

FRANCO ARATO

MEMORY AND MOURNING*Tadjo's Loin de Mon Père*

At an exhibition held some years ago in the Johannesburg Art Gallery, dedicated to South African women artists, one could find some photographic self-portraits shot in 2007 by the young talent Gabrielle Goliath titled *Ek is 'n Kimberly, Coloured*. Three photographs of herself had different subtitles: “Sou mulata”, “Je suis une personne métisse”, “Soy una mestiza”. Afrikaans, English, Portuguese, French and Spanish to signify what Gabrielle is, or perhaps is not. *Loin de mon père*, [Far from My Father], the latest novel by the Ivorian writer Véronique Tadjo (2010)¹, is the story of a meeting between two worlds and two ways of living and dying; it is also a chronicle of happiness and sorrow rooted in the reality of *métissage*. In French the words *métisse* and *métissage* are quite common in the vocabulary; however, as Goliath’s multiple portraits suggest, a perfect, equivalent translation does not exist in English, and the term *Coloured* still, at least in South Africa, has a bureaucratic, apartheid-style tone to it².

The title of the book *Loin de mon père* paradoxically does not really mean ‘far, or away, from my father’, but ‘near him’. From the beginning we immediately understand that this book of mourning is based upon a negative that is a positive statement. It is the painful contradiction of Life meeting Death, a presence meeting an absence. Tadjo writes “Nina” and “elle” (she) but we are invited (in a discreet way) to understand these

¹ Véronique Tadjo was born in Paris in 1955 and brought up in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. In 1981 she received a doctorate in African American Studies from the Université de la Sorbonne (Paris). After travelling to the United States, Europe and Africa, she has been living since 2007 in Johannesburg where she is a Professor of French Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand. She is the author of collections of poems: *Latérite*, 1985; *À mi-chemin*, 2000; and of short stories and novels: *À vol d’oiseau*, 1986, 1992²; *Le Royaume aveugle*, 1991; *Champs de bataille et d’amour*, 1999; *Reine Pokou*, 2004 (awarded in 2005 with the “Grand Prix Littéraire d’Afrique Noire”). In 2000 she published *L’Ombre d’Imana*, a travelogue about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (translated into English as *The Shadow of Imana*, 2002). Tadjo, who is also a painter, writes children’s books with her own illustrations.

² In the novel by Zakes Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* (Mda 2002, 59) we find the ironical question: why did the law (the Immorality Act) speak about “coloured babies”? Were they “polychromatic”? and all the other babies “transparent”?

appellations – often, not always – as implying ‘je, moi’ (I, me). We can describe Tadjó’s work as ‘autofiction’ or autobiography in a fictional form, adopting the formula coined thirty years ago by the writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky, who himself tried to cross the narrow bridge between reality and imagination³ (the subtitle of Tadjó’s book is, *roman*, ‘a novel’, as in Doubrovsky’s *Fils*); to quote a more recent example, one can refer to the reflections on the intertwining between ‘le roman’ and ‘le réel’ made by Philippe Forest, whose theoretical assessments arise also from a personal life’s tragedy, the loss of his four years child⁴. The very first quotation in Tadjó’s book begins with “cette histoire est vraie”, ‘this story is true’, but then ends with the paradoxical “ce qui reste, c’est le mensonge (facétie) de la mémoire”, ‘what is left is the trick of memory’ (*mensonge* literally means ‘a lie’). Who wrote this quotation? The author does not know, for she confesses at the end: “Références perdues. Citation réécrite, ou entièrement de moi?” [Lost references. Is it an accurate rendition of the quote, or entirely mine?]. One wonders if it is an elegant play of hide-and-seek. We can guess the reasons for this reticence. Writing about one’s life and one’s beloved yet tortured country (the Ivory Coast, the fatherland of both Nina and of Tadjó) is not an easy task. It is a story inside History, better still a private mourning and a public one. Indeed the second quotation at the beginning is a *true* statement, a defense of the reliability of oral sources (from a book on the Akan culture by the historian Henriette Diabaté) with this final suggestion: “ne dis plus rien; ce que tu as dit est exacte” [don’t say more, what you have said is accurate]. We must believe that what Tadjó recounts, through the medium of Nina, is ontologically, if not historically, true.

The life of Nina – as I mentioned before – is a typical case, even if not always a happy one, of the encounter between different cultures and spaces, history and geography. A French mother and Ivorian father: motherland versus fatherland (in this case it is the French language that lacks an equivalent to express this polarization)⁵. Nina has difficulties in understanding the Ivory Coast that she knew before because of the civil war. At the same time, she has to cope with the long shadow of her father, the renowned medical doctor Kouadio Yao, who has just died, and whose disturbing secrets Nina starts to discover little by little. The country is in the middle of a violent political crisis, but the old rituals of mourning remain unchanged.

The imposition, and in some cases, acceptance of the Christian religion (in the case of Ivory Coast, Catholicism) did not do away with or mitigate the complex traditional ceremonies of praying and preparing for the burial of the body (lasting even a month). Contrary to this, Western societies try to obliterate intimations of death; in an urban

³ A critical overview can be found in Jeannerelle – Viollet 2007.

⁴ See Forest 1997 and Forest 2007.

⁵ It seems that – at least among ‘classical’ writers’ – only the Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral regularly used the word *matrìe*, ‘motherland’, but it is not idiomatic French (in Italian and Spanish too the words *matrìa* and *mátrìa* are quite unusual).

context, people get to know of the death of a neighbour usually only when reading the obituary in a newspaper. Death has no fascination for the skeptical and the unbeliever, therefore it must remain hidden. It was not always like that. Just a few months before the publication of Tadjò's book an intriguing novel by the Italian writer Licia Giaquinto was published, *La ianara* (*The Shaman*, Milano, Adelphi 2010): it is the story of a woman who has lived for many decades in the mountains and in the small villages of Southern Italy. The "ianara" – perhaps from the Latin *ianua*, meaning 'door' and derived from the dialect of the Irpinia, a province of Campania – was a 'practitioner' who spoke with the dead, performed abortions and assisted the old and the sick as they lay dying. This 'sister of mercy' appears to have been a haunting yet tolerated and necessary figure, possessing a craft handed down from mother to daughter. She was believed to live alone (in fairy tales the devil *must* live in solitude). However, the protagonist of Giaquinto's novel, Adelina, falls platonically in love with the Count, the lord of the village, but finally learns how difficult it is to break the spell of solitude⁶. If we turn again towards African literature, we find in the acclaimed novel by the South African writer Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (1995), a character, Toloki – a man in this case –, whose task is the caring for the dead. Living in a township near Cape Town, he re-invents for himself the skill of a Professional Mourner, though his life is that of an awkward beggar (his suit often stinks). He struggles to make sense of his experience: "Death – he wonders – lives with us everyday. Indeed our ways of dying are our ways of living. Or should I say our ways of living are our ways of dying?"⁷.

These two very different novels on death can help us understand the world of *Loin de mon père*. In the stories of Adelina and of Toloki, the respective authors lay emphasis on the public and private spaces of death: solitude and solidarity are extremes that can hardly be accommodated. At the time of her arrival in Côte d'Ivoire from France, the experience of solitude⁸ is excruciating for Nina. The first family reunion – her mother, a talented musician, died many years before – is not easy for her. Nina tries to persuade her relatives that her father's funeral should remain a private affair, without the involvement of any political figure. An old relative explains that her desire cannot be fulfilled:

Merci pour ton intervention, Nina. Cependant, il faut savoir que nous ne pouvons pas refuser la participation des officiels. Kouadio, paix à son âme, nous appartient biologiquement, mais pas socialement. C'est une figure publique qui a beaucoup fait pour son pays. On doit lui rendre les hommages qu'il mérite. Il serait scandaleux de n'avoir aucune représentation officielle aux

⁶ A similar figure occurred in the island of Sardinia, as it is shown in another recent Italian novel, *Accabadora* by Michela Murgia, 2009 (the word *accabadora* comes perhaps from the Spanish 'acabar', to finish).

⁷ Mda 1995, 98

⁸ A distinguished German sociologist wrote about the loneliness of the dying in modern times: Elias 1982.

cérémonies. Tout ce que nous pouvons te promettre, c'est que, lorsque la date de l'enterrement aura été arrêtée par la famille, elle ne changera plus. Nous ne céderons à aucune pression extérieure.

[Thank you for your speech, Nina. Nevertheless, you have to know that we cannot refuse the participation of authorities. Kouadio, may he rest in peace, is ours biologically, but not socially. He is a public figure who did so much for his country. We have to pay him the homage he deserves. It would be a scandal if no authority was present at the funeral service. All we can promise is that the date of the burial, as decided by the family, will not change. We will resist any external pressure]⁹.

A host of memories gathers around Nina. Photographs are triggers for happy but also troubling thoughts: children's plays; travels; the happiness of a Saturday afternoon with *papa*; the struggle for freedom when Nina was a teenager; the desire, not satisfied, for a brother; and finally the decision of her older sister, Gabrielle, to desert the family for good (she will never come back, not even on the occasion of her father's funeral). But some things Nina cannot remember, because she ignores many aspects of her father's life. Her cousin Hervé exposes Doctor Kouadio's lies:

Il hésita pendant quelques secondes avant de poursuivre, tel un plongeur trouvant enfin le courage de se lancer du haut de la falaise. "Avant ton arrivée, une femme est venue à la maison. Elle nous a dit qu'elle avait eu un enfant avec ton père, un garçon de neuf ans".

[He hesitated for a while before going on, like a diver who at last plucks up the courage to leap from the cliff. "Before your arrival, a woman came to our house. She told us that she had had a child with your father: the boy is nine now"]¹⁰.

Nina's first reaction is one of disbelief, which is promptly revised when she meets her *new* brother, Koffi: "Elle vit [...] qu'il ressemblait trait pour trait à son père. Mêmes grands yeux noirs, même ovale du visage, même air de famille" [She saw that he looked like his father, in every feature. The same big black eyes; the same oval-shaped face]¹¹.

The *quête*, has just begun: Nina discovers in the course of time new brothers and sisters. As the story develops on, the protagonist and the reader learn about two teenagers, Roland and Cécile, a boy and girl, and an adult man, Amon, who is about Nina's age and who now lives in Canada (he has a wife and a child: he comes back to attend the funeral). Doctor Kouadio technically was not polygamous, because he officially had only one wife; but he had more than one lover and at least four other children. A sort of triumph of virility, silently encouraged by hypocrisy. Many knew, among friends and relatives, but no one spoke about the deeds of this African Don Juan. The slighted Nina refers to this situation as akin to a farce in her conversation with her aunts, who are the keepers of Kouadio's secret:

⁹ Tadjó 2010, 27 (if not otherwise indicated the translations in English are mine).

¹⁰ Ibid., 35.

¹¹ Ibid., 42.

Nina avait l'impression d'être en pleine comédie burlesque. Au point où elle en était, plus rien ne pouvait la toucher: "Vous êtes absolument certaines que c'est tout? Vous comprendrez, j'ai du mal à vous croire, maintenant ...".

[Nina felt as though she was in the middle of a burlesque show. At that point, nothing could affect her anymore: "Are you absolutely sure that's all? You see, it's hard for me to believe you, now ..."]¹².

No, nobody else is identified, but all the lies hurt Nina deeply: she thinks that her father's "enormous, boundless lie", was "like a tree, whose destructive roots, as tentacles, killed everything living around it"¹³.

Nina feels also that she must reopen the book of her personal *Trauerarbeit*, the process of grief (in Freudian terms): the past cannot really be 'healed' or embellished, one must try to understand it. Because spoken words are not always reliable – the words of reluctant eye witnesses for instance –, Nina decides to rummage in her father's journals and letters (the expressive French words are *fouiller* and more specifically, *piocher*, meaning 'to dig'). Tadjó is particularly fond of lists, of objects and facts. Is listing items not the oldest and most elementary form of poetry ranging from Hesiod's enumeration of gods to Homer's catalogue of ships? First, Nina finds a *carnet*, a notebook that belonged to her father, with some autobiographical notes on his studies in France and in the Ivory Coast, and about his early career. The notebook is no more than four pages because the writing was abruptly interrupted (we do not know why). Nina's first reaction is one of deep disappointment:

Aucune émotion ne ressort de ce qu'il a écrit. Il ne parle pas de ses sentiments au moment où il a quitté sa famille, son village. Rien sur ce qu'il a ressenti à son arrivée en France. Rien sur son mariage et sur tout ce qui s'est passé avant. Un désert.

[There was no emotion in what he wrote. He doesn't speak about his feelings when he left his family and his village. Nothing about what he felt when he arrived in France. Nothing about his marriage and, above all, about what happened before. A desert]¹⁴.

The daughter tries to understand her father's failure to write about his emotions, she is conscious that "entre ses parents, ce ne fut pas le coup de foudre" [between her parents, it was not love at first sight]¹⁵. It was more like a 'forced' marriage in post-war Paris, where a charming French girl, Héléne, met Kouadio, a brilliant, yet poor student. A baby (Gabrielle, Nina's older sister) was the fruit of the inexperienced love between those two university students. Nina finds among her father's papers something that is

¹² Ibid., 124.

¹³ Ibid., 125.

¹⁴ Tadjó 2010, 49.

¹⁵ Ibid., 83.

far more interesting than his interrupted, elusive autobiography: the bridal contract with “la dote à la future épouse”, the dowry for the future spouse, provided by Héléne’s parents. It is a rich dowry, including the free use of a flat for five years in Paris. Nina’s commentary is: “Générosité ou extrême arrogance?”, generosity or extreme arrogance?¹⁶, she wonders if Héléne’s parents wanted to help or to humiliate the young African man. After decades, it is difficult to say but we understand that Nina’s heart is beating at the rhythm of her father’s youthful distress.

Tadjo in some cases chooses a nominal syntax, in a way that refers to the typically French genre of the “poème en prose” she has already experimented with in her earlier books. Here is for instance the description of Gabrielle, the not yet born sister in her mother’s womb:

Tam-tam du cœur tambour du sang s’engouffrant dans les veines; bruit assourdissant d’une respiration haletante. Elle avait jailli de sa mère comme une rebelle.

[The drumming of the heart; the blood throbbing through her veins; the thundering noise of heavy breathing. She sprang forth from her mother like a rebel].¹⁷

Tadjo, while writing a realistic portrait of a man and his family, is always looking for a language capable of mimicking the *intermittences du coeur*, the fitful heartbeat of a woman seeking after the truth. One reads something similar – in terms of style – in *À vol d’oiseau*, a book where poetry blends with prose, the sound confronts sense:

Il faut entendre la voix de ceux qui se taisent avec des mots qui sortent de la terre. Point de langage aseptisé, mais le tempo de la vie au galop, remodelant les images dépassées, les syntaxes usées, la pensée capitonnée.

[You should listen to those whose voices remain unheard although the wisdom they carry is shaped by their closeness to the earth. No refined language but the pace of life at a gallop refashions outmoded images, well-worn phrases, and ways of thinking that are out of date].¹⁸

Further in her quest, Nina runs into a strange book entitled *La sorcellerie et ses remèdes* [Witchcraft and its cures] that used to be the *livre de chevet*, the bedside book of the elderly Kouadio in his last days. It contains a list of treatments and prayers for diseases and problems of all sorts. Evidence that the old man was looking for consolation and help. He believed in traditional healing methods (among other worries was perhaps his vanishing sexual strength)¹⁹. Everyone living in sub-Saharan Africa has come across the fascinating – yet very unsettling – leaflets of fake doctors who promise

¹⁶ Ibid., 87.

¹⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁸ Tadjo 1992, 15; Tadjo 2001, 15 (the English translation is by Wangūi wa Goro).

¹⁹ Among his frustrations there is also the failure of his candidature for National Health minister.

to cure dozens of ‘diseases’, from impotence to unemployment (this was common in southern Europe too, decades ago). The book of prayers is a creation of Tadjó, who reworked an existing manual. It is a mixture of Catholicism and magic and explains how to fight “les attaques de sorcellerie”, the attacks of a witch doctor who wants us to die. Here is a short passage from a long list:

3 jours de prières-veillée de 22 heures à 5 heures; 3 jours de jeûne de 18 heures à 21 heures, avec intervalles de prières; 7 jours de prières-veillée de 22 heures à 5 heures; 7 jours de jeûne, avec intervalles de prières.

[3 days of praying and staying awake from 10 pm to 5 am; 3 days of fasting from 6 pm to 9 pm, with praying in between; 7 days of praying and staying awake from 10 pm to 5 am; 7 days of fasting, with praying in between]²⁰

Kouadio went to see a local *marabout*, a muslim healer, for advice. It was not, unfortunately, free and altruistic help. Nina discovers that her father spent a great amount of money indulging in his weakness, listening to what turned out to be a con man. Nina does not share her beloved father’s beliefs, but she tries her best not to judge him, even if she is shocked by his disavowing of knowledge acquired at school and at university. Nina looks for a physical reason for this intellectual decay:

Vers la fin de sa vie, le père avait restreint ses mouvements [...]. Il s’était progressivement détaché de tout ce qui se trouvait en dehors de son espace. Il vivait à l’intérieur de sa solitude peuplée par des regrets dont il était le seul à connaître la vraie nature.

[At the end of his life, her father restricted his movements [...]. Progressively he distanced himself from what was outside of his space. He lived in a solitude peopled with regrets, whose causes only he knew]²¹.

Nina had a special fascination for and aptitude in the natural sciences. The narrator refers to this passion from when she was just a teenager at school. For instance, she was interested in the mating habits of the praying mantis, the insect that kills her male during copulation. The passion for truth, even the most disturbing truth, is Nina’s destiny. Can we call this part of the book: Enlightenment against superstition? It is not so simple, because the journey back is a sort of self-therapy, and Nina through knowing her father’s life recognizes herself.

Dreams, both night and day dreams, are of special importance when the sentimental paths of motherhood and daughterhood meet. Nina is ready to embrace a new, delayed process of mourning. Her mother and she had lived not a symbiotic but a conflicting relationship. The writer uses a poetic, childlike way of describing their

²⁰ Tadjó 2010, 67-68.

²¹ Ibid., 55.

conflict, which we can interpret as an unconscious fear of being killed, possibly in a sort of cannibalistic rite:

Quand Nina constata que sa mère prenait enfin de l'âge, elle en ressentit un profond soulagement. Celle-ci ne pourrait plus la manger car celui lui prendrait trop de force, trop d'énergie. Et elle était maintenant affaiblie, préoccupée par le temps qui lui restait à vivre. Nina avait toujours su que c'était elle, et elle seule, que sa mère voulait avaler avant de partir. Mais Nina avait réussi à lui échapper.

[When Nina understood that her mother had at last begun to age, she felt a deep relief. She would not have been able to devour her anymore, because this would have demanded too much strength, too much energy. Now, her mother was weak, preoccupied with the time that was left to her. For a long time, Nina had known that her mother wanted to swallow her up before departing. But Nina had been able to escape from her]²².

After this chilling fantasy, Nina, remembering or perhaps describing another dream, recalls a Sunday on the beach. Nina and her sister were looking at their mother, an able swimmer, fighting with the waves of the ocean. Once again, fear and desire are inextricably united:

Brusquement, l'océan se mit à gronder, à noircir, on aurait dit la lave d'un volcan en éruption. Sa soeur sortit à la hâte. Nina la suivit. Quand elles se retournèrent, leur mère n'était plus là. Elles crièrent son nom. Rien. Elles crièrent encore, puis pleurèrent, recroquevillées sur elles-mêmes. Un attroupement avait commencé à se créer. Alors, elles virent leur mère émerger de l'eau, plus belle que jamais.

[Suddenly the ocean began to rumble, to turn black; it was like the lava of an erupting volcano. Her sister emerged in a hurry from the sea. Nina followed her. When they turned back, their mother was not there anymore. They cried out her name. Nothing. They cried out again, they started to weep, curling up their legs. A crowd began to gather. At that precise moment, they saw their mother coming out of the water, more beautiful than ever]²³.

The mother, as an unconquered demi-god, was still alive then (but in reality she is now dead). She could defeat the waves without losing her aloof charm. We come to understand that, during the process of mourning for her father, Nina is also coming to terms with her mother's legacy. "Loin de ma mère?", "Far from my mother?". In a certain way yes, because her family's heritage is indivisible. These are really powerful passages in which Tadjó is at her literary best, in the tradition of the most unforgiving pages of Albert Camus.

Tadjó has often written about the difficulties of being a mother, for instance in her novel *Reine Pokou. Concerto pour un sacrifice* (2004). It is a multi-faceted story of an

²² Ibid., 147.

²³ Ibid., 148.

eighteenth-century African queen named Pokou, from the Baoulé tribe of Ivory Coast. It is not really a historical chronicle, because Tadjó likes to blend reality and myth. As the subtitle shows, her slim and intriguing book is a *concert*, a musical and poetic commentary on the theme of sacrifice. Whose sacrifice and why? The myth, which the writer encounters for the first time as a child living in Abidjan²⁴, speaks of Pokou who, in an attempt to rescue her endangered people, decides, following the suggestion of a priest, to sacrifice her only child by throwing him into the river. It is well known that the idea of sacrificing the innocent is present almost everywhere in human cultures: from the children of Incas offered, far away in the highest mountains, to the gods right up to the biblical story of Isaac (the commemoration of a forbidden infanticide). But in her story, Tadjó does not end with a bloody version of the myth. As in Jorge Luis Borges' short story *Jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* [Garden of the forking paths], different denouements are offered, because "tout est possible dans la légende, la belle parole fabriquée pour apaiser le peuple, lui redonner confiance en l'avenir" [everything is possible in a legend, a beautiful story invented to appease people, to renew their confidence in the future]²⁵. Tadjó wants to delve into the internal conflicts of a woman torn between her maternal instinct and her political duty:

Elle pleura. Finalement, elle se jeta à terre et se mit à rouler de gauche à droite en se tenant la tête entre les mains. D'un coup, elle arracha son pagne, dévoilant sa nudité aveuglante. Elle se tira les cheveux, se griffa la peau. Le sang coulait, se mêlant à la sueur et à la poussière.

[She cried. Finally, she threw herself on the ground and began to roll from left to right, holding her head in her hands. Suddenly she tore off her loincloth, displaying her glaring nakedness. She tore her hair, she scratched her skin. Blood started to flow, mingling with her sweat and the dust]²⁶.

This is a manifestation of deep mourning. We can speculate that between the Queen, who is fighting against her fate (in the book we find many clear references to modern civil wars in Africa), and Nina's mother (who unsuccessfully tried, as a young woman, to have an abortion) there are similarities. But the mother's sacrifice is different in nature. She dies before the catastrophe devours her adopted country: "Elle ne connut pas le signes de l'intolérance, le rejet de l'Autre. Elle ne connut pas le coup d'État, la peur, les remous et les gouvernements successifs" [She did not experience the rejection

²⁴ "La légende d'Abraha Pokou, reine baoulé, m'a été contée pour la première fois quand j'avais autour de dix ans. Je me souviens que l'histoire de cette femme sacrifiant son fils unique pour sauver son peuple avait frappé mon imagination de petite fille vivant à Abidjan. Je me représentais Pokou sous les traits d'une Madone noire" ["The legend of Abraha Pokou, Baoulé Queen, was told to me for the first time when I was around ten. I remember that the story of this woman who sacrificed her only child to save her people struck my imagination as a child living in Abidjan. I thought of Pokou as someone with the features of a black Madonna"]: Tadjó 2004, 7.

²⁵ Ibid., 82.

²⁶ Ibid., 45.

of the Other. She did not experience the coup d'état, the turmoil and the new governments]²⁷. The passions that stormed her life are over and Nina finds relief in remembering her mother's everyday life, when she enjoyed gardening in her small villa. Once again, the metaphor of the growing trees has a heuristic meaning, but this time not referring to puzzling lies but to the mysteries of memory:

Les arbres sont porteurs de notre mémoire. Et pourtant ils se taisent, gardent jalousement leurs secrets. Je ne saurai jamais ce qui s'est réellement passé.

[Trees carry memories. Yet they are silent, jealously keeping their secrets. I will never know what actually happened]²⁸.

Tadjo, uses a familiar French, not *collet monté* (stiff). However, the process of recognizing what (perhaps) is true, is a painful one. Several years before Tadjo wrote in a poem: “La racine des pierres / plonge très loin dans l’oubli / elle se gave des mémoires / que la terre rejette”, “The roots of stones / sink deep into oblivion / gulping down those memories / that the soil rejects”²⁹. Is this the evocation of a burial? or of life springing from the earth? This dialectical movement is characteristic of Tadjo's imagination. Let us compare this with an early love poem of hers (from *Latérite*):

Je poserai mes mains
Sur ton front or-ivoire
Et sourirai en toi
Des sourires d'enfant
Mais il faut
Que tu ailles
Là où les champs sont mûrs
Il faut
Que tu repartes
Sur le chemin des dieux
Car tu es homme
À faire jaillir les sources.

[Let me put my hands
On your ivory-gold brow
And smile for you
The smiles of a child
But
You must go

²⁷ Tadjo, 2010, 138.

²⁸ Ibid., 141.

²⁹ I quote these lines of *À mi-chemin* from: Chevrier 2007, 190.

Where fields are ripe
 You must
 Leave again
 On the path of the gods
 For you are the man
 To make the springs gush forth]³⁰.

Once again the elementary life of Nature has been brought back to the circularity of beginning and end. *Loin de mon père* effects a closure in a very simple way, by adhering to chronology: the Catholic funeral mass (no healers or *marabouts* around), the reading from the Gospel of John (Lazarus rising from the grave), the burial. And just before the coffin descends into the grave, we read Nina's last poetical epiphany, a vision of a small-scale funeral:

Entre deux racines, elle vit une colonne de fourmis ouvrières transportant un papillon renversé sur le dos. Elles se déplaçaient en parfait accord.

[Between two tree-roots she saw a column of worker ants carrying a butterfly in its back. They moved in perfect harmony]³¹.

Writers are tempted by memory as well as by forgetting. Nina is sure that she won't forget her father ("elle pensa qu'elle l'aimerait toujours", 'She thought she was going to love him forever')³². It is her personal mourning, her resolution of happiness: the journey of memory has just begun.

WORKS CITED

- CHEVRIER J. 2007 (ed.). *Nouvelle anthologie africaine d'expression française. La poésie*, Paris: Hatier International.
- DOUBROVSKY S. 1977. *Fils: roman*, Paris: Galilée, 1977.
- ELIAS N. 1985. *The Loneliness of the Dying* [Über die Einsamkeit der Sterbenden, 1982], Oxford: Blackwell.
- FOREST P. 1997. *L'enfant éternel*, Paris: Gallimard.
- 2007. *Le roman, le réel et autres essais*, Nantes: Default.
- FREUD S. 1950. *Mourning and Melancholia* [Trauer und Melancholie, 1917]. *Collected Papers*, vol. IV, London: The Hogarth Press, 1950.
- GIAQUINTO L. 2010. *La janara*, Milano: Adelphi, 2010.

³⁰ Tadjó, 2006, 84 (English translation by Peter S. Thompson; the poems were originally published in 1984).

³¹ Tadjó 2010, 189.

³² *Ibid.*: this is the novel's last sentence.

JEANNERELLE J.-L., VIOLLET, C. 2007. *Genèse et autofiction*. Louvain-la-Neuve: Bruylant-Academia.

MDA Z. 1995. *Ways of Dying*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press S.A.

-- 2002. *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press S.A.

MURGIA M. 2009. *Accabadora*, Torino: Einaudi.

TADJO V. 1992. *À vol d'oiseau*, Paris: L'Harmattan.

-- 2000. *L'ombre d'Imana. Voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda*, Arles: Actes Sud.

-- 2001. *As the Crows Flies*, Oxford: Heinemann.

-- 2004. *Reine Pokou. Concerto pour un sacrifice*, Arles: Actes Sud,

-- 2006. *Red Earth/Latérite*, Washington: Eastern Washington University Press.

-- 2010. *Loin de mon père. Roman*, Arles: Actes Sud.