

**History, Culture and Religion Migrate into Multicultural Literary Images Shaping an
Interpretation of National Identities
A Comparative Study of Images in Les Amants de Tolède of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam**

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*“L’homme (...), en contemplant les cieux dans leurs ombres splendides, leur jette (...) un regard
d’exilé”*
Barcarolle III

“J’ai soif d’un paradis dont je suis exilé.”
Hermosa II

Jean-Marie-Mathias-Philippe-Auguste Comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1838-1889) was born into one of the most distinguished French families that in the aftermath of the Revolution lost its fortune. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam was haunted all his life by an evading fortune and glory that resisted his geniality as a writer. He started publishing in 1959 a series of poems, novels and stories that were not understood by his contemporaries given the fact that they were bizarre and distinctive stories alive with strange dreams written in an exalted tone. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam cultivated a taste for intellectual cruelty and the uncanny fantastic that emanated from horror as a variant of ghost stories. The characters that Villiers de l'Isle-Adam chooses for his stories live also in a bizarre surrounding even morbid where dreams, mysterious communications, the fear of death intermingle with life itself. Even though Villiers de l'Isle-Adam was influenced by the German romantics as well as by Edgar Allan Poe, his work remains extraordinary and original taking an exceptional place of its own in the French Literature.

“Les Amants de Tolède” is one of 16 stories compiled in the volume Histoires Insolites published between November 1886 and February 1888 by Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. The stories in this compilation were conceived portraying a more relaxed atmosphere. Nonetheless, in “Les Amants de Tolède”, Villiers decides to re-enact the horrific memories of the Inquisition by choosing an imaginary Spain of the times of the Inquisition as the scenario of the horrific story of two lovers that by the Tribunal decision are forced to live their love detached from reality bringing the young couple to a state of satiation. The author’s writings are marked by a personal touch where his voice shapes his personal aesthetic project in a euphoric tone. In this manner, his *parole* or expression creates a sort of legend or myth involving his life.. In his story ‘Isis’, Villiers, 24 years old at that time, shared these thoughts through the character of the prince Forsiani:

Ah! If you knew that a word, apparently ordinary, contains mighty power and spreads hastily! You realize what a word can do. Somebody opens the mouth and articulates any idea that could be applied to a general fact; this idea breaks down, it is absorbed and assimilated in a million different ways by millions of different ways of listening and comprehending them.
(...) Consequently by mutual agreement, man and his idea become miraculous, simply because to open the mouth, beginning of the general fact, is already a

miracle. (...) Do not end by despising humanity but despise the power of the human word.

“Ah! Si vous saviez comme une parole; en apparence banale; contient de puissances terribles et marche vite! (...) Vous voyez ce qu’un mot peut produire. Un tel ouvre de la bouche et articule une idée quelconque pouvant s’appliquer à un fait général; cette idée se décompose; s’absorbe et s’assimile d’un milliard de différentes façons par le milliard de différentes manières d’entendre les mots et de voir les choses. (...) Bref d’un commun accord, l’homme et son idée finissent par devenir miraculeux, simplement parce qu’ouvrir la bouche, principe de l’événement général, est déjà un miracle. (...) N’en concluez pas au mépris de l’humanité, mais à la puissance de la parole humaine.”(De l’Isle’Adam 116-118)

It is this ‘*parole humaine*’ that transforms itself and starts a dialogue between cultures, histories, and literary expressions. The notion of *Volksnation* a nation of common origin, common “blood and belonging” (Yuval-Davis 8), is then used by Villiers to look into the “other” thus enriching the ‘national’ dialogue on heritage while nurturing his narrative with multiple perspectives. In the ‘Westphalian model’¹ there is a dominant and unified political authority over a clearly delineated territory. This position leads us to the realization, in light of the current migratory trends, that the concept of nationalism constituted over a well-demarcated territory has evolved. Between universal recognition and personal identity there are images of reference for those newly acquired “identities” of the masses moving across the globe in a perpetual state of transformation. We might be facing a historical, cultural and religious identity transition, giving place to a strong human identity. We study how Villiers in the nineteenth century documented in the narrative of the fantastic, cultural, historical and religious transformations and migrations in that period as we associate it with contemporary multicultural interpretations of national identities. It is interesting to note that the shaping of identities that used to take generation after generation is now rapidly evolving in front of our eyes. The present-day physical relocation of peoples also catapults the migration of cultures and religious practices and beliefs. Villiers seems to experiment with the exodus of culture, history and religious icons in an intellectual and artistic migration to a literary narrative context.

The image of Christ emerging from a biblical network of meaning common to all Europe of the nineteenth century is captured by Villiers, transposed to a literary work and modified under particular cultural, historical and religious expressions, creating a stereotyped image that permeates the fantastic literary story. This image does not stay in the literary realm but through the reading process associates itself with our contemporary cultures that continue to offer new interpretations of the biblical image of Christ. The title of the compilation, *Histoires Insolites* or *Extraordinary Stories*, is associated with the nature of many contemporary cultures that reflect back to us distorted images of conviviality by means of generalizations, stereotypes and false impressions. To rise above these strong misconceptions that challenge to shape our interpretation of national identities we need to generate an image of hospitality to the “other” in its uniqueness. It can be argued that it is in spiritual depth not of religious dogma but of the personal connection with a bigger source than the individual that we will find ways to connect with ourselves, with

¹ The “Westphalian Model” means that individual states need not recognize any superior authority beyond their own sovereignty.

the community and with God. In “Les Amants de Tolède” the subject of religion is presented from a different perspective, with the institution of the Inquisition as a theme. The author’s position in relation to the Inquisition is complex because he presents it as fostering the virtuous practice of love and the heinous practice of torture at the same time. This literary choice can be associated with current political and moral discussions about the practice of torture by some of our countries that are equally involved in relief and aid to the needy. Judging by the financial limitations that Villiers had to face during his life, he has been qualified as “le poète maudit” by Verlaine (De l’Isle’Adam 874-83).

In spite of the author’s talent, his work has been ignored for almost a century after his death. The stories “La Torture par l’Espérance”, “Les Amants de Tolède” and “Axël” have the Inquisition as the setting, which is both troubling and worrying, “troublant et inquiétant”, reflecting the ambiguous position of the writer. This hesitation, combined with some Machiavellian perspectives, sets the stage of the story based on a controversial time in history. The inclusion of the Inquisition as an image of “La Terreur” as scenario in his story contributes to the comparative perspective that unites and differentiates the French and the Spanish cultures, thus fostering the shaping of a national identity. Who is then the self and who is the other? As Meister Eckhart, a Dominican monk of the XIII century said in his sermons: “El ojo con el cual Dios me ve es el mismo ojo con el que yo veo a Dios.” “The eye that God uses to see me is the same eye that I use to see God.” (Meister Eckhart sermon 12)². We could apply the same thought to our contemporary multicultural context where I “see the other” as he or she “sees me”. The eye is coincidentally the part of the body that exposes the self and captures the other at the same time. Villiers choice of images of cultural and religious content seems to respond to this objective of letting two “foreigners” meet in a mutual observation.

A spectacular punishment to carnal love

The subject of love intersects the three domains that enlighten our analytical reading of “Les Amants de Tolède”: history, culture and religion. Villiers, a writer who had cultivated “horror”, presents it as being associated with a subject that appears welcoming and common to all: love. From this connection originates the subversive cruelty of the plot: a spectacular punishment to carnal love. The loving context that fosters belonging is the same that can foster exclusion, separation, indifference and uprootedness. The transposition of images of love of different nature into the craft of the narrative parallels the political normalizations in our immigration policies that seek to find a cohesive way to create membership. Globalization placed us closer without training us how to be civil in the ideal exchange of gratitude and recognition. The process of hospitality, a practice of love for the other, is a two-way relation rooted in real contexts. Villiers’ literary target was not to create a world of dreams robust enough to disguise reality. Instead, he pretended that imagination was so compelling that it imposed itself upon reality. That is why he did not hesitate to transpose the biblical image of Christ with its supernatural connotation and insert it in his narrative. The presence of the biblical images in a new network of meaning could aim to surprise and captivate the reader who has become familiar with the same images in the original network of meaning. The reader is then invited to view them in a new dimension proposed by the author. In this new environment religion, culture and history

² I translate.

are summoned to participate equally in the creation of a unique literary cosmogony of a “foreign literature world” in the “world of foreigners”. The fantastic element of the narrative then takes the place of a foreign land with “foreigners” who entice the reader to come closer.

With respect to his religious background, we know that Villiers was obsessed with the life of martyrs so much that he could have believed that he himself was a saint of the bourgeois century. His was a duality of thought. On one hand, he was convinced that his eternal destiny depended on the orthodoxy of religion and he was ready to give his all to this purpose. As to his literary expression, however, he could not accept any limit to his creative freedom. Villiers appeared to have a Christian heart but his intellect was not. This is revealed by the emotional charge of the story, (which is immense), which comes from the image of the ‘church building’ in the background. “...confused burst of shouts so agonizing, so acute, so hideous’—that we could neither distinguish nor guess the age or the sex of the voices that yelled (...) as a distant breath of hell...” “confuse rafale de cris si déchirants, si aigus, si affreux: - qu’on ne pouvait distinguer ni pressentir l’âge ou le sexe des voix qui les hurlaient (...) comme une lointaine bouffée d’enfer” (De l’Isle’Adam 141)³ whereas in the foreground, there is the image of a wedding ceremony being officiated. The narrator tells the story as a silent witness of what was happening. His impartial point of view enlarges the image of Torquemada, “The Grand Inquisitor of Spain”, which serves as a channel to convey the vivid emotional messages that the religious character imparts to the listeners. The audience comprising relatives of the couple is also present but rather silent in listening to the priest. We could approach this narrative image with discourses on ethics when some groups in society seem to be excluded and thus relinquished to silence like the silent voices of young children, the differently abled, the mentally ill, the widows and so many others. Between a heart that feels and a mind that thinks, one disassociated from the other by terror, there is a human being who oscillates between two worlds, between two extremes, and there is a pendulum that originates a dialogue between the silence and the screams. All of the human expressions are exacerbated to their utmost articulation. It is interesting to see that the silence and the cries convey the same weight in the story. The conflict and tension of the drama builds up. The drama between the members of the religious community and those who are tortured for rebelling against it is vivid, but the story does not precisely define those characters, they are left to the reader’s identification and observation.

Let us remind ourselves that Villiers is a romantic who shows a Promethean tendency, where a heroic vision of man is central to his conception of humankind. In “Les Amants de Tolède” Villiers insinuates a certain dislike for physical love as he seems to choose to express love exclusively in an ecstatic moment. The rest of the story is just a degradation of such a climax. At this time in his life, Villiers lets himself be carried away by the fascination of terror and cruelty. In this story, the scenario of the Inquisition served his literary purposes very well as we can relate this kind of repression with those of the national policies in relation to immigration. We could parallel Villiers’ narrative strategy with the politics and ethics of equal dignity where we foster equality in rights but diversity in individual needs. At the core of this controversy there is a society that meets the migrating “foreigner” who in turn finds himself or herself participating in a society that having forged a certain identity continues to be transformed. The universal respect for the individual transcends cultural differences as we emphasize the humanity of the “other” expressed in the “foreigner” who is closer and closer to

³ I translate.

the “self” creating a synergy between recognition and identity that oscillates between love and cruelty.

When More Than One ‘History’ Converges

The Inquisition as an image of a historical time, more than a choice of heart, seems to be a preference of a literary intellect who seeks a scenario suitable for staging his cruel stories, as a “toile de fond” or backdrop of the story of “Les Amants de Tolède”. It is evident that Villiers, as a writer, plays the role of a fictional screenwriter of historical events treated from a kaleidoscopic point of view. He reflects on the French history through the Spanish history, presenting in his work the image of Christ, which unites both histories marked by terror. Villiers, as a romantic, always defended his right to freedom, which he also associates with happiness. In “Les Amants de Tolède”, our writer condemns the dictatorial decision to impose our own parameters of freedom and happiness on others. Villiers proposes in the story that we all respond to an authority, but this authority needs to be legitimized by each individual as we echo Emerson’s words: “Each age must write its own books” (Emerson 87). Freedom, then, is the perfect scenario for happiness and a fertile soil where it can thrive. The act of writing is always a fusion of a personal story with the collective history. Each literary work is born at the intersection of these crossroads that become a geographical and metaphorical image of a cross. Crossroads tell of the image of Christ in the absence of a visible body but on the bases of the testimony of a biblical history accomplished.

The image of exile is also a historical, literary, political and religious image that participates in the literary dialogue with a polyphonic resonance. The young couple in “Les Amants de Tolède” is punished by being ostracized and confined to a certain “imprisonment” to start their new married life in an artificial environment and experience love in exile, outside the ordinary world in an imposed, abrupt and exacerbated proximity of their bare selves. This image relates to many diasporas that come into conflict with their self-image and identity as they are hosted by a society or societies. Just as they are looking for ways to integrate the migrants, segregation frequently constitutes the first environment into which they are confined. As they leave this confinement, the obvious differences from the ‘nationals’ depict them in the exposed self that is not protected by cultural markers, linguistic patterns or historical traditions. This spirit of alienation was dear to Villiers and to the contemporary romantics who tried to go against the emerging bourgeoisie and the positivist movement that marked that era. That is why we can compare Villiers to a screenwriter or even a cinematographer who presents to the reader in close-up and panoramic views, perspectives of an image that is magnified by the abundance of detail, as well as different points of view and perceptions.

Villiers’ national French history is represented in Spanish history through the nexus of a common history of horror and terror. In this case, the distance of the geographies and historical times where each history takes place create a fertile literary territory to reflect beyond the immediate political and national partisan positions that impinge on the writer and the reader. The allusions to the Spanish Inquisition adapt very well to the literary themes of fantastic stories and serves at the same time, as a reflection of some episodes of the passion of Christ that form the broader cultural European backdrop. The Spanish and French histories share episodes of great violence where religious passions were expressed, blending with the political events of the times.

Given these connections between the French “Terreur” and the Spanish Inquisition, the author can talk about “his history” through the eyes of the “history of the other”. To talk about the shortcomings of the “other” is an indirect way of addressing our own shortcomings. This indirect dialogue is a prolific venue where art, history, and religion converge to present the reader with a cultural convocation to reflect on and enter into dialogue with rather than to react to. In the same way, we see that the overall effect of our current migratory societies creates communities with multiple loyalties as they relate simultaneously with their societies of origin, the hosting society and the “migratory” community in other countries. A new scenario of what Villiers proposed in his story is a reality today. Different episodes of our history convey fantastic themes that speak of the exacerbated reality where our people live as well as of the “ex-temporis” reality of the spiritual realm. The history of the “other” is not associated with “our history” but, to a certain extent, it is viewed as a competitive history that is opposed to “our history”. Nowadays, violence, horror and terror are rendering the literary world as a reflection field, permeating our real lives, which are carried out in such unstable territory of crossroads and intersections. This closeness instead of bringing us together rather alienates us from one another. The convergence of histories is it of a gathering or of an alienating nature or both simultaneously? Conversations oscillate as the pendulum between the two, marked by an ever-changing conflict, as many facets are incorporated in it and an evasive resolution carries us into more reflections.

The literary dialogue then unfolds into a historical and religious dialogue where myriad of mirages expose a deep spiritual need reproducing a composite mosaic of visions and realities, of the supernatural and the human. For Ricoeur:

(...) allegory is a way of expressing the ‘excess of meaning’ present in those apprehensions of ‘reality’ as a dialectic of ‘human desire’ and ‘cosmic appearance’. A historical narrative, then, can be said to be an allegorization of the experience of ‘within-times-ness’ the figurative meaning of which is the structure of temporality. [...] The figurative meaning is not so much “constructed” as “found” in the universal human experience of a “recollection” that promises a future because it finds a “sense” in every relationship between a past and a present [...] between birth and death in the work of ‘repetition’.” (White 53)⁴

Inventory of Images

Ricoeur articulates in his work the notion that historical narrative belongs to the symbolic discourse which is to say that it constitutes a discourse whose principal force derives neither from its informational content nor from its narrative but rather from its imagistic function (Reagan 98). The story of “Les Amants de Tolède” is introduced from a vivid visual perspective: an oriental sunrise, “Une aube orientale”. The sensual image of the “exotic other” in the image of the orient is indirectly suggested in this literary sunrise, “aube littéraire”. This scenario which is temporary, sensual, colourful and almost intangible, contrasts with the image of the pediment of the official building in “Tolède”, the “fronton de l’Official à Tolède”. The enduring and quasi-monochrome presence of the stone is associated to the Saint Office whereas the broader scenario is full of colour and nuances of colour. We could see in this introductory image a glimpse of a social image that denotes the presence of another kind of diversity in the “aube de notre siècle”

⁴ Cited from Ricoeur, *Narrative Time*, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1984 p.178-84

resplendent with social diversity as well as cultural multiplicity. The thread of history continues as events or stories happen within time while the narrative represents the aspects of time in which endings are linked to beginnings encompassing a continuity of unique repetitions. The cultural tradition is also represented as a lasting memory that embellishes itself with the glamour of new beginnings, a transcendental hope that is not of this world. The spiritual presence is associated to the biblical image of the God of The Bible: 'I am the Alpha and the Omega.' Villiers presents in the opening paragraph of "Les Amants de Tolède" a kaleidoscopic image of human complexities through the merged images of nature, history, spirituality and cultures, all encompassed in an artistic literary story.

In the next paragraph, we find the images of two fig trees that provide shadow to a gate of bronze. Villiers is directing the reader's attention to the opening of the narrative as well as of the story. This image of a gate is that of transitions to areas of greater significance marked by the tension between hiding and revealing. This image can well be associated with our contemporary "national" gates as we participate in conversations about transitions between the "outside" and the "inside", between the self and the other as we seek a balance between belonging and requesting membership. In the Bible, the image of being "under the fig tree" connotes the idea of prosperity and safety in the story this image is enlarged to one of complete protection by duplicating the image of a fig tree into two. Those fig trees are described as thick or full of leaves. Villiers creates a luxurious, Oriental scenario where two neighbouring cultures meet in a neutral imaginary geography that stops being Oriental to become imaginary and fantastic. Although these fig trees are described as having abundant leaves, no fruit is mentioned. This fact could allude to the symbolism of the biblical image when Jesus pointed out the lack of fruit of the fig tree as a lack of religious and authentic profession of the faith (Mark 11:12-17). We could also argue that the lack of fruit in the symbolism of our contemporary multiculturalism is a sign of lack of definite results of our current migratory policies which on one hand emphasize the ideal of the open door and a refreshing shade for the outsider but on the other hand the satisfactory fruits of definite results that contribute to the nourishment of society are not visible they seem simply not to be there.

The image of two fig trees at the entrance could also indicate the number of witnesses needed for a testimony to be valid. The number two speaks of communities of cultures that agree on something: two cultures and two histories that have something in common. They are standing at sunrise, the "aube" telling stories of histories that relate to the past that opens up to the present while insinuating a future in common. In this image distances have faded away and proximity is the place where the host and the guest experience "belonging" in a relational space which is forged as they meet where the past and the present participate in a profusion of beauty, wealth and success welcoming the reader to a palace. Villiers continues his narrative by describing the pathway that leads to the interior, the "entrailles" of the palace. From the entrance, we are now getting into the inner courts of the building. As the writer guides the reader into the palace, the road becomes less clear, and it multiplies into many ways that are not straight but follow a spiral pattern. The road as an image of communication also represents the life journey of a person, and of a community. The labyrinth characteristic of the road that leads to the interior also mirrors the process of incorporation or assimilation of the migrant. It is not an easy or clear process but it is in insisting on addressing the issue that we can advance. As another Spanish writer, Antonio Machado, stated so poetically: "Walker, there is no path. The path is made by walking"

“Caminante no hay camino se hace camino al andar” (Creige 184)⁵. The pathway is also a biblical image that we find in the Old Testament, when the people of Israel are exhorted to leave the “false ways” and to direct themselves to the ‘true way’. Furthermore, in Psalms 37:5, the pious asks God to “show him the way” as the image of Jesus, Christ, constitutes the image of a prepared Way for Salvation, *i.e.* all of these images alluding to a unique way contrast with the image of spiral multiple ways of the palace presented in our story. As Villiers introduces the image of the pathway in the fantastic narrative and as the image passes the threshold of the biblical realm, it goes crazy and multiplies itself into many pathways, taking the spiral pattern that contrasts with the biblical images of only one Way in the image of Christ.

This image of multiple ways reminds us moreover of the Roman Via Apia which was so long that it was said that “all ways take us to Rome.” Between “many ways” and “The Way” we have the biblical image of Christ that affirms to bring together the many ways that humankind takes. The pathways or roads are connections that normally remain for many centuries, serving as a vehicle of communication for basic human needs. The image of transportation, of natural rhythms of life and death, is associated to the pathway that multiplies as a reflection on fundamental ethics of communities that are striving to follow their way. It seems that, in our cultures, we have developed many new tracks that are somehow taking us to the inner courts of human intimacy where the close proximity of the “other” is just revealing our own inability to connect with the depths of ourselves. The process of magnification starts with the presence of the “other” that is stretching our comfort zone and challenging us to connect even to accommodate the new by the differences that lie in between us. The response to “tolerance” failed so we need to find new ways to show hospitality without losing ourselves in the process. This scenario challenges us to go deeper in search of our roots and self to redefine ourselves and avoid losing our identities. Villiers could allude in “*Les Amants de Tolède*” that the multiplication of the roads is distracting us from the original design of connecting with ourselves and with others in the authenticity of a common way shared with the “other” rather than parallel ways or conflicting ways.

“*Les Amants de Tolède*” in its imagery, suggests more than an intercultural approach, an “*ex-temporis*” approach to human nature. It is in this aspect that we find the genius of Villiers as he reaches out to our time through human nature, which we share with the people of his time. These paths take us to the core of all of the sectors of society as we approach the end of the road in a library, a cultural place to congregate, where the “other” and the self meet in a multicultural diverse context and both author and reader feel that they belong where the local, the regional, the national and the transnational share the same space, and where time evades the mutual rootedness in humanness.

⁵ From Selected Poems of Antonio Machado

Wanderer, your footsteps are / the road, and nothing more; / wanderer, there is no road, / the road is made by walking. / By walking one makes the road, / and upon glancing behind / one sees the path / that never will be trod again. / Wanderer, there is no road-- / Only wakes upon the sea.
 Caminante, son tus huellas / el camino, y nada más; / caminante, no hay camino, / se hace camino al andar. / Al andar se hace camino, / y al volver la vista atrás / se ve la senda que nunca / se ha de volver a pisar. / Caminante, no hay camino, / sino estelas en la mar.

The image of rumours of joy that permeate the wedding party in the palace relates to the images of our aspirations that are always more seductive than real. Using this image, Villiers shares with the reader his view of history, culture and religion from his own perspective: they constitute a mirage of what we once wanted or wished for. The image of Christ is presented in the biblical account as being constituted from a cumulus of personal and collective aspirations in its maximal expression, which escapes history, culture and religion, becoming simply the expressions of the Christ. This inner longing is tantamount to the quest for a unique image, perfectly matching each individual's need. The image of Christ in the literary narrative lacks a definitive shape, which parallels to the lack of the power of decision in the young couple who are at the mercy of the "others". In our cultures, we project using "images of saviours", like the image of a new era in environmental consciousness, in equitable rights, in a certain transnational membership, in institutions and organizations that work for people not for money, in including in the conversations those who have no voice, such as the different able, the widows, the sick, the poor, etc. Just as the society of our story proposed to the young couple an enforced conviviality of compulsory, complete intimacy and closeness as the way to make life a pleasurable experience, we tend to continue to force our societies to accept diversity, the foreign, the "other" without a proper introduction or a proper time of hospitable mutual discovery and understanding. The image of peace forged in our contemporary societies where each country and nation can live in peace nationally and internationally contrasts with the reality of borders that lost their traditional meaning and entered an imaginary individual space that is not common to all anymore. The image of "Christ with us, Emmanuel" in this literary story represented in a politically all-powerful, quasi dictatorial figure is also associated by contrast with our "tolerant" perspective of everybody's right of interpretation of our historical, our cultural and our religious choices as we simultaneously fear to run the risk of losing our identities in the constant incorporation of the "other" into the "self". Torquemada represents the many times in history when our societies lived periods when the "other" was excluded and repressed.

Some of the images in the narrative descriptions of the guests in the wedding party are "brief words" "brèves paroles", "people looking away" "regards qui se détournent" and "cold smiles" "froids sourires". It is interesting to see the first "expression of society" in the story as not reflecting or manifesting but celebrating. This society is presented in a very unreal time and circumstance, that of a party, a time set aside for pleasure and fun where we intentionally ignore the reality and concentrate on the images of pleasure. For example, in the celebrations in The Bible there are times to observe special commemorations, pacts with God and assemblies of the congregation, in other words, historical events pertaining to the history of the people participating in the Sacred History at the same time. At this time of feast, eternity and temporality are interwoven, thus belonging to a "sacred time". In these biblical feasts, we see all of the partakers participating actively and each one of them playing an active role in the party. In the image portrayed in the story, society is alien to the reality of what is really happening, with the main purpose of their celebration. It looks like they do not grasp the tragedy of the couple that is ironically "being celebrated". Maybe the personal tragedies of the "guests" invited to celebrate are equally ignored in a meaningless celebration. The images of the culture of the contemporary "stars" testify of such celebration. "Brief words" or "brèves paroles" stands for a lack of communication or ignorance of what is actually happening, even a lack of interest that manifests disconnection. This image of a society disconnected is representative of many contemporary cultures and their way of expressing themselves. We are in an era where

technology has been seen as a certain “christ with us”, promising to allow us to improve our communication and informational processes while our contemporaries tend to shorten every expression and every thought with minimal expressions that leave the precise message in a vague idea. All of this is happening in contrast to our renovated interest in conversations. Villiers shows us a fragmented society where each member knows a facet of reality and interprets it according to a certain community’s perspectives while carrying on parallel lives rather than an integrative communal life. The image of “people looking away” “des regards qui se détournent” deepens the image of disconnection with the image of fear and avoidance. These two images of our society and cultures are symmetrical with those of the history of Spain as a reflection of the history of France in a literary story. The image of “cold smiles” “des froids sourires” enlarges the same image into the image of a paralyzed response that chooses not to engage itself as Villiers takes us on a tour of the many expressions of a society that suffers.

The story comes to an end at the climax of disintegration, when separation is institutionalized and there are no other attempts to reconcile the closest relationship of all, that of a couple. The dramatic and cruel ending of the story seems to reveal more an alert message rather than a pessimistic point of view. “Private quarters” “Les appartements personnels” is a contemporary image of our contemporary cultures that separate themselves in independent “kingdoms” where each one is “free” to live according to his or her free will. The irony between the image of personal freedom and that of separation within a society of communal nature is remarkably striking. This constitutes the ultimate image of annihilation for the individualistic “flourishing” of the members of our cultures who became unable to even leave a legacy of life. This sentence is the result of the lack of practice of love. In the story, the image of the biblical mandate of God to love each other as the most important mandate is nullified through a religious misinterpretation of its practice. Multiculturalism, conflict and belonging as represented in history, culture or religion are translated into the image of fear. The particular fear represented in the story is the fear that it will repeat itself in the circularity of the human experience that chooses to replicate the story. The concept of “being human” and sharing that humanity with the “other” includes the thought that the “other” is “foreign” to me and I am “foreign” to him or her. As we get involved in transnational conversations about major world transformations that challenge the fundamental notions of identity, we need to redefine the self and the other or we simply need to accept our humanity. How much are we willing to negotiate in order to give to this concept a practical meaning of inclusion? As our cultural, social and national identities are being transformed at such an accelerated pace, how are we going to respond to the challenge? If a hospitable attitude and practice are to be adopted what kind of price are we willing to pay? Who has to pay the price? There are many questions but if we insist on seeing the “other” in a human context rather than an economic or political one, I believe that the conversations will lead us to a more authentic relationship.

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