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# Fashioning Universality in Literature: Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*

**Abstract:** There are two predominant approaches to universality in the contemporary discussion of world literature. The first, rooted in neo-Marxist or Bourdieusian social theory, contends that universality is produced in material processes of circulation and cultural hegemony across the fields of translation and publishing, and through frictions between centres and peripheries. Here, universality is related to norms produced in social and political interactions. A second approach takes recourse to Walter Benjamin and Erich Auerbach and the idea that the anthropological dimension of narration can open up concrete settings towards a shared horizon, humanity and historical justice. In this case, universality, as experience brought to language, “appears” as an emotional and normative possibility that is able to transcend the problems singled out in the first approach. While these understandings are often considered mutually exclusive, the essay argues this is not the case. In his novel *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (*The Most Secret Memory of Men*), 2021 Goncourt Prize winner Mohamed Mbougar Sarr develops a form of rewriting (literary) history cognizant of the material conditions of the European-African relation and its narrative articulation. Taking into account the first approach, Sarr fashions a new, minor form of universality in the reparative process of writing.

**Keywords:** (minor) universality, consciousness of the world, literary field, literary anthropology, repair/reparation, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr

The problem of universality can be addressed from two distinct critical positions. One is based on structuralist or neo-Marxist premises and assumes that universality is produced in material processes of claiming legitimacy – operations of publishing, translation and reception that are always subject to effects of cultural hegemony. Universality, in other words, does not simply emerge: it is produced. And this production is fundamentally structured by power relations that play out on the interna-

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tional market, in economies of perception or through the unequal prestige of different languages and other cultural asymmetries.<sup>1</sup> In this case, “universality” refers to norms that emerge out of political interactions in the broadest sense, and this way of approaching world literature is accordingly interested less in the production of universality in texts themselves than in the mechanisms used to claim social legitimacy for literary works. Pierre Bourdieu laid the foundations for this approach by analysing the emergence of a relatively independent literary field in modernity.<sup>2</sup> Research dealing with the question of universal legitimacy in the globalized world building on Bourdieu’s field theory has thus analysed the concrete connections between economic and cultural capital and related processes for conferring value, dignifying or consecrating works of literature. Some critics have described studies on this spectrum, especially Pascale Casanova’s *République mondiale des lettres*, as “centric”, even though they hardly affirm any relation to cultural centres such as Paris but rather identify and critique such hierarchies precisely as historically constructed through claims of legitimacy. In our context, what Pascale Casanova’s book thus reveals is precisely the historical and political specificity pertaining to the epoch of French universalism.<sup>3</sup>

The second approach draws from thinkers such as Walter Benjamin or Erich Auerbach and asks how the representation of reality in texts is fashioned in such a way as to reveal facets of humanity.<sup>4</sup> Universality in this sense is produced by the anthropological power of literature to open up the specific contexts narrated

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1 See Gisèle Sapiro, ed., *Les contradictions de la globalisation éditoriale* (Paris: Nouveau monde éditeur, 2009); Gisèle Sapiro, “How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)? A Sociological Approach to World Literature”, *Journal of World Literature* 1, no. 1 (2016): 81–96; Gisèle Sapiro, “What Factors Determine the International Circulation of Scholarly Books? The Example of Translations between English and French in the Era of Globalization”, in *The Social and Human Sciences in Global Power Relations*, ed. Johan Heilbron, Gustavo Sorá and Thibaud Boncourt (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 59–93; Gustavo Guerrero, Benjamin Loy and Gesine Müller, eds, *World Editors: Dynamics of Global Publishing and the Latin American Case between the Archive and the Digital Age* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996). On this point, see also Gisèle Sapiro, “Champ(s) de production culturelle”, in *Dictionnaire international Bourdieu*, ed. Gisèle Sapiro (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2020), 133–35.

3 See here, as a response to the international criticism, Casanova’s own reflections in her preface to the 2008 edition of the book. “Préface à l’édition 2008”, in *La République mondiale des lettres*, rev. and corrected edition (Paris: Seuil, 2008), xi–xvi.

4 In the sense in which both Walter Benjamin and Erich Auerbach discern the possibility, in the arrested, single moment of the present, for a sudden appearance of justice and historical truth and humanity. Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), esp. 397

in and through literature towards a shared horizon, and thus to generate a “we” that allows or even claims universality. The experience that this literature brings to language takes shape as an emotional or normative possibility of perceiving and interpreting the world that can transcend or subvert the problems of cultural hegemony and asymmetry singled out by the first approach.<sup>5</sup> What is interesting here is that this second approach does not necessarily aim for the utmost degree of generalization; on the contrary, it often assumes subjectivity as an essential criterion of universal experience, following thinkers such as Roland Barthes.<sup>6</sup> In this view, a literary voice that claims maximum validity for itself does so in essential terms that it can hardly ever manage to justify. But a literary voice that speaks essentially for itself marks a human fragility in a way that can be experienced universally.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, Auerbach’s *Mimesis* can be interpreted as a Hegelian attempt to once again articulate the Western representation of the world before it is absorbed into globalization. Reading Auerbach in this way is certainly one historically possible interpretation, buttressed by his own 1952 essay “Philology and *Weltliteratur*”, which foresaw how the advance of globalization and the standardization it imposes would lead to a loss of such particular formations.<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière has suggested another reading of Auerbach, proposing that the worlding described in *Mimesis* is characterized by a process of individualization that can already be discerned in the biblical Genesis. Rancière finds in (deep) modernity a mode of representing the world that not only elevates reality to a problem (and here, Auerbach is the true protagonist), but even more fundamentally abandons any representation of humanity in terms of ideal types, in the form of heroes or exemplars of social roles, to favour instead individual destinies. In the modern novel, Rancière suggests, an experience that is human – and thus universal – is capable of manifesting itself as “real” in every moment of banal, quotidian exis-

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(17, 18b); Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 525–53.

5 See Markus Messling, *Universality after Universalism: On Francophone Literatures of the Present*, trans. Michael Thomas Taylor (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

6 See Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman (I et II): Cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1978–1979 et 1979–1980)*, ed. Nathalie Léger (Paris: Le Seuil, 2003), 25.

7 See Tzvetan Todorov, “Le dernier Barthes”, *Poétique: Revue de théorie et d’analyse littéraires* 47 (1981): 323–27; Markus Messling, “Mit Barthes: Subjektivität und Universalität”, in *Bilder in Bewegung: Transdisziplinäre Ansichten des Bildlichen zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft*, ed. Patricia Gwozdz, Tobias Kraft and Markus Lenz (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 35–48.

8 Erich Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*”, trans. Maire and Edward Said, *Centennial Review* 13, no. 1 (1969): 1–17.

tence.<sup>9</sup> Auerbach himself invokes this belief in the universal power of individual action in (his own) philological work on the textual archive of literature: literature as he sees it in “Philology and *Weltliteratur*” functions to construct an archive that can be preserved for humanity yet-to-come as an imaginative space of possibility. This would also mean that such a universal power stemming from individual experience can be found in texts that have not yet garnered widespread attention or been consecrated as canonical.<sup>10</sup> It need not be absorbed into a notion of “globalized literature” or abandon its socio-historical contextualization in favour of a superficial cosmopolitanism.<sup>11</sup> That said, this perspective necessarily forces a more complex engagement with the question of what social impact this power might have in cases where it has not been widely perceived and discussed as politically relevant.

As Pieter Vermeulen noted in his witty summary of the 174th Nobel Symposium in August 2022,<sup>12</sup> scholars usually understand these two approaches to the problem of universality as antithetical methodologies. In short: either universality is attributed to literature only on account of its circulation, in which case it is based on external conditions, or it is based on narration as an anthropological phenomenon that can manifest itself regardless of how widely it is read or not. Universality in literature, in other words, lies either in the power of cultural prevalence or in aesthetic potential. While the first possibility has been discussed at

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9 Jacques Rancière, “Auerbach and the Contradiction of Realism”, *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 2 (2018): 227–41.

10 See also Stefan Helgesson, Helena Bodin and Annika Mörte Alling, eds, *Literature and the Making of the World: Cosmopolitan Texts, Vernacular Practices* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022).

11 Gesine Müller and Mariano Siskind have directly addressed to the loss of the emancipatory power inherent in a globalist concept of literature: “The overwhelming sense of political, economic, institutional and humanitarian crisis that defines the state of the world in 2019 (understood as a set of necessary determinations which shapes the conditions of enunciation of academic and intellectual projects) makes it difficult if not impossible to continue to sustain that kind of self-affirming, hubristic culturalist confidence in the political power of world literature as a critico-theoretical frame capable of disrupting the process of neoliberal globalization or the resurgence of nationalistic and racist forms of xenophobia and ethnocentrism, or the disciplinary ability to make sense of the meaning of new kinds of global displacements and dislocations.” “Introduction”, in *World Literature, Cosmopolitanism, Globality: Beyond, Against, Post, Otherwise*, ed. Gesine Müller and Mariano Siskind (Berlin: De Gruyter), 1.

12 On a final panel, Peter Vermeulen and some other colleagues had the difficult task of summarizing the manifold presentations and discussions of the 174th Nobel Symposium, organized by Stefan Helgesson with Helena Bodin, Alice Duhan, Christina Kullberg, Paul Tenngart and Helena Wulff, which took place at the Rönneberga Conference Centre, Lidingö, from 17 to 19 August 2022.

length in Anglo-American debates about world literature,<sup>13</sup> the second has garnered more attention in francophone discourse on *littérature-monde*.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that these two approaches do not necessarily contradict or exclude each other, however, opens up an understanding of literature as cultural practice. In his *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*, Pierre Bourdieu offered one attempt to resolve the traditional contradiction in explanations of human action – and in this case, the focus is on literary action – between sociological objectivism and hermeneutic subjectivism. With his concept of praxis, he aims to bring the material and structural conditions of activity together with an idealistic intention directed towards the future that necessarily inheres in this doing. Seen thus, structure and construction are mutually dependent and hence linked to each other.<sup>15</sup> Yet both aspects of praxis can certainly come into a conscious relation with each other in a person's habitus – and can, in this form, be poetologically worked through in literature.

In Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's successful novel *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*, we see this object–subject dynamic play itself out in and through the narrative.<sup>16</sup> It seeks in this way to assert a universalistic way of thinking after Eurocentric modernity. Written in French, this novel – Sarr's third book – was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 2021. While Chloé Maurel attests to the author a sense for “sociological truth”,<sup>17</sup> the book is emblematic for our epoch inasmuch as it sets out on a shrewd and aesthetically demanding quest to understand, and open up to experience, the conditions of universality after universalism.

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13 See, however, Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World: The Contemporary Novel as Global Form* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), and Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), which asks about the world-creating power of literature through four philosophical modes: idealism, Marxism, phenomenology and deconstruction.

14 See the lucid treatment of the French debate in Camille de Toledo, *Visiter le Flurkistan, ou Les illusions de la littérature-monde* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2008).

15 Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique, précédé de Trois études d'une ethnologie kabyle* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2015), esp. 256–85.

16 Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (Paris: Rey; Dakar: Jimsaan, 2021).

17 Maurel Chloé, review of *Terre ceinte*, by Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, *Recherches Internationales* 122 (2021): 161. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this article are translated by Michael Thomas Taylor.

## Inscriptions

Sarr's awareness of how the publishing world claims international legitimacy is quite clear from the dual publication of his novel – in Paris with Philippe Rey, and in Dakar with Jimsaan. This double labelling marks the history of relations reflected in the book: a cultural ascent to Paris amid a colonially structured world, then a thriving in and through Paris, and finally, today, an intellectual life lived between these worlds. This colonial history between the centre (*la France métropolitaine*) and the periphery (*la Francophonie*) is evoked here in the same form embodied in countless biographies from the (post)colonial world, with the names of prominent Senegalese intellectuals marking significant shifts in the history of these relations over the generations. First, Léopold Sédar Senghor, student at the elite *École normale supérieure* in Paris, philosopher and writer, first Black member of the *Académie française* and first president of Senegal, who was and is often accused by the younger generation of fixation on France.<sup>18</sup> Then, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, himself a *normalien* too, student of Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida, advisor to numerous African and world cultural and educational programmes, with a professorship at Columbia University in New York and a personal relation to the Obamas that point towards a fundamental shift in the centre–periphery problem, characterized by a new triangulation between Dakar, Paris and Chicago/New York.<sup>19</sup> And finally, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr himself, who grew up in Dakar, studied at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in Paris under Gisèle Sapiro, among others, and was the first Senegalese to be awarded France's most important literary prize. Sarr in particular has provoked political criticism in Senegal because of this visibility,<sup>20</sup> and his book elevates the long history of literary relations between France and Senegal to a problem in its own right.

Writing through the lens of literary history, Elara Bertho has elaborated why Sarr rightly identifies the core of this history to be a racially charged denial of legitimacy to African literature by the hegemonic centre in Paris.<sup>21</sup> European liter-

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18 See Mamadou Diouf, Sarah Ligner and Sarah Frioux-Salgas, "Introduction", in *Senghor et les arts: réinventer l'universel* (Paris: Musée du Quai Branly, 2023), 24–28.

19 See the significance of these different places in Souleymane Bachir Diagne's biography, *Le Fagot de ma mémoire* (Paris: Rey, 2021).

20 Specifically because of his earlier novel, *De purs hommes* (Paris: Rey, 2018), on (one) homosexual life and homophobia in African societies. See Jérémie Vaudaux, "Mohamed Mbougar Sarr au cœur d'une polémique homophobe au Sénégal", *Libération*, 3 December 2021, [https://www.libération.fr/international/afrique/mohamed-mbougar-sarr-au-coeur-dune-polemique-homophobe-au-senegal-20211203\\_UAA266LHRVFYNIFYZHT4UHETHM/](https://www.libération.fr/international/afrique/mohamed-mbougar-sarr-au-coeur-dune-polemique-homophobe-au-senegal-20211203_UAA266LHRVFYNIFYZHT4UHETHM/).

21 Elara Bertho, "Écrivains 'noirs' et prix littéraires: enquête et contre-attaque selon Mohamed Mbougar Sarr", *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 77, no. 3 (2022): 491–507. See also Alain Ma-

ature, one can say, is understood to constitute its own tradition precisely through the citation and transformation of material, motifs and procedures, whereas any successes African literature might attain at the heart of the empire are discounted as plagiarism by their inscription into the European literary tradition. Analysing actual events connected to the lives of René Maran (the first African winner of the Goncourt Prize, with *Batouala*, 1921), Bakary Diallo (*Force-Bonté*, 1926), Camara Laye (*Le Regard du roi*, 1954) and especially Yambo Ouologuem's enormous success with *Le Devoir de violence* (1968),<sup>22</sup> Bertho shows how African texts are stereotypically reduced to their ostensible "ethnicity" and "African" ontology, seen as subordinate by a dominant European ethnological gaze, and how this leads to their rejection and prevents their inscription into a discourse of world literature written in French.<sup>23</sup> Bertho speaks of a "systematic undermining of Black novelists' status as authors".<sup>24</sup> While "world literature" is often taken to be the basis of European humanism, African literature is never considered part of this discourse, but always its Other, forced to take on the task of catching up from a putative position of supposed backwardness. Frantz Fanon has shown that the colonial perception can allow nothing else because it would otherwise be compelled to conceive of humanity (and thus its own humanism) as a form of universality that is truly universal.<sup>25</sup>

Sarr's book builds on this history. Dedicated to Yambo Ouologuem, the work is centred on the fictional young Senegalese writer Diégane Latyr Faye, who is in Paris completing a study of an author named T. C. Elimane. This fictional author, based on the historical figure of Ouologuem, is described in the novel as the "Black Rimbaud" ("Rimbaud nègre", 89) of his time – an author who earns both acclaim and infamy in 1938 for the publication of *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*. At first French, and then international critics accuse him of plagiarism, shattering his claim to originality and legitimacy; ultimately, his antagonists attack even his proficiency in speaking and writing French. Elimane leaves France, vanishing from collective memory until his young colleague Faye sets out to find him, convinced that *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain* is the "main path" (67), the "authoritative book" (353).<sup>26</sup>

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banckou, who has in particular pointed out the European ignorance and lack of knowledge about literary relations between the continents in "Lettres noires: Des ténèbres à la lumière" (inaugural lecture, Collège de France, 17 March 2016).

22 For an analysis of Ouologuem's work, to which Sarr's novel makes reference, see Sarah Burnautzki, "Masculinités 'noires' renégociées: Yambo Ouologuem au prisme de ses représentations d'ethnicité et de genre", *HeLix* 6 (2013): 12–35.

23 Bertho, "Écrivains 'noirs'", 497–503.

24 *Ibid.*, 500.

25 See Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, ed. Alice Cherki (Paris: La Découverte, 2002), 46–49.

26 Sarr, *La plus secrète mémoire*; citations are given in parentheses in the text.

Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's awareness of the conditions governing the reception of African literature thus becomes part of the novel's diegesis, as nothing less than a precondition of the narrated world and its evolvment, and the novel consequently reveals to readers the very logics it seeks to escape. Yet beyond elucidating the role that it, and its readers, play in the literary field of production, it can also undertake reparative work on history.<sup>27</sup> This is what *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* shares, in its own unique way, with other great novels of the recent years that bring literature and life together, such as Roberto Bolaño's *Los detectives salvajes* (1998) and *2666* (2004) or Mathias Enard's *Le Banquet annuel de la confrérie des fossoyeurs* (2020).<sup>28</sup>

## Rewritings and Reparations

Through fictional critiques of T. C. Elimane's *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*, *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* unfolds a narrative that compels us to confront its underlying tragedy: it is precisely the highly renowned specialists – Henri de Bobinal, “professor of African ethnology at the Collège de France”, and his colleague Paul-Émile Vaillant, holder of a “chair of literature” – who embody the science of ethnology, the authority claimed by the centre to interpret the colonial periphery, and the supremacy of *belles-lettres* as the archive of French state culture; these are the men who concertedly wield these discourses to publicly castigate T. C. Elimane (103–07). The charge of literary looting (“plagiat”, 105) levelled against Elimane carries a wicked irony in light of the historical looting of African cultures committed by French merchants and soldiers on punitive expeditions. The novel juxtaposes the exclusionary mechanisms of a Eurocentric understanding of culture with the fictional critique articulated by a journalist from the left-wing newspaper *L'Humanité* – a name marking his opinion as the very voice of humanity *tout court* – who insists that all literature lives from tradition: “To be a great writer is perhaps nothing more than the art of knowing how to conceal one's plagiarisms and references” (109). The fictional archaeology of the historical discussion that Diégane constructs step by step is only superficially aimed at producing historical documentation, because the constellation it uncovers in fact makes it possible to occupy positions opposed to the history it reconstructs. The case of Ouologuem and the injustice it represents, which Bertho so clearly describes, are thus replayed and rewritten,

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27 On the reparative functions of contemporary literature, see Alexandre Gefen, *Réparer le monde: la littérature française face au XXIe siècle* (Paris: Corti, 2017).

28 *Los detectives salvajes* is quoted by Sarr as an epigraph in the front matter of his own novel.



given a new form, prompting readers to revise the historical narrative and come to a different judgement. At the same time, the case serves as a subtext to Diégane's unbridled discussions with the "young guard of African writers living in Paris", who are being confronted with the question of what it means to write while struggling for their independence (61–67).

The inner liberation from the dominance of history does not, however, stop there. T. C. Elimane's critics all die after 1938, the same year in which *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain* was published, and even before the German occupation; six journalists involved in the attacks eventually kill themselves; the ethnologist Bobinal dies of a heart attack. The critic Bollème, Elimane's erstwhile lover, confesses to Siga D., Diégane's cousin and a central figure in the literary scene, that she is convinced Elimane killed them all (272–77). "Not himself, no doubt. But I'm certain he drove them to suicide. How, you ask? Through psychological harassment" (276). Literary defence is transformed here into a violent counter-attack. The integrity of the human subject is repaired by a force that recoups, in the novel's diegesis, a quality that had proven impossible to attain in the reality of history: the power of sovereignty.

The narrated world thus sets the conditions for an idealistic surplus to emerge over and beyond material structures. The knowledge possessed by the novel lies not only in its awareness of historical asymmetries, but in the reparative power of narration to deal with the irreparable dimensions of human experience, as a necessary prerequisite for a relationship among equals that has been absent from history. Literature must first free itself from the claim of a certain literary humanism whose effects have ultimately been exclusionary. And yet, it remains worth noting that the reader can only guess that the avenger is Elimane. Several episodes serve to crisply hint at the danger (the strange death of Denise, a dancer at Vautrin, the same Parisian table-dance bar where Siga D. had worked in the 1980s, after Denise met a mysterious client . . . ; 288–322), but the tension is not resolved in any visible, perceptible way. The story offers no superhero who will unleash a bloodbath of retribution, as we find in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. Rather, as Bollème says, it was a "black magic" (276) – a shadow of Elimane, a psychological presence – that had prevented his attackers from eluding punishment, as if their guilt had eroded their consciousness from within. This presence is narrated by those who were friends with Elimane. It functions as a kind of empty centre structuring Diégane's investigations to find the mysterious author and his text. And it is thus at once a motif for action and a poetic dynamic: Diégane's search for Elimane is Sarr's search for the possibilities of true literature.

## Minor Universality: Literature and Life

The implications of Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s concept of a “lateral universality of translation”<sup>29</sup> concern the question of how one might translate real lives of human beings into understandable forms. How might a process of reparation be unfolded out of a concrete context to create a consciousness of the world pointing to what divides *and* unites humanity? What is it that produces “true”, universal literature? Sarr’s novel poses this question in the guise of an enquiry into how literature is generated, fashioned, out of concrete life experience, exploring two possible answers in its diegesis: Diégane Latyr Faye and his best friend, Musimbwa, both of them emerging writers, take opposite paths in deciding whether their search for a universal force within literature lies in turning towards, or abstracting from, their own lives. Does their literary task concern the vulnerability and reparation of the self? Or is it, conversely, about writing true literature through a process of abstraction that attenuates the effect of identity? Wherein lies the truth of an intellectual activity that defines its highest expression as world literature – which is to say, as true literature about the world?

For Diégane, clarity comes swiftly: he is drawn into the vortex of perfection centred on Elimane’s novel; he becomes driven by the question of how to rediscover it, revive its power, possess it even – as though such a thing were possible. Musimbwa follows another path: “All this deserves a book, he said. You know it,” he says to Diégane. “I would have liked to accompany you on this adventure, but I can’t. I’ve been doing a lot of thinking over the last few days. It’s a different book that I have in mind. I’m going back to the DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo]. I don’t know if I’m ready, but I have to go” (96). In searching to find themselves, the two writers come under the sway of various forces, material and ideal:

- What made you become a writer, Faye? Looking back, would you be able to single out one event where you would say: this is the origin of my writing?
- It’s hard to say. Maybe my reading. But I don’t know if that counts. I don’t have a powerful founding story. (97)

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<sup>29</sup> See Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Jean-Loup Amselle, *En quête d’Afrique(s): universalisme et pensée décoloniale* (Paris: Michel, 2018), 76; Souleymane Bachir Diagne, “L’universel latéral comme traduction”, in *Les Pluriels de Barbara Cassin, ou Le Partage des équivoques*, ed. Philippe Büttgen, Michèle Gendreau-Massaloux and Xavier North (Lormont: Le Bord de l’eau, 2014), 243–56.

The conversation unfolds out of movement, on a night-time stroll through the city that performatively articulates the question, the search, being pursued by the young men. Recast as a theoretical discourse, their exchange could be translated as a discussion of materialism and idealism in the justification of literature. What comprises the core, they are asking, the truth of universal literature? Must literature be rooted in something structural, essential, identitarian? Or can it be founded through inscription into a history of dissolving boundaries? And what is the relationship of this question to the indispensable repair of the self?

In describing a night spent together by the young group of Parisian writers, the novel symbolically reveals that both men are not truly free in their decisions: having invited Diégane and Musimbwa to dinner, Béatrice Nanga proposes that they all join together in a “fabulous threesome” after the meal. Here, she takes on the role of muse, of an ember of the literary ambitions harboured by her guests. While Musimbwa – “like a sleepwalking dog” – seizes this chance, Diégane does not answer the call but succumbs – “a bit sadly” – to pensive rumination about literature and its Christological imaginaries and the further analysis this prompts (74–80). *Ecce homo*: incapable of literature, incapable of life – just where might something truly human shine forth?

Mohamed Mbougar Sarr skilfully stages this scene as the starting point of his poetological novel. It appears as a *mise en abyme* of Diégane’s confrontation with the “mother” of his literary creativity, Siga D., who had called out to him: “You can’t live in the moment and write about it at the same time.” He defended himself: “Of course you can. You can. That’s what it means to live as a writer. Make every moment of life a writing moment. See everything through a writer’s eyes and . . .” (suspension points in original). Her retort: “That’s your mistake. That’s the mistake that guys like you make. You think literature corrects life. Or completes it. Or replaces it. It doesn’t. Writers, and I’ve known a lot of them, have always been among the most mediocre lovers I’ve ever met. And do you know why? When they make love, they’re already thinking about the scene this experience will become . . . It’s life that counts. The work only comes later” (34–35). The entire novel follows this insight: what is universal in literature lies in the successful translation of life into literature. And yet, this does not succeed through any kind of immediacy, of “authenticity”, but in the translation of life as it is actually lived into a narrative. Literature is knowledge *in* and *of* experience.<sup>30</sup> From this point on, the novel fashions the search of the two friends as an attempt to generate this new form of universality – as an attempt that must be constructed anew

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30 Ottmar Ette, “Literature as Knowledge for Living, Literary Studies as Science for Living”, *PMLA* 4, no. 125 (2010): 977–93.

because it cannot simply be founded in tradition. As Diégane then struggles to find this new form, the novel constructs what we might call a *minor universality* – a universality that cannot be assumed in conceptual terms but takes shape as the goal that emerges when the ideal of humanity is transformed into a narrative quest.<sup>31</sup> Diégane wrests this universality from a painful negotiation between being and writing.

After a long silence, Musimbwa will finally open up in a letter to Diégane about the horror he experienced as a child: both of his parents were viciously murdered by a militia, an after-effect of stubbornly persistent colonial structures and the social destruction they have wrought. Musimbwa confesses to Diégane that he will stay in Congo, where he has found his place, and that it is from this place of his traumatic experience that he will pursue his writing and work to help repair society:

I know that you will disagree with what I am saying to you: you've always thought that our cultural ambiguity was our true space, our dwelling, which we must inhabit as best we can, accepting our tragic selves, as civilizational bastards, bastards of bastards, bastards born from the rape of our history by another, murderous one. Yet I fear that what you call ambiguity might just be another ruse in our ongoing destruction. I also know that you will think I have changed, from the one who believed that as a writer your value is not made by the place from which you write, that you can achieve universality from anywhere if you have something to say. That's still something I still believe. And yet I now also believe that everywhere is not a place where you can discover what you have to say. (424)

Musimbwa claims the very place where he was wounded as the site of his identity. He chooses an engaged way of writing, chooses life and the task of repairing it. And in contrast to a kind of social responsibility that arises from proximity and belonging, he discounts as toothless the position of cultural mediation, of the experience of writing between worlds. In short: he opts for a postcolonial counter-discourse rooted in the wounded self, one which does not completely abandon the ideal of universal validity and yet also pushes the universal out of reach, declares it to be a “ruse” (of Europe? of power in general? of the passage of time?) that serves to threaten any authenticity of the self.

Diégane, too, works from a place rooted in his own grievances in confronting the question of individual wounds. But he learned from Siga D. to take another stance on the problem, as she would tell him this: “Then, much later, I understood: having a wound doesn't mean you have to write about it. It doesn't even

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31 On the concept of minor universality, see Messling, *Universality after Universalism*, 1–30; Markus Messling and Jonas Tinius, “On Minor Universality”, in *Minor Universality: Rethinking Humanity after Western Universalism/Universalité mineure: penser l'humanité après l'universalisme occidental*, ed. Markus Messling and Jonas Tinius (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 1–31.

mean you have to think about writing about it. And I'm not talking about being able to do so. Is time a killer? Yes. It shatters the illusion we carry within ourselves that our wounds are unique. They are not. No wound is unique. Nothing human is unique. Over time, everything becomes horribly common. That is the dead end; yet in this dead end, literature has a chance to be born" (284). Against the background of Musimbwa's history, Siga D.'s assessment sounds harsh. But it is not that she takes individual experience to be irrelevant. On the contrary, this is why she tells Diégane her life story and all about how she started to search for Elimane. Faced with a suffering that spans the globe, she deems it neither special nor singular. Yet this view is concerned not with the impact of wounds on individual lives but with how they might become exemplary in a literary form. And it is possible for them to do so precisely because individual suffering is not "unique", you might say: not alone, but points to the general fragility of human beings. The power of literature lies not in how it positions the particular but in how the particular manages to break through its isolation to become a shared experience. In short: Diégane rejects forms of the postcolonial discourse turning towards cultural authenticity, invoking instead the universalizing power of narration.

And this is the source of the novel's tremendous relevance and wisdom in posing one of the central questions of our time: How it might be possible to bring together a repair of the self that has been destroyed by colonialism and a search for what connects human beings. Is literature inescapably linked to identity? Or does it possess a universal mission rooted in its own, unique aesthetic value?

The discourse Diégane constructs out of the turmoil he himself ultimately experiences while searching for Elimane in Senegal is a plea for anti-essentialism: "Are things any different today? Is it literature that we are talking about, aesthetic value? Or is it people, their tan, their voice, their age, their hair, their dog, the hairs of their pussy, the style of their home, the colour of their jacket? Is it your way of writing we are talking about or your identity? Your style or the way the media makes it? Literary creation or your sense of yourself?" (308). In Senegal, however, Diégane is overcome by doubts about his position, while the country erupts into unrest after a young woman self-immolates. What power does literature really have in the face of "social suffering" and of the "aspiration for essential dignity" (353)?

## Openings

This doubt is fundamentally inscribed into the book, in that there are no easy answers to the big questions. Whatever the book negotiates on the level of its diegesis is suspended, undone, by its form.

If Bertho rightly emphasizes that “even in its borrowings, Mbougar Sarr’s work tends toward a radical anti-essentialism”,<sup>32</sup> then the basic poetic principle of the novel remains a resistance to any completion. The narrative of the search for Elimane remains confused, even enigmatic at times. The structure of its narrative technique is that of an *enquête* – an investigative search for an author who represents the possibility of true literature yet ultimately remains mere traces. In its heyday during the nineteenth century, the *enquête* and its paradigmatic expression in literary naturalism stood for a process that would unfold a single case as pathologically representative of society as a whole, thereby restoring a supposed totality (of the nation). Sarr’s procedure, by contrast, corresponds to the realism of our time, in which this mode of investigation can no longer presuppose any whole in this sense: “The real is precisely that which must be *given form* in a tenacious work of critical investigation and figurative hypothesis, in an attempt to grasp what eludes us.”<sup>33</sup> What structurally eludes us again and again, in this realistic narrative peppered with markers of documentary reality, is how life and literature might be successfully brought together to form something universal. Literature cannot solve the problem of conceptually determining true literature, now that the concept of Western humanism has been stripped of its legitimacy; it must narratively delineate, in multiple attempts, the challenge this concept poses.

The impossibility of completing the narrative refers, on a formal level, to the impossibility of bringing the problem to a close. Of course, the narrative does in some sense come to an “end”: Diégane finds the last place where Elimane was living, as well as the manuscript of his second book, left behind after his death and keenly anticipated by the entire world. Yet Diégane ultimately decides not to publish the book, disregarding the instructions of its author’s last will and testament. Diégane breaks this trust placed in him because he believes the text is too beholden to an identitarian project of seeking to find the self, that it holds too little universal validity. For him, such validity arises instead from a restlessness, a search that cannot be concluded: “Madag will come to see me one night to hold me accountable, perhaps to avenge himself, I know it; and his ghost, walking toward me, will whis-

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<sup>32</sup> Bertho, “Écrivains ‘noirs’”, 504.

<sup>33</sup> Laurent Demanze, *Un nouvel âge de l'enquête: portraits de l'écrivain contemporain en enquêteur* (Paris: Corti, 2019), 20 (emphasis in original).

per the terms of the terrible existential alternative that was the dilemma of his life; the alternative that provokes hesitation in the heart of anyone haunted by literature: to write, not to write” (456). Elimane had finally found himself, but in the process had lost the power of literature. The novel expresses this failure on the formal level, in that the last sentence not only refrains from clarifying the dilemma at the root of the situation but in fact suspends it through a poetic formula reminiscent of Shakespeare’s “to be, or not to be”. Spoken out loud to oneself, in the mind, this is a statement that seems to become a question, almost referring back to the beginning of the story: everything is clarified, nothing is clarified. Here, what Diégane sees as the universal power of literature shines through: formulating the interminable search for what it means to be human. The validity of literature follows from this anthropological necessity. Literature unfolds no logic of “either/or” but seeks to translate this contradiction into a possibility making it possible to subvert, in ideal terms, the identitarian, social and economic logics of the world. Mohamed Mbougar Sarr plays out this possibility on every level of his novel. The minor universality that *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* unfolds thus points to the function of literature for our understanding of what might be “universal”.

This novel is indeed great literature. And once again, we would like to believe that this truth has been heard and that *this* is the reason the novel received the Goncourt – and not that this truth was heard *because* the novel received the Goncourt. The book itself is aware of just how unlikely this is. What it shows us, then, is that the world must change. And this brings us back to the beginning of the text.

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