

Otherring Space and Time: *Paul et Virginie* (1788) and *Genie and Paul* (2012)

Farhad A.K. Sulliman Khoyratty
Ireena Kanbye, University of Mauritius

*Paul et Virginie*¹ is the earliest known major representation of the island of Mauritius (formerly Isle de France²) in literature. Predictably, the myth of such a foundational text has become assimilated all at once as Romantic philosophy and colonial, ecological and literary, scientific and spiritual. It marks the geography and imaginary of the locals and others in diverse ways. *Genie and Paul*³, a novelistic revisit of the myth set in contemporary Mauritius and London, is a testimony of the myth's lasting impact, both in time and space as the characters and certain iconic narratological elements have been re-imagined in a subtly playful re-appropriation.

This exploration proceeds by investigating some of the myth-making processes connected to *Paul et Virginie*. Thus, the historical setting of colonial Mauritius as the backdrop to the narrative is scrutinised under the lenses of ecocriticism. There is a postmodern relation between *Genie and Paul* and *Paul et Virginie*. We seek to locate the two texts within contemporary Mauritius and London whereby geographical spaces such as Mauritius are transformed into floating signifiers wherein different texts each create their own respective liminal spaces.

Prompted by the collapse of his sister Genie at a club one night in London, Paul escapes to the sister islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues on a quest to find answers to his listless life. There follows a series of flashbacks for the two characters as they attempt to negotiate their own personal sense of belonging, identity and purpose in a trajectory not dissimilar to their namesakes in *Paul et*

¹ Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie* [1788], Paris, Le Livre de poche, 2015.

² The Republic of Mauritius includes the islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues, the outer islands (Agaléga, St. Brandon and two disputed territories (Chagos archipelago and Tromelin). The Isle de France in *Paul et Virginie* and Mauritius in *Genie and Paul* refer only to the main island of Mauritius. Rodrigues, as referred to in *Genie and Paul* is the second largest island of the Republic of Mauritius, and forms part, with Mauritius and Réunion islands of the geographical entity of the Mascarenes.

³ Natasha Soobramanien, *Genie and Paul*, Oxford, Myriad Editions, 2012.

Virginie. When the body of Paul washes up on the shores of Rodrigues shortly after the cyclone Kalunde, the readers are confronted to the same question – what does it mean to exist in a contradictory world relentlessly moving towards homogeneity yet which simultaneously places increased emphasis on the individual?

While the natural environment figures largely in the fabric of the narrative, *Paul et Virginie* has been inscribed into the territory of Mauritius as a vector of national belonging. The pathos of the tragedy of Virginie's death by drowning, Paul's angst at losing Virginie without the knowledge of her love for him and the mention of certain geographical places such as the district of Pamplemousses and Port Louis the harbour serve to mark Mauritius with elements of history and fiction that can only be described as geographically specific. As in the pastoral tradition, the narrative of *Genie and Paul* also places emphasis on the natural environment of Mauritius although the perspective from which it is viewed undeniably contemporary and tinged with concerns linked to the 20th and 21st century, the time during which the narration unfolds. In *Genie and Paul*, intertextual references to *Paul et Virginie* include recurring motifs such as the sea, beach and death by drowning. Character names of Paul and Virginie (childhood friends and eventually lovers) are re-utilised in *Genie and Paul* as Paul and Genie (siblings) and much of the overall myth of *Paul et Virginie* is maintained in *Genie and Paul*.

The pastoral as a genre adopted for the narration of *Paul et Virginie* exists within a wider context of writing by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. *Paul et Virginie* is a compilation of several volumes of scientific and philosophical thoughts entitled *Études de la Nature* (1788) wherein the idea of 'nature' is shown in both the human and ecological sense, with the human nature presented in a metonymic relation to Nature. In light of the epistemological tendencies of that time, the writing of such a vast coverage was acceptable, if not encouraged, since knowledge was considered to be multifaceted and intended to be drawn from the different social and natural sciences and disciplines. The characters present in the pastoral are allegories that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre selects for the unfolding of the storyline. In general, the Paul/Virginie couple represents the human nature unexposed to what can be qualified as the excesses of the French society, represented in turn by Virginie's aunt in France, and includes virtues such as hard work, simplicity, kindness, compassion and patience. Likewise, Madame de La Tour, Marguerite and their slaves are those caught between the two worlds of progress and excesses (metropolitan France) and the promise of virtue in the virginal state (Isle de France). The historical figure of Mahé de La Bourdonnais functions as a literal 'seal of truth' that helps in the perpetuation of the pastoral as a myth, inasmuch as 'La Bourdonnais' itself survives today as a myth in the guise of place names and connotative of the older, albeit colonial, Mauritius.

Similar questions arise within *Genie and Paul* as the characters, mainly Paul and Genie, grapple with questions as to what it means to belong and to what extent nature is the answer to existential questions. In contrast to *Paul et Virginie*, it is Paul who wanders from one location to another in search of fulfilment, which he seemingly discovers only by letting himself be swept away by the sea waves while on a self-imposed exile on the island of Rodrigues. Likewise, it is Genie's role as

the worrier to go in search of Paul, though while facing personal dilemmas of ill-adjustment and alienation when back to her native homeland of Mauritius.

Myth-making in *Paul et Virginie* and *Genie and Paul*

Set against an elaborately described backdrop of the flora, fauna and the general natural environment of Isle de France, *Paul et Virginie* makes identifiable references to several geographical locations as the narration unfolds. Such specific localizations create an interstitial space between the boundaries of fact and fiction, of history and make-believe. Since the narrative is set in Mauritius during the French colonial period, the act of looking back through such textual lenses tends to incite a sense of nostalgia and a resulting desire to regain a lost past marked by innocence such as can be seen from the pathos of Virginie's tragic death. Thus, these locations are remapped into a sort of exoticism and nostalgia of the past.

Some of that nostalgia has been recaptured by the tourism industry as part of a marketing strategy which presents Mauritius as an idyllic location where the love story and tragedy of *Paul et Virginie* unfold. Targeting an image of Mauritius as top global destination for marriage ceremonies and honeymoon vacations, such strategies retain the same undertone of an island caught between the two, perhaps opposing, forces of geographical isolation and irrepressible globalisation that underlie the narrative of *Paul et Virginie*. Mauritius is exoticised through its tourist advertising as a destination of 'sun, sand and sea', in some ways reminiscent of the voyages undertaken to explore uncharted territories during colonialism. Likewise, the colonial undertones are heavily emphasized and reiterated within this particular industry through the naming of various locations and buildings such as Le Caudan Waterfront, le St Geran Hotel, L'Aventure du Sucre, the duty-free shopping mall of the local airport is even called 'Paradise', amongst others, while names such as Paul and Virginie or even le St G eran ship have been re-appropriated for diverse projects.

In the more official Republic of Mauritius rhetoric, *Paul et Virginie* has been conferred the role of a national myth, whereby it has been preserved within the national imagination as an entity firmly anchored in the geography and history of the island, given a status comparable to that of the now-extinct dodo bird. The process of myth-making in this particular instance takes place in both the antique and modern meanings – first, as a reminder of the past, and, second, in terms of the perpetuation of hidden ideology associated with the narrative and in the fact that both Paul and Virginie re-emerge as Genie and Paul several centuries later in a Mauritius struggling to strike a balance between the past and the present, between nature and culture.

The act of interpreting the past for the re-creation of the present is the driving force behind the perpetuation of myths, with each myth undergoing changes with each re-appropriation. As Barthes⁴ argues, myths are a distortion of remembered pasts, brought forward not to obscure, but rather to perpetuate, them. The

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Vintage, London, 2000.

representation of Virginie being carried in the arms of Paul to cross a stream, is one of the most iconic scenes of the narrative, and has been reproduced in various forms including statues, operas, covers of notebooks, stationery and ‘exotic’ products such as locally produced teas. However, the perpetuation of any myth necessarily entails the sign system to possess a corresponding set of culturally constructed connotations, that in order to make the myth successful, need to be considered as normal, natural, even ‘taken for granted’. As will be explored shortly, the figures of Paul and of Virginie are in general the most remembered characters of the pastoral, much at the expense of other characters such as the matriarchs or the slaves, which underlines the fact that issues such as colonialism, social hierarchy or even racial discrimination are overlooked, if even noticed. This may help to explain, for instance, the existing appeal for the use of the two names in the contemporary public domain in Mauritius.

The narrative has also been appropriated by different forms of media over the years, including a television series (1974-1975) and a comic book. Levi-Strauss⁵ posits that myths are a superficial reflection of a reality, whereby they conceal another ideological sign structure. Myths, therefore, reflect an unconscious social history. Based on events that may or may not be historical facts, the narrative comes to represent some of the social tensions that pervaded the island of Isle de France at that time. For instance, the two households in *Paul et Virginie* uncover hierarchical divisions which already unconsciously existed within the isolated settlement.

Mauritius has been the site of several well-known literary productions (de Chazal, Devi, Appanah, Le Clézio, Collen, to name a few) but arguably few of the literary myths have captured the Mauritian imagination (both official and popular) as enduringly as *Paul et Virginie*, admittedly considering time a factor that plays in favour of *Paul et Virginie*. Located within the waterfront of the capital Port Louis, the Blue Penny Museum, which advertises itself primarily as the cultural and history museum of Mauritius, is devoted mainly to the documentation of *Paul et Virginie* and contains a collection of relics and related paraphernalia. Set amidst the colonial undertones of Port Louis and its harbour, with a decidedly eurocentred sense of history, the museum itself, as with the myth of *Paul et Virginie*, is problematic. Popular interpretations of *Paul et Virginie* sanitise the underlying ethnic and social class tensions that are inherent in the narrative and that have formed part of the history of Mauritius since. In the Barthesian understanding of myth-making, the museum – and by extension, *Paul et Virginie* – treats the pastoral as a piece of normative literature that is approached only at a superficial level. As a result, the political appropriation, or even invisibility, of non-white ethnicities, is filtered within the ongoing myth. For instance, colonial hierarchies are normalised (and naturalised) almost as part of a natural order and that characters playing an influential role within the narrative are whites, leaving the non-whites – the slaves – voiceless and ancillary to, or even entirely absent from, the plot. In

⁵ Claude Levi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth”, *The American Journal of Folklore*, 68 (270), “Myth: A Symposium”, 1955, p. 428-444.

fact, as was mentioned earlier, the use of archetypal characters is harnessed through stock figures of La Bourdonnais (authority), the white landowner from Tamarin (racial superiority), Paul (youth), Virginie (virtue), her aunt (social class) and the non-whites (unquestioned racial inferiority) and so on.

The perpetuation of a myth, according to Levi-Strauss, is only possible if it is backed by a cultural framework that facilitates its various 'constituent units'⁶. The colonial history of Mauritius, its independence as an ex-colony and its assumed independence in general (one thinks here of the spread of *neo*-colonialism through globalisation and the reach of mass media) have succeeded in rendering *Paul et Virginie* an inane relic of the island's past. Thus, for instance, the wealth divide between Madame de Latour and Virginie's aunt is treated as a 'thing of the past'. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre constructs the racial relationship as follows during the funeral of Virginie: "Les mères demandaient à Dieu une fille comme elle ; les garçons des amantes aussi constantes ; les pauvres, une amie aussi tendre ; les esclaves, *une maîtresse aussi bonne*"⁷. The social and racial division existing between the slaves and non-whites and the landowners is approached with much complacency.

The Island as site of (inter-)textuality

In keeping with much of the existing tradition of island literature, it can be said that Bernardin makes use of the natural environment of the island as a backdrop to the unfolding of the narrative. The isolation of the island (etymologically island implies isolation) thus serves as a site of virtual social experimentation in the same vein as was attempted on other islands in texts such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1796), *Coral Island* (1858).

As Elizabeth DeLoughrey⁸ explains in her own exploration of island literatures of the Caribbean, and the Indian and Pacific Ocean archipelagos, islands have traditionally been constructed as isolated and remote land masses, insularised by the ocean that surrounds them, and used for colonial and more modern commercial purposes. Thus, islands (isolated) served as ideal, virtual sites of philosophical and social experimentation, for *Gedankenexperiment* (thought experiment). Juxtaposed with the nascent Romantic philosophy, closely linked to the idea that the human lives in harmony with Nature, *Paul et Virginie* is problematic in the way the characters negotiate their roles with, and relationship to, Nature. In 18th century Europe, romantic concerns about Nature were coterminous with the birth of modern science, and not opposed to it. Nature, in both senses, is viewed in both anthropocentric (human-centred) and its opposite, ecocentric, ways, reflecting the underlying tensions between the human and the environment. In the same vein, the

⁶ Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth", *op. cit.*, p. 431.

⁷ Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, *op. cit.*, p. 247 (je souligne).

⁸ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Island Writing, Creole Cultures", in Ato Quayson, (ed.), *Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 802-832.

protagonist, heroine and proclaimed martyr of the narrative, Virginie, represents the innocence of youth untainted by society's dominant values. As her name suggests, Virginie is an epitome of bourgeois virtue, purity and of steadfastness, as portrayed in the climactic scene of the narrative, where she chooses death by drowning rather than to disrobe and allow herself to be rescued by a sailor, a patriarchal and class-conscious bourgeois judgement. Her ensuing funeral commits her passing into everlasting and universal remembrance as the entire island mourns her loss. Virginie becomes a metaphor of the island, which is still in a virginal state, an ambiguous fantasy of purity that remains definable only in terms of a phallic colonial discourse of territorial penetration.

In parallel, Paul seems to fall back into the narrative as the ultimate castaway from the European continent, sharing the fate of his mother who fled to the island after being rejected by her homeland and by French society. Not only is his lack of wealth a hindrance to his love for Virginie, his apparent lack of sophistication also emphasizes the breach between the urbane metropolitan and the islander. Moreover, this dichotomy between the two worlds is highlighted by his own angst and self-torturous thoughts over the possibility of losing Virginie to a wealthy and polished Frenchman, whom he incorrectly believes to be more appealing to the inexperienced and perhaps easily impressionable island girl. From this vantage point, it is possible to retrace remnants of the very social values the two households sought to escape – social hierarchy and the possession of wealth. Yet, Paul's steadfast "innocence" needs to be inscribed within a discourse of purity and virginity that is at odds with *Genie and Paul's* more subversive, more autonomous "Paul and Virginie". Perhaps a signal for *Paul et Virginie's* limited subversion might be in the fact that, after all, *Paul et Virginie* protagonists are white, or if black, generally 'happy slaves' or 'invisible Indians' on an island with a very small white minority.

Overall, such 'what if...?' questions belie the didactic nature of the narrative (18th century literature, heavily influenced by the writings of Rousseau) which is also denoted by the strong presence of the worldly-wise first-person narrator, on the one hand the outsider, and therefore having the benefit of objectivity; on the other hand the insider, privy to the internal events in the lives of the two families and interestingly enough, the sole survivor of the tragedy. The space that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre constructs for the unravelling of the storyline is, thus, doubly isolated for such philosophical and rhetorical ends – not only are characters united on a remote island by attenuating circumstances, they also set camp in an uninhabited part of the still-sparsely populated island in an attempt to flee from the rest of local society. Such intense isolation seemingly allows the characters to flourish without external influences. Instead, Mme de La Tour and Marguerite both construct and consolidate a culture of an island within an island, insularities in palimpsest. However, the small settlement they build for themselves, while intended to correspond to a Romantic ideal, manages to maintain hierarchies based on racial, social and even wealth divides that fall short of more contemporary standards. That their past is irrelevant to their quotidian and future is an illusion that is fast revealed. Such an illusion culminates in the voyage Virginie undertakes

to France in the hope of acquiring a respectable social position with a corresponding sizeable wealth.

The strong intertextual relationship between the two narratives can be understood in postmodern terms, where texts are viewed as a production as opposed to a finished product in and of themselves. Thus, *Paul et Virginie* itself, the source of the myth, can be understood as not being fixed and stable but always in flux. *Genie and Paul* further opens up the possibilities offered by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre in texts such as Ghosh in the 2008 novel *A Sea of Poppies*, which re-appropriates the character of Virginie under the guise of Paulette, a vivacious young woman who undertakes a sea voyage to the Mascarene islands in search of adventures and a new life. *Paul et Virginie* and *Isle de France* remain floating signifiers that hold multiple meanings in various contexts, allowing the re-appropriation and re-imagination of the storyline and the characters.

Thus, the climactic scene in *Paul et Virginie*, where Virginie prefers death by drowning, is replayed in the final chapters of *Genie and Paul*, where Paul embraces death in an attempt to escape the seemingly futility of his own life. As Linda Hutcheon⁹ contends, narratives are social constructions that can be actively borrowed and recast according to subjective considerations of reality and fiction. The postmodern narrative thus creates the very space whereby its self-destruction is inherent as it subverts any narrative that can be subsumed as a totalising whole. The extant myth therefore functions as a site of re-appropriation since *Paul et Virginie* is refracted through the lenses of time, geography and authorship into a multiplicity of narratives, each connected through similar characters, yet disconnected at the level of the narratives, some of which are diaspora, ennui, death by drugs, surfing, literary serendipity.

The fragmented nature of *Genie and Paul* opens up *Paul et Virginie* further to the proliferation of multiple narratives. The parallelism of both texts, revealed predominantly by deaths by drowning, forms the basis of the intertexts and leitmotifs that recur in narratives. While the narrative of *Paul et Virginie* moves in a circular manner with the births and deaths of Paul and Virginie, *Genie and Paul* ends with multiple open avenues, made obvious by the fact that the initial text of *Paul et Virginie* exists as a metanarrative within *Genie and Paul*. *Genie and Paul*, moreover, seems very self-conscious of its linkages with *Paul et Virginie*, which appears in the former as the namesake of the characters Genie and Paul and featuring as a narrative within the narrative. Such intertextuality, which according to Manfred Pfister is a “trademark of postmodernism”¹⁰, marks its playfulness to both narratives. Such re-appropriation also subverts the potential of *Paul et Virginie* from becoming a grand narrative by undermining any form of closure and gives the endless possibility of subjective interpretations. However, postmodern

⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New York; London, Routledge, 1989.

¹⁰ Manfred Pfister, “How Postmodern is Intertextuality”, in Heinrich F. Plett, (ed.), *Intertextuality*, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1991, p. 209.

intertextual playfulness or “playgiarism”¹¹. The fragmentation of identity that usually occurs in parallel questions the very idea of anthropocentrism, which places man at the centre of the universe and of all knowledge.

As with most mythical texts, the story of *Paul et Virginie* is generally mostly remembered from a few iconic scenes, as imprinted in the popular mind, and visually reproduced in various forms and media in Mauritius, with each feeding the other. Thus, for instance, in *Genie and Paul*, Genie’s quest to locate and to physically bring him back home in a more contemporary fashion – in an airplane – is reminiscent of the way Paul, in a surge of protectiveness and love, chooses to carry Virginie across the turbulent waters of the river and to the safety of their home. But the romantic potential of the older text is replaced by a reversal of patriarchal logic, with a world-wise and almost world-weary Paul and Virginie, belonging to a world of the postmodern blasé, a subversion of *Paul et Virginie*.

Ecocriticism in *Paul et Virginie* and *Genie and Paul*

The rise of ecocriticism in the critical analysis of literature is largely the result of its topical methodology and critical language in the days of radical global climate change. Further, ecocriticism investigates the relation between a narrative and the environment, both natural and, increasingly, non-natural¹². This serves to explore other intricacies that may exist within the classical texts that are centred on the natural world in more direct ways. Increasingly, however, a shift in perspective results from a more pressing global environmental awareness, especially regarding global warming, the depletion of natural resources and the attendant suffering¹³.

At a first level, the natural environment can be understood as a functioning metaphor within the two texts of *Paul et Virginie* and *Genie and Paul*. Just as the coconut trees, planted at the births of the two characters, symbolise the growth of Paul and of Virginie, the seeds sent by Virginie from France represent the alienation that persists when uprooted from one’s natural habitat. Likewise, the presence of the sea that encompasses the island is a strong element that factors in both narratives. Whether as the medium of transcendence through death or as a means to insulate oneself from others, the sea and the beach are recurrent metaphors in both narratives and are reminders of the geological particularities of Mauritius. Functioning as both a means to access land through sea voyages, the sea in *Paul et Virginie* also becomes a rampart that effectively separates Virginie from Paul.

¹¹ Ulrich Broich, “Intertextuality”, in Hans Bertens and Douwe W. Fokkema, (eds.), *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997, p. 249-256.

¹² Guangchen Chen, “Against Ecological Kitsch: Derek Jarman’s Prospect Cottage Project” in Serpil Oppermann, (ed.), *New International Voices in Ecocriticism*, Washington, Lexington Books, 2015, p. 117-131.

¹³ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four These”, *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2), 2009, p. 197-222; Manisha Rao, “Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review” *DEP*, n. 20, 2012, p. 125-142.

As Edmond and DeLoughrey¹⁴ elsewhere explore, the beach has been actively used within beachcomber narratives as a site of discovery, of promise, of answers and even of forbidden pleasures. Thus, Paul watches from the beach as Virginie confronts the reality of the shipwreck, her beliefs about virtue and purity, and her existence in general. Likewise, Paul in *Genie and Paul* seeks answers to his persistent *ennui* and recurrent existential crises by escaping to the beach and by ultimately accepting his own death as an answer of sorts to his personal dilemmas. While the ship gives way to the airplane in *Genie and Paul*, it is a more portentous object in *Paul et Virginie* by being a harbinger of news, cultures and more sinisterly, of being deeply entwined with the history of slavery and exploitation. Slavery as “constituent unit” is approached in an almost Romantic way in *Paul et Virginie* but its vestiges are still evoked in *Genie and Paul* through specific references to the Creole language, the history of Mauritius and Le Morne.

The beach of Le Morne, which is closely linked to the imagination of the Mauritian identity and to the question of slavery and colonialism, is retrieved in *Genie and Paul* as a destination for surfing activities, effectively transforming the myth of Le Morne into a lived experience in the same way the peak has been turned into a tourist attraction, *inter alia* after its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This reflects the protean nature of memory which is actively constructed and re-shaped with changing times, events and even generations.

Approaching unknown beaches and shores is an unconscious search for homeland and for appurtenance. Both narratives present the voyage from one part of the globe to another as a crucial stepping stone in the search of the characters’ identities, and, in true metropolitan spiritual tourism fashion, the islands of Mauritius and Rodrigues as eventual places to find oneself. If the relationship of the characters to the sea and the beaches in *Paul et Virginie* is more exploratory in nature, then in *Genie and Paul*, the characters wander around different geographical spaces in an attempt to understand their own selves. Paul in *Genie and Paul* seemingly finds some solace to his existential crisis away from the crowds of both London and Mauritius in the more isolated island of Rodrigues, away from ‘civilisation’, a heuristic connection with the original bucolic myth in *Paul et Virginie*.

The compilation of *Études de la Nature* represents an 18th century European understanding of the world which was viewed as being made up of various interconnected components found in Nature. The study of Nature meant that the world could be encountered in a very comprehensive and holistic manner, all at once pantheistic and tending towards the positivistic. *Études de la Nature* was thus an attempt by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre to investigate different aspects of Nature. That Nature should encompass the human, and by extension, the societal nature, reflects the anthropocentric approach s/he has had in relation to her/his natural

¹⁴ Rod Edmond, *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, Hawai’i, University of Hawai’i Press, 2007.

surroundings. Yet, Nature seems to be alluded to in two different, almost contradictory ways: firstly as an entity that the human can control to will and secondly as a force that surpasses her/his own strength. Such seemingly contradictory portrayal in both anthropocentric and ecocentric ways reflects the complex relationship of the human with Nature as has been brought forth in various forms of cultural expression.

In the case of *Genie and Paul*, the non-linear narrative and the multiple narrative voices construct a view of Nature which also hints at its multifaceted constitution. Thus for instance, London is associated with the urban landscape, second-generation immigrant affective relationship and the use of recreational drugs while Mauritius is seen as both the land to escape from (Genie's mother, Genie herself as an adult) and the very place to escape to (mostly Paul). As Guangchen Chen¹⁵ explores elsewhere, the current trend in ecocriticism is to view Nature not as composed of all non-manmade entities, but rather, of all entities of the surrounding environment, notwithstanding the ugly, the repulsive and the appalling aspects such as death, decay and degeneration. Therefore, while recurrent motifs of the sea and beaches in *Genie and Paul* bring back memories of Mauritius and Isle de France, the juxtaposition of the landscape of London, which functions as a metaphor for urbanity, emphasizes the fact that the natural environment is also under a constant process of change and of transformation – the elusive sense of 'progress' and 'development'. This is captured succinctly in *Genie and Paul* in the following words: "So they spent a lot of time in that draughty hallway where once they had played in a garden in Mauritius"¹⁶. Such a parallelism serves to bring about a country-side/city dialectic as well as an island/metropolis dialectic, not unlike the Isle de France/France dichotomy in *Paul et Virginie*. As a re-writing of *Paul et Virginie*, *Genie and Paul* makes a self-conscious portrayal of both the natural and non-natural environment of the different geographical locations, with most of the characters having a personal relationship with different aspects (or "constituent units") of Nature – Genie's mother her *potager*, especially after the storm; Eloise the London urban landscape; Maja the Chagos islands.

Seen in the wider context of *Études de la Nature*, *Paul et Virginie* can be said to be metonymic of the entire compilation of works by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre. *Études de la Nature* can be understood as a taxonomy of Nature, an 18th century scientific move to rationalise the human environment, in line with the spreading ideals of Enlightenment which began to see the human as primarily a thinking subject within a universe mapped by science, as ordered as a French formal garden. Nature, then, becomes a site of discovery and of experimentation, a precursor, in fact, to scientific laboratory experimentation. More than a scientific and physical experiment, *Paul et Virginie* is a thought experiment, whereby Nature becomes the site of observation. The characters of the pastoral, but mainly Paul and Virginie, are treated as subjects under the influence of *stimuli* that come in the form of

¹⁵ Guangchen Chen, "Against Ecological Kitsch: Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage Project", *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Natasha Soobramanien, *Genie and Paul*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

societal constructions of wealth and happiness, social class and of virtue. The isolation of the island and the double seclusion of their encampment serve as ideal environments for such experimentation.

The interaction between the characters of *Paul et Virginie* and their natural environment seems to strongly suggest that the pastoral is constructed around the Copernican view that the human is at the centre of the universe. In the same way, the island only becomes nameable (Isle de France or otherwise) and identifiable (an island) as part of human presence. Such anthropocentric assumptions are exacerbated by colonial attitudes to settlement, which for instance seemingly came into existence only after their 'discovery' and (re)naming. Historically, colonialism entails the heavily anthropocentric since the exploitation of natural resources was the driving force behind the need to seek out newer and more fertile lands, and the exploration and exploitation of unknown seas. As such, typically, the official view is that an island without an indigenous population, Isle de France, could only come into being after it being colonised. Likewise, the natural environment of the island was planned and managed according to colonial strategies, such as the transformation of the island into a vast sugar plantocracy. Meanwhile, *Études de la Nature* is one of the ways the French colonial signifies anthropocentric control over nature and *Paul et Virginie* is part of that strategy.

As Lynn White Jr¹⁷ points out, the contemporary relationship between the human and her/his natural surroundings has stemmed in great part from the Judeo-Christian tradition that construed the human as the master of "his" environment. The two matriarchs, just as La Bourdonnais, are, thus, placed in the roles of the first of Biblical owner of nature, Adam, (by the very virtue of naming plants and animals, and colonially, humans), as keepers of the virginal environment, with duties of subduing it to their needs. It remains that what makes Virginie's death resonate more among the readers is the fact that Nature emerges as being indomitable, which triggers the realisation that in the end the human is not, in fact, potent in the face of Nature. This seemingly is reiterated in the instances where Nature outdoes human willpower such as when Paul, in *Paul et Virginie*, is unsuccessful at growing the seeds sent from Europe by Virginie or when Paul's mother, likewise, is unable to grow seeds from Mauritius.

Susan Nolan¹⁸, in an essay on 'un-natural poetics', contends that the intermingling of nature, manmade environment and culture is voiced in literature, more precisely in poetry, and that more emphasis should be placed on the 'un-natural' environment in order to encompass all aspects that make it up in contemporary times. Extending Alaimo's concept of the human body and the surrounding

¹⁷ Lynn White Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromms, (eds.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1974, p. 3-14.

¹⁸ Susan Nolan, "Un-natural Ecopoetics: Natural/Cultural Intersections in Poetic Language and Form", in Serpil Oppermann, (ed.), *New International Voices in Ecocriticism*, Washington, Lexington Books, 2015, p. 87-99.

networks¹⁹, Nolan points out that the environment also constitutes what is within and outside the body, a movement away from the classic approach to ecocriticism. This can be borrowed in application to the unease, almost existential crisis, that Paul experiences, forcing him to seek respite in different ways – recreational drugs, illegal betting, the final escape to Rodrigues and his death. While the way he embraces death is certainly extreme, it reflects the postmodern sense of bodily unease, an *ennui*. In general, it is a curious fact that he returns to his roots while Genie feels none of the same bond with the same island.

The application of ecocriticism to the understanding of both narratives helps in situating the texts within a more concrete reality and provides a richer connection with the surroundings, which may be natural or human-made. Thus, the interplay of space and time is the point of departure in the analysis of the two texts as *Genie and Paul* re-appropriates the iconic scenes of *Paul et Virginie*. Such parallels between *Paul et Virginie* and *Genie and Paul* problematize taken-for-granted mind constructions such as temporal and geographical spaces like Mauritius and London.

Bibliography

- Alaimo, Stacy, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies*, Vintage, London, 2000.
- Baudrillard, Jean, 1988. "Simulacra and Simulations", in Mark Poster, (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard, Selected Writings*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 166-184.
- Bracke, Astrid, and Margu rite Corporaal, "Ecocriticism and English Studies: An Introduction", *English Studies*, 91(7), 2010, p. 709-712.
- Brann, Eva T.H., "What is Postmodernism?", *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Spring 1992, p. 4-7.
- Brooker, Peter, "The Postmodern Story", *Critical Survey*, 9 (1), 1997, p. 78-95.
- Broich, Ulrich, "Intertextuality", in Hans Bertens and Douwe W. Fokkema, (eds), *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997, p. 249-256.
- Bystrom, Kerry, and Isabel Hofmeyr, "Oceanic Routes: (Post-It) Notes on Hydro-Colonialism", *Comparative Literature*, 69(1), 2017, p. 1-6.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh, "The Climate of History: Four These", *Critical Inquiry*, 35 (2), 2009, p. 197-222.
- Chambers, Ross, "Alter Ego: Intertextuality, Irony and the Politics of Reading", in Michael Worton and Judith Stills, (eds.), *Reader of Intertextuality*, Manchester; New York, Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 143-158.
- Chen, Guangchen, "Against Ecological Kitsch: Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage Project" in Serpil Oppermann, (ed.), *New International Voices in Ecocriticism*, Washington, Lexington Books, 2015, p. 117-131.
- Clark, Timothy, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, London; New York, Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Debrix, Fran ois, "Specters of Postmodernism: Derrida's Marx, the New International and the return of Situationism", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 25(1), 1999, p. 1-21.

¹⁹ Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2010.

- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*, Hawai'i, University of Hawai'i Press, 2007.
- DeLoughrey, Elizabeth, "Island Writing, Creole Cultures", in Ato Quayson (ed.), *Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 802-832.
- Eagleton, Terry, "The Contradictions of Postmodernism", *New Literary History*, 28(1), "Cultural Studies: China and the West", 1997, p. 1-6.
- Edmond, Rod, *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Frow, John, "Intertextuality and Ontology", in Michael Worton and Judith Stills, (eds.), *Reader of Intertextuality*, Manchester; New York, Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 45-55.
- Haberer, Adolphe, "Intertextuality in Theory and Practice", *LiteratŪra*, 49(2), 2007, p. 54-67.
- Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, New York, Routledge, 2015.
- Hutcheon, Linda, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, New York; London, Routledge, 1989.
- Lauzen, Sarah. E., "Notes on Metafiction: Every Essay Has a Title", in Larry McCaffery, (ed.), *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, New York, Greenwood Press, 1986, p. 93-117.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude, "The Structural Study of Myth", *The American Journal of Folklore*, 68 (270), "Myth: A Symposium", 1955, p. 428-444.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw, *Myth In Primitive Psychology*, London, Routledge, 1926.
- McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York, Routledge, 1987.
- Miller, J. Hillis, "The Fiction of Realism", In Lilian R. Furst, (ed.), *Realism*, London, Longman Group Ltd, 1971, p. 287-318.
- Nolan, Susan, "Un-natural Ecopoetics : Natural/Cultural Intersections in Poetic Language and Form", in Serpil Oppermann, (ed.), *New International Voices in Ecocriticism*, Washington, Lexington Books, 2015, p. 87-99.
- Payne, Michael, *Reading Theory: An Introduction to Lacan, Derrida, and Kristeva*, Hoboken; Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1993.
- Pfister, Manfred, "How Postmodern is Intertextuality", in Heinrich F. Plett, (ed.), *Intertextuality*, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1991, p. 207-224.
- Plett, Heinrich F., "Intertextualities", in Heinrich F. Plett, (ed.), *Intertextuality*, New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1991, p. 3-29.
- Rao, Manisha, "Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review", *DEP*, n. 20, 2012, p. 125-142.
- Reid, Roddey, *Families in Jeopardy: Regulating the Social Body in France, 1750-1910*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993.
- Riffatterre, Michael, "Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive", in Michael Worton and Judith Stills, (eds.), *Reader of Intertextuality*, Manchester; New York, Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 56-78.
- Saint-Pierre, Bernardin de, *Paul et Virginie*, [1788], Paris, Le Livre de poche, 2015.
- Soobramanien, Natasha, *Genie and Paul*, Oxford, Myriad Editions, 2012.
- Vital, Anthony, "Towards an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and Life & Times of Micheal K", *Research in African Literatures*, 39(1), 2008, p. 87-121.
- Waugh, Patricia, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, London; New York, Routledge, 1984.
- White Jr, Lynn, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis", in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromms, (eds.), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1974, p. 3-14.