahandove”

Ravel uses his small orchestra to great dramatic effect in this first song. The various instruments are calculated to make their entrances like characters in a play, each effecting a change in the dramatic landscape. The cello sets the romantic mood of both landscape and narrator with its brief opening figure before the vocal line enters. The piano, entering in measure 19, establishes a sudden and growing rhythmic urgency -- perhaps a representation of the 'marche rapide' which the vocal line shortly declares, or even the narrator's own quickening heartbeat. The cello has dropped out; the peacefulness of the opening is temporarily suspended. It reenters in measure 26, this time with a sweeping ascending line -- the first real 'motion' in this instrument, which in the opening seemed to be suspended within a small range of pitches and intervals. The flute enters at last in measure 28, corresponding exactly to what we learn from the voice part is the entrance of Nahandove, the narrator's lover. Its rhythm here is similar to the 'irregular heartbeat' of the piano's entrance. Were we to assign names to the 'roles' played by the instruments here, the cello might be said to represent the narrator's thought-landscape, the piano his bodily feelings, and the flute the presence of Nahandove. These assumptions are born out in the use of the instruments in the closing of the piece: at 'tu pars', the narrator is left again with only the cello for company; the piano, when it reenters at the final mention of Nahandove, plays a fragmented and suspended version of the excitement of its first entrance; the piccolo, played in its lower register for a huskier, more muted sound than the flute would offer on the same pitches, seems to figure the anticipation of Nahandove's eventual return. We are left at last on a suspended D-sharp in the cello, unresolved and aching for another go-round.

Caught up in the sweep of all of this instrumental drama, the vocal line seems to play an interpretive role in relation to that of the other three instruments. The bulk of the work necessary for painting the emotional and physical landscape of the text is done in the 'accompaniment'. The voice seems to float on top of the other parts, dramatically speaking; its clear articulation of the admirably-set text provides theatrical clarity, but in the true substance of the piece, its emotional bread-and-butter, the vocal line is perhaps the least significant of the parts. 'Thought', 'body', and 'other' -- cello, piano, and flute/piccolo -- are already represented. The voice here is merely the center at which they intersect; it is the glue which creates a 'self' from disparate parts.

'Nahandove' sets the standard for the rest of the cycle in the tension between immediacy and remove. The text here is in first person, present tense; the events are narrated as they unfold. The instruments intensely evoke and even seem to embody the various aspects of the scenario -- though Ravel is too subtle a dramatist to assign any of the instruments a concrete role in the piece. Indeed, this adds rather than detracts from the immediacy of the piece, for if the flute were intended actually to stand for the physical body of Nahandove, it would still merely be a representation -- 'ce n'est pas une pipe,' but in music. With the flute serving instead as an evocation of the feeling, scent, memory or idea of Nahandove, the audience is drawn into feeling the moment, rather than having it simply painted for them. Virtually all the components of Ravel's setting would seem oriented towards this end, of having the audience identify with the narrator and feel with him.

Yet there remains a certain distance between the audience and the sense of full-throttle immediacy one might expect from such a dramatic and comparatively literal

musical setting. One possible source of this distance might, somewhat paradoxically, be the site at which the primary identification between audience and music might be expected to take place, namely within the vocal part. Throughout the poem, the narrator remains at least theoretically without explicit gender, an omission unusual in the context of Parny's full set of poems. Parny uses first person in almost all of his *Chansons madécasses*, and more often than not the gender of the speaker is labeled explicitly: we hear the voices of kings, of captive women, of a daughter sold into slavery, of a definitively male guest. In fact, Ravel managed -- whether or consciously or not -- to choose in two of his three poems the only two out of Parny's whole twelve that give no explicit statement as to the gender of the narrator. In the context of 'Nahandove', this is potentially problematic. In this degree of eroticism, our heteronormative ears might well expect to hear a male voice. A closer examination of the poem by a more expert speaker of French might reveal some aspects of gender-specificity in the relation between the narrator and Nahandove. But more immediately relevant to an analysis of the song cycle is that Ravel himself chose this specific poem for a commission for female mezzo-soprano voice.

Is this a kind of vocal 'drag'? It would not be the first time that Ravel had assigned an ambiguously male role to a female voice -- the role of the Child in his opera *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* is scored for mezzo-soprano. Moreover, Ravel was a frequenter of the gay and lesbian bars in Paris, as Benjamin Ivry's biography tells us, and he was apparently amused and intrigued by gender and sexual ambiguity, as an anecdote concerning Colette, the author of the libretto for *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, demonstrates:

Ravel commented... on the recent ban of the tango as 'lewd' by the Archbishop of Paris. Ravel declared that he was composing another type of dance, a 'Forlane', and that

he would "get busy to have it danced at the Vatican by Mistenguett and Colette Willy in drag." He was clearly amused by the scandal created by Colette when she danced at the Moulin Rouge in 1907 with her female lover, the cross-dressing Marquise de Belbeuf, who planted a kiss on her lips.²¹

Ravel's joke demonstrates at least the possibility that he intends 'Nahandove' to be heard either as a sort of 'trompe l'oreille', or as carrying a sheen of lesbian eroticism. Where questions of composer intention are concerned, however, it is always impossible to prove definitively how we are 'meant' to hear something in the absence of an explicit statement on the part of the composer. The simplest statement remains that the poem is authored by a man who was known for erotic poetry written from his own perspective, and that Ravel chose nonetheless to set this poem for high female voice. Whether conscious or unconscious on Ravel's part, this choice present a possible means for the audience to distance themselves from the eroticism of the text.

Ravel provides one more opportunity for 'safety' for the audience. Parny's poem clearly traces a sexual encounter; uses of the words 'mourir' and 'plaisir', as well as the shape of the poem from anticipation to growing pleasure to climax to exhausted recovery render any greater degree of explicitness unnecessary. Ravel's setting traces this arc almost faultlessly, carrying the audience along on the narrator's tide of pleasure in his use of layered instrumentation, tempo changes, and driving rhythms. In only one verse does the identification with Parny's text seem somehow to slip; the climactic verse, in which the singer declares: "Your kisses penetrate my soul; your caresses burn all my senses: stop, or I will die! Can one die of pleasure, Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove?"²² The verse could scarcely be more self-evidently orgasmic. And yet Ravel covers it up: the

²¹ Ivry, 87

²² Tes baisers pénètrent jusqu'à l'âme; tes caresses brûlent tous mes sens: arrête, ou je vais mourir. Meurt-on de volupté, Nahandove, ô belle Nahandove?"

moment is less exultant, and carries less of a tidal wave of feeling, than the earlier moment when Nahandove first appears. The instrumental parts are all marked 'piano' at the beginning of the verse, while the voice enters 'mezzo-forte' -- a crescendo building to the word 'arrête' provides the moment of greatest dynamic intensity, but all voices immediately die away again to the middling level at which the verse opened.

Multiple recordings of the *Chansons madécasses* demonstrate this as a moment of confusion for performers; almost all ensembles, no matter how faithful to Ravel's highly specific markings in other respects, seem to single this moment out for some attempted recomposition, usually changing the dynamic or tempo markings in an attempt to give this moment a greater importance in the shape of the song. This holds true even for a performance in which Ravel himself took part: in a remastered recording recently released in CD format which features Ravel himself at the piano and his favorite interpreter of the piece Madeleine Grey as the singer, this particular moment breaks down almost completely: Grey attempts to make the moment build to a climax by accelerating the tempo significantly, and while the other instrumentalists catch her drift and stay more or less together, Ravel himself loses his place. For several seconds, the parts are complete out of sync. The moment is indeed headlong, but it lacks musical coordination.

The dramatic high point of the piece remains the arrival of Nahandove: the climax comes too early. 'Nahandove' is the most direct, live-in-the-moment of the three songs, and for the most part Ravel takes full advantage of the dramatic immediacy offered by the poem. Only in this one respect does he leave the text hanging somewhat in his setting, but that moment alters the piece and leaves it ambiguous. *Is this truly a sexual encounter, as Parny's words alone would leave us in no doubt of? Or has Ravel's shying-away at a*

critical moment rendered it chaster, more innocent -- in a word, safer?

Ravel was famous for his sexual reticence. Though he frequented brothels with friends, he apparently spent his time chatting with the women there while his friends took advantage of sexual services. (Ivry, 136) He never married, and was highly evasive on the subject. His sexuality was a point of contention among friends; heterosexual acquaintances defended Ravel's status as a 'confirmed bachelor', while those who had had homosexual affairs simply presumed his gayness as a fact. (Ivry, 3-4) Ravel himself was entirely silent on the subject of sex, both in his social life and -- what concerns us more here -- his professional life. Though he touched upon erotic love in the plot of *L'Heure espagnole*, the opera is fundamentally a farce; 'Nahandove' was the only time Ravel directly conveyed the erotic in music, and as has been demonstrated, he chose to introduce a note of ambiguity into an otherwise relatively unambiguous poem.

“Aoua!”

The opening of the second song of *Chansons madécasses* comes as a complete shock to the system. After ending 'Nahandove' on a soft sustained note of melodic suspension, Ravel begins 'Aoua!' with its titular cry. This word was his own interpolation; it does not exist in the original poem at all. Ravel sets his 'battle cry' on a fortissimo chord of profoundest dissonance; the singer nearly screams out this first utterance, close to the top of the usual range for a mezzo-soprano. We are clearly meant here to receive a jolt of

adrenaline and fear, setting up the ominous mood of the next segment of the piece.

After this violent opening, all parts retreat into a softer dynamic, which nonetheless does little to relieve the anxiety induced by the beginning of the piece; the continually reiterated major seventh down at the bottom of the piano's range, the brief descending chromatic statements of the flute, and the *sordino* seesawing fifths in the cello part keep the listener aware that some dark tale is about to be told. The singer's first entrance has the cast of a chant, maintaining a steady rhythm and a narrow range, low in the singer's voice. Not until the second verse does the hint of menace in the poetry begin to make itself felt in the music, as the cello part's muting is lifted, the melodic figure in the voice starts a series of upward chromatic transpositions, and all performers begin a slow crescendo and accelerando. This building of tension becomes more and more frantic, until the panic again reaches a climactic moment with the repetition of the opening cry in measures 35 to 37, now transposed upward by a half step in vocal part for an extra thrust of fear. When the instruments enter again in the next measure, the tempo indication is 168, nearly triple the 60 of the opening, reflecting the greater menace of the text: "We saw new tyrants, stronger and more numerous..."²³ This new tension does not relax until the deus-ex-machina of the poem -- "the sky fought for us; it made rain fall on them, tempests and poisoned winds. They are no more, and we live, and we live free."²⁴ The cello and the flute drop out, leaving the piano and the voice to carry the level back down to the ominous pianissimo with which the narration began. 'Aoua', sung now an octave down from the opening scream of the piece, becomes a hushed warning; when the

²³ Nous avons vu de nouveaux tyrans, plus forts et plus nombreux...

²⁴ Le ciel a combattu pour nous; il a fait tomber sur eux les pluies, les tempêtes, et les vents empoisonnés. Ils ne sont plus, et nous vivons, et nous vivons libres.

flute and cello re-enter for the last four measures of the piece, the flute repeats its small chromatic descending statements from the first verse, while the cello softly echoes the vocal lines from the same spot. Though we have ostensibly been rescued from slavery and death, the conclusion leaves us with the feeling that this hard-won peace may be snatched away again at any moment if we neglect, as the poem warns us, to 'beware of the whites'.

The limited analytical and critical work that has thus far been published on the *Chansons madécasses* has focused strongly on this song, particularly on its bitonality. 'Aoua' was Ravel's most extensive experiment with this technique, though he used it to a lesser extent in several of his later works. The two keys suggested here, D# minor (in the vocal line and in the right hand of the piano) and G major (in the cello and the left hand of the piano), seem to carry an added significance when one considers where these key signatures lie beneath the fingers of the pianist -- almost entirely on black notes and white notes, respectively. Ravel was a lover of symbolism; the obvious racial analogy to these two warring keys is presumably intentional. He may have hoped that audiences accustomed to bitonality by the works of Strauss and Stravinsky would have caught on to this musical coding; or he might have intended it as a secret symbol for the ensemble alone. His ending leaves us suspended in metaphoric ambiguity; the cello's final note is D#, but the left hand of the piano's last utterance is another of the low major sevenths, on an F# and a G -- and in fact it is the piano which is given the fermata, so that this interval continues to sound after the D# has died out. Quite literally a tragic and pessimistic note on which to end, despite the cautiously hopeful tone of the last verse of the poem.

Ravel, basically a liberal-minded man for his era, was apparently sympathetic to

the oppression and racism endured by black people, both in France and in the colonies it still continued to hold in Africa at the time of the *Chansons madécasses'* composition. Like many musical Parisians in the 1920's, he had a love for jazz and spirituals. He knew the compositions of Duke Ellington, and heard Josephine Baker at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. His close friendship with the famous Dreyfus family and his love for Jewish music and history demonstrated him capable of actively defying one of the more prominent racist ideologies of his time. (Ivry, 96) But what exactly are we to make of this song, with its terrifying beginning and ambiguous ending? Can we interpret it as an active stand by Ravel against the violence of colonialism, as Parny certainly meant his poem to be?

Richard S. James and Stephanie Ann Reuer have attempted to shed light on the *Chansons madécasses* in a way particularly relevant to the second song. They contend that Ravel was acquainted with the music of Madagascar, and that he attempted to incorporate his knowledge into the composition of the *Chansons madécasses*. Their case rests primarily on a small collection of relatively minor resemblances: a complexity of texture resulting from a layering of simpler independent voices; a horizontal, melodic conception of music rather than a vertical, chordal one; the juxtaposition of duple with triple rhythmic patterns. Any of these descriptors could be applied to several other regional African musics, as well as to relatively common tropes of exoticism in French composition. A more convincing connection can be found in the unusual instrumental ranges and colors used in the *Chansons madécasses*. The frequent pizzicato in the cello and the unusually high-lying range of its part in many passages resembles both the range and (much more loosely) the sound of two chordophone instruments found ubiquitously

in Malagasy music, the valiha and lokanga voatavo. The flute in Ravel's score, like flutes in Malagasy music, often has an improvisatory sound to it, and sometimes plays a commentary role on themes in the vocal line. Meanwhile, the piano is used more percussively than melodically throughout the *Chansons madécasses*, perhaps Ravel's effort to evoke Malagasy drums.

The 1900 Exposition Universelle included a program of "Les chants de Madagascar", which Ravel would have had at least the opportunity of hearing, as he was at the time a student at the Paris Conservatoire. The evening was also chronicled in some detail -- including a description of the sound and construction of many instruments, as well as song texts and some Westernized transcriptions -- by Judith Gautier, in a book titled *Les musiques bizarres à l'Exposition de 1900*, published that same year.²⁵ Reuer admits that Ravel's memory would have had to be 'profound' in order to recall particularities such as the ranges of the valiha and the lokanga voatavo or (still more unlikely) the particular pitches of the strings on these instruments (which she claims bear a resemblance to the opening themes in 'Nahandove', though James drops this idea in his article), given the twenty-four-odd years which elapsed between the Exposition and the commissioning of the *Chansons madécasses*. We do have some evidence that his musical memory may have been sufficiently acute to accomplish this feat; Ravel claimed that the dance-like rhythms and irregular meters in the first song of *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée* were drawn from the guajiras with which his Basque-born mother used to lull him to sleep at night.²⁶ Within that period of fifty years, however, Ravel certainly would have had opportunities to refresh his memory, not only through the population of Spanish

²⁵ Reuer, 39

²⁶ Orledge, 30

musicians in Paris in 1932 when *Don Quichotte* was begun, but also through his trip to the country itself in 1911; there is no similar evidence that Ravel would have heard Malagasy music subsequent to the 1900 Exposition. Nonetheless, if there is anything of substance to the James/Reuer case, it constitutes a significant argument in favor of the idea that Ravel intended with the *Chansons madécasses* to evoke a 'real' Madagascar, giving the second song in particular a far greater point and real force than if its musical landscape were confined to the realm of pure exoticist fantasy.

The songs did indeed have a certain political significance at the time of their premiere in Paris, as Myers relates in describing the event:

Curiously enough, the work was criticized in some quarters on political grounds, especially the second song *Aoua!* with its defiant: "Méfiez-vous des blancs, habitants du rivage" which was considered provocative and most inopportune at a time when French colonialism was at its height. This attitude was confined to a few right-wing musicians such as Pierre de Bréville, but was not shared by the majority. Heartily, we are told, at the first performance of the songs.²⁷

Ivry similarly claims that there was even a high-ranking military official who walked out on the performance, though he does not offer a name or any specifics.²⁸ The Paris premiere of the *Chansons madécasses* took place nearly two years after Ravel had first received the commission, making it impossible that he wished with these pieces to make a specific political commentary. But anti-French uprisings were frequent at the beginning of the 20th century, making it equally impossible for Ravel to have composed 'Aoua' without some awareness of the racial paradox he was engaging in, a white composer dramatically villifying his own race.

Ravel's music in this second song seems more of a commentary upon Parny's

²⁷ Myers, 75

²⁸ Ivry 135

original poem than a simple faithful setting of it. His addition of the 'battle cry' 'Aoua', as well as the pointed symbolism of the 'black' versus 'white' key signatures (particularly in the piano part, which of course he himself performed on many occasions) demonstrate a strong desire to render the point of the text in dramatic, forceful, and memorable terms to a contemporary audience. Indeed, the descriptions of the *Chansons madécasses* offered in the first section of this paper indicate that his bid was successful, for although the violence of the second song is bookended by the far more gentle sensuality of the first and third songs, it is 'Aoua' that leaves the greatest impression on most of the writers quoted.

“Il est doux”

The third and final song of the *Chansons madécasses* is far less emotionally demanding of its audience than either of the previous two. After the nightmarish landscape portrayed in 'Aoua' with driving rhythms, harsh dissonances, and shrieking high notes, the gentle, spontaneous quality of the flute played in its lower register at the opening of 'Il est doux' must come as a relief. Here we have again some of the pastoral eroticism of 'Nahandove', now rendered softer and lazier by the heat of a summer afternoon. The text is from the perspective of a Madagscan man lounging beneath a tree at the close of a day. As he waits for the evening breeze to cool the air, he commands the women to dance; finally, he orders them to go and prepare the meal. The shimmering sound of the muted cello and its soft pizzicato again seem to set both the mental and

physical landscape, while the largely stepwise movement of the vocal line and the long legatos marked by Ravel convey the narrator's languid pleasure.

Of the three songs, 'Il est doux' is not only the quietest, it is also the most conventionally exotic in its portrayal -- the song offers us heat, dance, song, women, and food, all of the sensual pleasures associated with the exotic in French. And yet this portrayal is subtly subversive, for we are still in a first-person narration, and Ravel has abandoned the ostinati and the percussive piano part that were some of the more conventional signals of exoticism in the first two songs. The scene, for all its voyeurism and languid eroticism, also ends on a note of startling and almost humorous domesticity; the unaccompanied, off-handed conclusion to such an emotionally varied and demanding cycle has, in two live performances I've witnessed, provoked a smile and a small chuckle from the audience.

We are left not knowing quite what to make of the entire cycle, in light of this last song, which cushions the emotional blow of the harsh 'Aoua' and softens the intense passion of 'Nahandove' into something both more distant -- we are never *made* to feel anything in 'Il est doux', certainly not in the forceful, dramatic way of the first songs -- and also more personal, resulting from the quasi-conversational tone of the very final notes. Ravel leaves us suspended here both melodically (the F on which the piece ends can in no way be conceived of as a tonic), no longer knowing quite who or where we are, devoid of our comfortable tropes of exoticism, any tonal resolution, or any sort of dramatic ending which the viscerally engaging first two thirds of the cycle might have led us to suspect. We must leave even before dinner is served.

For my own part, it is this ending which renders the *Chansons madécasses*

indelibly memorable, more so even than the more dramatically intense first and second songs. “Il est doux” might easily be overlooked because of its subdued and almost casual tone, which stands in such stark contrast to the rest of the cycle. Yet for all its languid softness, it is in this song that the bottom drops out from under us. The emotional landscape is stable, the scene domestic (albeit an exotic domesticity), with the result that our guard is down. We are not expecting the unexpected, and when instruments drop out and leave the voice to its *quasi-parlando* conclusion, it is startling. The narrator seems suddenly to be speaking directly to us, asking us what’s for dinner. It is a conclusion which destabilizes all that has come before it by its sheer simplicity; any comfortable sense of distance the audience might feel as a result of the cycle’s exotic ‘otherness’ is undone. This is real, and has always been real; we can no longer dismiss what we have heard.

Conclusion

With the *Chansons madécasses*, Ravel took the opportunity of a fairly straightforward commission to experiment with subject matter he had previously avoided. Apart from hints of eroticism in one or two early works like the *Deux épigrammes de Clément Marot*, Ravel's vocal music prior to the *Chansons madécasses* touches only in passing or in jest on the subjects of sex and death, which have been almost obligatory in their ubiquity within song literature for centuries. The *Chansons madécasses* was the first and only time Ravel tackled an overt representation of the erotic, and the first and only time that violence or mortality took center stage in a vocal work. Moreover, Ravel does not simply set the text to music; rather, he seeks to make the music itself speak the text. The emotions and conflicts present in the words receive active, dramatic, present-tense musical representation; the erotic play of dynamics and tempos in 'Nahandove', the clash of keys in 'Aoua!', and the languid timbres of 'Il est doux' are all exemplary of an attempt at musical *immediacy*, a direct embodiment of text in music.

The cycle also stands apart from Ravel's other works of exoticism. He was well-acquainted with Spanish folk song via his mother, while widely-used tropes of oriental exoticism permitted him to 'flavor' *Shéhérezade* without having any apparent knowledge of any eastern music. In *Chansons madécasses*, however, Ravel attempts to invent a new exotic language, based more on instrumental timbre than on melodic or rhythmic themes. Taking both cello and flute into their outer ranges, and using the piano more as a percussive than a harmonic instrument, Ravel seems to be working for a sound which can convey an unfamiliar music without making heavy use of the non-diatonic scales or

irregular meters which had become clichés of the exotic. Whether or not these efforts were based on an actual acquaintance with the music of Madagascar remains debatable. But Ravel's avoidance of conventional exotic tropes, and the spirit of adventure and experimentation with which he approached the setting of the *Chansons madécasses*, speaks to a desire to engage with the texts at close range, without the cushioning, distancing, other-izing effect produced by conventional musical exoticism.

In her discussion of the original collection of poems by Evariste Parry, Trina Marmarelli suggests that claiming an original work as a translation permitted Parry to experiment with a new kind of poetic language, the prose poem. In distancing the work from himself by claiming to be merely its translator, Parry could safely break the rules, both of strict French verse and of the personal precedent he had set by composing mostly erotic poems in strict verse form. That he chose to use the voices of native Madagascans, Marmarelli sees as 'a williness to let himself be inhabited by other voices' (Marmarelli, 65), though as I have mentioned, it could just as easily demonstrate a desire to inhabit other voices himself, to use the voices of others to speak his own feelings.

The very same ideas are easily extendable to Ravel himself. The *Chansons madécasses* were a commission, with both the instrumental ensemble and the type of work (song cycle) specified. Anything Ravel might produce was therefore instigated or constrained by his commission. In other words, he could lay the responsibility for the existence of the *Chansons madécasses* at the feet of Elizabeth Sprague-Coolidge, just as Parry could attribute the content of his poems to the Madagascans. Ravel also appeared to use Parry's texts as a means of distancing himself from the content of the *Chansons madécasses*; though he admitted to "a new element -- dramatic, indeed erotic" in the

cycle, he attributed this new element as "resulting from the subject matter of Parny's poems." Ravel thus gains a degree of deniability for the outcome of his venture into unknown compositional territory.

The idea of the *Chansons madécasses* as a result of 'inhabitation' by the voices of others also crops up within scholarship on Ravel's song cycle. In his biography of Ravel, H.H. Stuckenschmidt speaks in almost mystical terms of Ravel's ability to 'channel' exotic voices in general, and the voices of Madagascans in particular:

As so often with Ravel, these three songs embody music of symbol and inner conception that seems to originate in a sympathy for a landscape and a race that are foreign and strange. The pattern is the representation of something wholly imagined. By way of almost supernatural empathy, Ravel understood and participated in the spirit of these songs... this skill of adhering to a pattern of imagined reality is typical of Ravel. Creatively, he was always in the grip of an intuition quite unique, which made the inner essence, the core of a subject, clear to him and inspired his creativity. For this reason, as Debussy once claimed, Ravel wrote Spanish music that was more typical of Spain than the music of native Spaniards, and this long before he had even become acquainted with the country.²⁹

In elevating Ravel's sense of exoticism to the level of the 'supernatural', Stuckenschmidt undermines the degree to which Ravel's own desires and perspectives and intentions must necessarily play a role in any composition. Rather than consciously choosing his texts and creating sounds to go with them, the Ravel of Stuckenschmidt's portrayal becomes simply the divinely inspired channel through which the 'foreign and strange' may be transmitted. He has been 'inhabited' by 'other voices'.

Yet I would argue that, as in the case of Marmarelli and Parny, the reverse is equally true, if not more so. Ravel is not 'being inhabited' -- he himself is doing the

²⁹ Stuckenschmidt, 204

inhabiting. Just as Parny invented a fantasy collection of Madagascan narrators who could give voice to his own feelings about racial conflict, so does Ravel use an exotic medium, a female voice, and the opportunity of a commission in order to explore previously unknown thematic territory. All of these are potential mechanisms of distancing oneself from the material at hand. Together, Ravel and Parny make use of the opportunities for exploration and development offered gratis by the musical/poetic figures they invent; in fewer words, they colonize the voices of others.

But like Parny, Ravel seems to be colonizing with a purpose. Throughout the *Chansons madécasses* he seems to comment on and engage with the poems rather than merely setting them to music. In ‘Nahandove’, he draws us into identification with the narrator through his visceral, quasi-literal setting of the erotic text; he avoids any accusation of cheap thrills by destabilizing the gender of the narrator, and by drawing back musically at the expected moment of climax. After ‘Nahandove’, we have identified with the narrator, but we know our position to be outside of the text. Ravel then builds upon this dual understanding of self by delivering a shock of fear and moral outrage in “Aoua!” We are made to feel the narrator’s terror, and yet to be conscious that many of us listening are likely members of the very group the song warns against. The ambiguity of the ending makes us grateful for the pastoral peace of “Il est doux”; but even this quiet conclusion delivers a surprise at the end, which again forces us to question our relationship as the audience to the narrator of the songs.

The *Chansons madécasses* thus represents a complex relationship to the idea of ‘the voice’. Ravel appropriates the voice of an exotic ‘other’ to engage with provocative subject matter avoided in the rest of his vocal work; yet rather than rest quietly in this

'safe space', he consistently undermines its stability. Avoiding conventions of musical exoticism, and continually seeking a forcefully dramatic setting of the text capable of impressing itself upon the audience, Ravel brings us into confrontation with the varied emotions represented in these songs. He has forged a path which strays far from his own musical comfort zone, and he draws us along behind him. The landscape is unfamiliar, but Ravel demands that we recognize it as present-tense, immediate, and bearing a definite although complex relationship to ourselves. It is a colony in song.

Nahandove

Text by Evariste de Parry, trans. Anna Sutheim

Nahandove, ô belle Nahandove! L'oiseau nocturne a commencé ses cris, la pleine lune brille sur ma tête, et la rosée naissante humecte mes cheveux. Voici l'heure: qui peut t'arrêter, Nahandove, ô belle Nahandove!

Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove! The night bird has begun its cries, the full moon shines on my head, and the budding rose bedews my hair. The hour has come; what could be keeping you, Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove!

Le lit de feuilles est préparé; je l'ai parsemé de fleurs et d'herbes odoriférantes; il est digne de tes charmes. Nahandove, ô belle Nahandove!

The bed of leaves is prepared; I have strewn it with flowers and fragrant herbs; it is worthy of your charms, Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove!

Elle vient. J'ai reconnu la respiration précipitée que donne une marche rapide; j'entends le froissement de la pagne qui l'enveloppe; c'est elle, c'est Nahandove, la belle Nahandove!

She comes. I recognized the hurried breathing which denotes a quick step; I hear the rustling of the skirts which clothe her; it is her, it is Nahandove, the beautiful Nahandove!

Reprends haleine, ma jeune amie; repose-toi sur mes genoux. Que ton regard est enchanteur! Que le mouvement de ton sein est vif et délicieux sous la main qui le presse! Tu souris, Nahandove, ô belle Nahandove!

Catch your breath, my young friend; recline upon my knees. How enchanting your gaze is! How lively and delicious is the movement of your breast beneath the hand which presses it! You smile, Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove!

Tes baisers pénètrent jusqu'à l'âme; tes caresses brûlent tous mes sens; arrête, ou je vais mourir. Meurt-on de volupté, Nahandove, ô belle Nahandove?

Your kisses penetrate the soul; your caresses burn all my senses; stop, or I will die! Can one die of pleasure, Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove?

Le plaisir passe comme un éclair. Ta douce haleine s'affaiblit, tes yeux humides se referment, ta tête se penche mollement, et tes transports s'éteignent dans la langueur. Jamais tu ne fus si belle, Nahandove, ô belle Nahandove!

Pleasure passes in a flash. Your sweet breath weakens, your humid eyes close, your head droops limply, and your ecstasy dissolves into languor. You have never been so beautiful, Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove!

Tu pars, et je vais languir dans les regrets et les désirs. Je languirai jusqu'au soir. Tu reviendras ce soir, Nahandove, ô belle Nahandove.

You leave, and I will languish in regrets and desires. I will languish until evening. You will return this evening, Nahandove, oh beautiful Nahandove.

Méfiez-vous des blancs

Text by Evariste de Parry, trans. Anna Sutheim

Méfiez-vous des blancs, habitants du rivage. Du temps de nos pères, des blancs descendirent dans cette île. On leur dit: Voilà des terres, que vos femmes les cultivent; soyez justes, soyez bons, et devenez nos frères.

Les blancs promirent, et cependant ils faisaient des retranchements. Un fort menaçant s'éleva; le tonnerre fut renfermé dans des bouches d'airain; leurs prêtres voulurent nous donner un Dieu que nous ne connaissons pas, ils parlèrent enfin d'obéissance et d'esclavage. Plutôt la mort. Le carnage fut long et terrible; mais malgré la foudre qu'ils vormissaient, et qui écrasait des armées entières, ils furent tous exterminés. Méfiez-vous des Blancs!

Nous avons vu de nouveaux tyrans, plus forts et plus nombreux, planter leur pavillon sur le rivage: le ciel a combattu pour nous; il a fait tomber sur eux les pluies, les tempêtes et les vents empoisonnés. Ils ne sont plus, et nous vivons, et nous vivons libres. Méfiez-vous des Blancs, habitants du rivage.

Beware of the whites, inhabitants of the shore. In the time of our fathers, the whites descended upon this island. They were told: Here is land, which your women may cultivate; be just, be good, and become our brothers.

The whites promised, but they made entrenchments. A great menace arose; thunder was enclosed within mouths of iron; their priests wished to give us a God we did not know, they spoke at last of obedience and of enslavement. Better death! The carnage was long and terrible; but despite the lightening which they spewed, which crushed entire armies, they were all exterminated. Beware of the whites!

We saw new tyrants, stronger and more numerous, planting their pavilions on the shore; the sky fought for us; it caused rains and tempests and poisoned winds to fall upon them. They are no more, and we live, and we live free. Beware of the whites, inhabitants of the shore.

Il est doux

Text by Evariste de Parny, trans. Anna Sutherland

Il est doux de se coucher, durant la
chaleur, sous un arbre touffu, et
d'attendre que le vent du soir amène la
fraîcheur.

It is sweet to rest during the heat beneath
a tufted tree, and to wait for the evening
breeze to bring refreshment.

Femmes, approchez. Tandis que je me
repose ici sous un arbre touffu, occupez
mon oreille par vos accents prolongés.
Répétez la chanson de la jeune fille,
lorsque ses doigts tressent la natte ou
lorsqu'assise auprès du riz, elle chasse
les oiseaux avides.

Women, approach. While I lie here
beneath a tufted tree, entertain my ear
with your languid tones. Repeat the song
of the young girl, while her fingers
weave braids or while by the rice fields
she chases the greedy birds.

Le chant plaît à mon âme. La danse est
pour moi presque aussi douce qu'un
baiser. Que vos pas soient lents; qu'ils
imitent les attitudes du plaisir et
l'abandon de la volupté.

The song pleases my soul. To me the
dance is almost as sweet as a kiss. How
slow your steps are; how they imitate the
postures of pleasure and the abandon of
rapture.

Le vent du soir se lève; la lune
commence à briller au travers des arbres
de la montagne. Allez, et préparez le
repas.

The evening breeze rises; the moon
begins to shine through the trees of the
mountain. Go, and prepare the meal.

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