Lyric and Memory: Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's "Tristesse"

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Accounts of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's poetry tend to foreground above all the question of gender. Nineteenth-century poets such as Sainte-Beuve and Baudelaire viewed her as conforming to a stereotypically feminine role–natural, maternal, melancholic, and passive–and this perception persists in more recent criticism, such as Wendy Greenberg's *Uncanonical Women* (106-107). However, commentators such as Michael Danahy, Christine Planté and Edward Kaplan have shown how she challenged the male model of poetic authority, and increasingly the critical focus has been on the manner in which her poetry itself dramatizes this tension between acquiescence and resistance, as explored in very different ways by Barbara Johnson, Gretchen Schultz and Aimée Boutin. At the same time, the formal innovations of her verse are being considered on their own terms, for instance by Michael Danahy, Laurence Porter and Aimée Boutin. It is essential that any assessment of her conformity to gender stereotypes and her place in the Romantic tradition take full account of the form as well as the content of the verse, as rightly emphasized by Planté (86). Her originality can only be truly assessed through close textual analysis, as this article will demonstrate through a reading of the poem "Tristesse", a complex reflection on memory written in 1832 (1: 215-17).

It is particularly important to read Desbordes-Valmore's poems as complete texts rather than selecting isolated extracts, because one of the criticisms frequently made of her verse is that it is incoherent or uneven, and this view can only be challenged if her poems are analysed as wholes, just as those by her male contemporaries routinely are. It is in large part because her works are read in fragments that her poetic strategies are insufficiently understood. "Tristesse" has

received surprisingly little critical attention but is a fine example of her distinct and intricate lyric approach to the relationship between memory and creativity.

"Tristesse" combines many of the major Romantic themes addressed by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore's contemporaries, but presents them from a strikingly different perspective. Included in her collection *Les Pleurs*, published in 1833, at a moment when her reputation as a poet was growing, it displays an ambition to move away from her earliest sentimental, exclamatory mode towards a more self-consciously structured, meditative kind of verse.[1] Spoken by a passionate first person nostalgically recalling her childhood home, "Tristesse" explores the difficulty of remembering and the ways in which both the speaker and the place have changed.[2] The abstract noun of the title presents sadness as a general experience, but the absence of an article reduces its force as a universal. Indeed, the way the poem relates particular feelings to general reflections is central to its interest.

The poem consists of alexandrines arranged in twenty-two stanzas, each of five lines with an *abaab* rhyme scheme. The speaker opens with a stanza asking why it is so painful to remember her childhood, and answers first with three stanzas describing in abstract terms how remembering involves reliving past suffering, and then with seventeen stanzas evoking memories of her childhood home. These begin with a detailed description of connections to the surrounding landscape and build up to the reliving of two key moments: a day when her father collected her from school and an ecstatic day of festivities enjoyed with her childhood friend Albertine. What began as a lament at lost innocence turns into a celebration of the creative power of

[1] Sainte-Beuve noted this development at the time (252-53). Eliane Jasenas views *Les Pleurs* as a more ambitious volume than the subsequent *Pauvres fleurs* (52).
[2] The theme of remembering this childhood home was to become a recurrent one in her later poems, such as "La Maison de ma mère" and "Sol natal" in *Pauvres fleurs*.

memory. The poem closes with a repetition of the first stanza, which has been transformed by the intervening stanzas from protest into acceptance.

Bertrand's notes explicate the poem with reference to its author's biography (1: 349-350) but its main interest derives from the way it reworks a Romantic topos. By beginning with a meditation on memory and proceeding to contemplate changes in a particular scene, it reverses the conventional strategy of taking external particulars as a starting point for abstract reflection. As I shall show, the poem starts from a fundamental understanding that the past is already internalized rather than imagining it could be recovered from the landscape. It also narrates the gradual unearthing of a specific memory of a festive day, which seems to take the speaker by surprise at the end, being expressed in a series of exclamations, and so, rather than just recounting recollections, the poem presents the working of memory as an involuntary process. My reading will explore how the poem combines these two elements.

The structure that I have just outlined is particularly apparent if one views "Tristesse" as a variant of what Abrams calls the "Greater Romantic Lyric", a poem in which a speaker observes a particular setting and "an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely intervolved with the outer scene" (201). The landscape description in "Tristesse" only begins in the fifth stanza but from that point on it follows the structure closely. Abrams' survey of the genre concentrates on works in English such as Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey", but well-known French examples are Lamartine's "Le Lac" (1817) and Victor Hugo's "Tristesse d'Olympio" (1837), in both of which a solitary speaker returns to a scene where he had previously

experienced happiness with a lover who is now lost or absent.[3] These poems have a clear, linear sense of time, recalling past pleasure in a mood of sorrow, and explore the relationship between the poet's mind and the natural word. The speaker of "Le Lac" finds the natural scene remains unchanged despite his grief and appeals to it to hold the memory of the privileged moment:

> Ô lac! rochers muets! grottes! forêt obscure!
> Vous, que le temps épargne ou qu'il peut rajeunir,
> Gardez de cette nuit, gardez, belle nature,
> Au moins le souvenir!

Hugo's Olympio notices only changes in the setting and laments that nature has not held the memory of his joy ("Nature au front serein, comme vous oubliez!"), before recognizing that the memory is actually retained within himself. These male speakers address nature as though it were a vessel which could preserve aspects of themselves, and thus establish a dynamic of tension between inner and outer worlds.[4] Desbordes-Valmore's "Tristesse" presents a very different model of remembering.

Firstly, the speaker of "Tristesse" does not evoke sorrow at the absence of a lover but grief for both her mother and her childhood friend.[5] These are not passive companions to a male poet but an organic part of the world in which the female poet grew up, making very concrete the analogy between nature and mother implicit in

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[3] See Lloyd Bishop and Patricia Ward for readings of, respectively, "Le Lac" and "Tristesse D'Olympio" as instances of the Greater Romantic Lyric.

[4] Georges Poulet captures this kind of tension in his desciption of the position of the Romantic hero: "Mais prendre conscience de son isolement, c'est se trouver en présence d'un nouveau mystère. Si la nature externe devient énigmatique à nos yeux dans la mesure même où elle nous devient étrangère, c'est au contraire dans la mesure même où nous prenons plus vivement conscience de nous-mêmes que notre moi se charge pour nous de mystère." (173)

[5] Where her earliest poems are above all about yearning for absent lovers, the emphasis in *Les Pleurs* begins to shift towards her relationship with her mother.

much Romantic verse.[6] The mother is not represented directly but defines the landscape – the speaker begins by expressing nostalgia for "l'enclos de ma mère" (line 1) and describes the place as "ma natale" (21).[7] Boutin points out that the landscape of Desbordes-Valmore's birthplace is often represented as a maternal body (112), and here the primary lost object is literally identified with the natural scene. In Romantic poems which depict a speaker's evolving relationship with a landscape, the unstable self often tries "to borrow […] the temporal stability that it lacks from nature" (de Man 197). Desbordes-Valmore does not so much seek to anchor the self in something more permanent as to recognize the flux of which it is a part and which will ultimately feed its creativity.

Secondly, "Tristesse" undercuts a linear sense of time and in particular the notion that childhood is idyllic. This myth is encapsulated in the epigraph, attributed to "Un auteur anglais":

> Une fille est née dans la classe du peuple, et malgré le triste avenir qui lui est réservé, sa naissance a été accuillie comme un joyeux événement.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Elle est heureuse, car le soleil brille, la pluie tombe, l'arc-en-ciel étend ses couleurs, et les oiseaux chantent pour elle. Son sommeil est profond et doux, ses jeux gais et vifs, son pain délicieux! Elle ne sait pas le secret d'être mécontente de ce qu'elle possède.

The epigraph has the effect of setting out the pleasures of childhood in the present tense, suggesting they could be directly accessed. By referring to the girl's class, it also situates a poem about personal loss in a social context and invites us to view its

[6] Schultz observes that Desbordes-Valmore distances herself from the subject positions of male poets - instead of standing at a distance and looking at the sea, she is concerned with proximity. For example in "L'eau douce" the subject speaks as a stream who addresses the passing poet. (61-71).
[7] Quotations from poems will be followed by line numbers in brackets.

speaker as representative of a larger group. The quotation is taken from a story by the English poet James Montgomery, which recounts the life of a woman whose childhood and adulthood alike are characterized by material hardship, and highlights the limitations this poverty imposed on the woman's desires.[8] It is striking that Desbordes-Valmore selects from this political text two isolated references to the child taking consolation in nature, because in fact this myth of childhood innocence is undercut by the rest of Montgomery's story. It will also be challenged in a different way by "Tristesse", in which the speaker recalls how as a child she was unsure of her own voice and preoccupied with mortality.

The third way in which "Tristesse" stands out from poems by contemporaries is through its ambiguity about how the speaker is positioned physically in relation to the landscape. Although much of the poem explores the kind of tension between the remembered landscape and the picture before the eye that Abrams discusses (206), these two images constantly blend into each other. The opening questions imply that the speaker is both temporally and spatially remote from the place, opening with "N'irai je plus courir dans l'enclos de ma mère?" Even when the poem attends closely to the landscape, from the start of the fifth stanza, the speaker's position is indeterminate:

> Vous aussi, ma natale, on vous a bien changée!
>
> Oui! Quand mon cœur remonte à vos gothiques tours (21-22)

Line 21 suggests that she is observing a familiar place but line 22 suggests she is only seeing it in her mind's eye. By the end of this stanza, "ma natale" has been transmuted into the purely temporal "maternel séjour" (25). This blurring of temporal and spatial

[8] The original story was entitled "Old Women" and the abridged French version was entitled "La Vie d'une femme du peuple". Sainte-Beuve views the quantity of epigraphs in *Les Pleurs* as a sign of its author having read widely since writing her first poems and having absorbed a range of influences (252-53).

dimensions suggests that the loss is not so much of a place but of the time of childhood spent close to her mother. When the poem goes on to examine specific contrasts between the landscape in the past and present, sometimes it seems as though the speaker has physically returned to the place in the present, for instance "N'a-t-on pas détruit cette vigne oubliée" (61) and "Notre-Dame! Aujourd'hui belle et retentissante, /Triste alors, quel secret m'avez vous dit tout bas?" (71-2). At others, she seems to be remembering the landscape from a position of exile: "Et ne jamais revoir ce mur où la lumière / Dessinait Dieu visible à ma jeune raison!" (76-77), only then to observe differences as if the scene were before her eyes, noting that a well has dried up (84). It is through these shifts in perspective that the poem suggests that the past has already been internalized.

By problematizing spatial references, "Tristesse" forces us to focus on temporality, and its attention to the very process of retrieving memories is the fourth aspect of the poem which is strikingly different from the comparable poems by Lamartine and Hugo. This emphasis on process is apparent both in the general description of remembering at the start and in the later account of how a particular landscape triggers memories of events. I shall examine these two aspects of the poem in turn, to show how its form articulates the workings of memory and, as a consequence, also suggests a particular model of creativity.

The opening stanza is typical of the exclamatory style of Desbordes-Valmore's early verse, expressing pain in a series of questions:

N'irai-je plus courir dans l'enclos de ma mère?

N'irai-je plus m'asseoir sur les tombes en fleurs?

D'où vient que des beaux ans la mémoire est amère?

D'où vient qu'on aime tant une joie éphémère?

D'où vient que d'en parler ma voix se fond en pleurs? (1-5)

However, these lines anticipate all the key elements of "Tristesse", the questions suggesting both a desire to return to childhood and an awareness that this is impossible. Playing amongst graves undercuts the illusion that childhood is pure innocence. The reference to poetic speech in line 5 anticipates the preoccupation with creativity which the poem will go on to explore. The word "mère" generates the subsequent feminine rhymes of the stanza, and in the *abaab* scheme, the *a* rhymes are (with one exception) feminine and thus dominate the poem as a whole. One effect of this scheme is that at the fourth line the masculine rhyme one might expect to return is deferred, and the poem surprises the reader by offering repetition of the same where difference was anticipated. This surprise is greatest in the first stanza, where the repetition serves to prolong the echo of the mother's name.

The next three stanzas offer a more general reflection on memory in the third person. The first offers echoes the myth of the idealized past evoked in the epigraph, and suggest that an unsullied memory of the past can be recovered by traversing more recent suffering. The second specifies that the recent sorrows are disappointments in love, playing on the imagery of Cupid's arrows and reworking the cliché of the bleeding heart:

Quel effroi de ramper au fond de sa mémoire,
D'ensanglanter son cœur aux dards qui l'ont blessé,
De rapprendre un affront que l'on crut effacé,
Que le temps… que le ciel a dit de ne plus croire,
Et qui siffle aux lieux même où la flèche a passé! (11-15)

It is the process of remembering which causes the bleeding, for the remembering subject is not a passive victim of her emotions but actively confronts the past. Pain is simultaneously past and present; the person remembering is the subject of "ensanglanter", which is in parallel to "ramper" and thus part of the present recollection, but the arrows which inflict the damage belong in the past.[9] This stanza is uncomfortable in both its sense and form, being the only one to deviate from the rhyme scheme, and the masculine rhyme of line 13 has the effect of adding insult to injury, denoting forgetting whilst phonetically recalling the hurt. The speaker names "le temps" as a source of consolation before correcting it to "le ciel" (14), as though acknowledging that time heals as much as it destroys, an unusual qualification in a poem lamenting transience.

The poem goes on to translate this experience of reliving past suffering into terms associated with language. Hearing certain words can be enough to reawaken painful memories: "Qui n'a pas un écho cruellement sonore,/ Jetant par intervalle un nom que l'âme abhorre" (18-19). In this negative form of involuntary memory, language has the capacity to hurt. However, the poem as a whole demonstrates the power of language to overcome precisely those losses which cause so much pain. If the younger self was vulnerable to verbal insults, the mature poet can inhabit the realm of language and master it. Aimée Boutin has shown how Desbordes-Valmore represents memory working to restore the lost reciprocity between mother and infant, and how this idealized past bond continues to inform the present (130). In "Tristesse", remembering both re-enacts separation and affirms the power of language, displaying the kind of dynamic relationship between mourning and creation explored by Julia

[9] As Clive Scott says: in poetry "the thing remembered and the process of remembering constantly intermingle and displace each other." (99).

Kristeva.[10] The articulation of this struggle takes a particularly unusual form in the pivotal fifth and sixth stanzas, and this dense passage calls for close analysis:

Vous aussi, ma natale, on vous a bien changée!
Oui! Quand mon cœur remonte à vos gothiques tours,
Qu'il traverse, rêveur, notre absence affligée,
Il ne reconnaît plus la grâce négligée
Qui donne tant de charme au maternel séjour!

Il voit rire un jardin sur l'étroit cimetière,
Où la lune souvent me prenait à genoux;
L'ironie embaumée a remplacé la pierre
Où j'allais, d'une tombe indigente héritière,
Relire ma croyance au dernier rendez-vous! (21-30)

We have already seen how the fifth stanza positions the speaker as simultaneously addressing a place in the present and a time in the past, but it also emphasizes the figural nature of language. "Gothiques tours" indicates a solid external reality, and the age of the towers connects the present to both the recent and remote past, but "tours" also means "turns", underlined by its position at the line ending, and drawing attention to a turning-point in the verse itself. The language thus increasingly applies to the inward time of the psyche. "Remonter" literally means to climb back up, but recalls idiomatic expressions relating to memory, such as "les souvenirs remontent à la mémoire", "remonter à travers les ans", or "remonter à la source", and thus could denote a move back in time as well as a vertical ascent of the towers. Desbordes-

[10] "La création littéraire est cette aventure du corps et des signes qui porte témoignage de l'affect: de la tristesse, comme marque de la séparation et comme amorce de la dimension du symbole; de la joie, comme marque du triomphe qui m'installe dans l'univers de l'artifice et du symbole que j'essaie de faire correspondre au mieux à mes expériences de la réalité." (32)

Valmore creates an uncertain temporality by playing on the ambivalence of the prefix "re-", which can indicate an action undertaken repeatedly in the past or an action in the present which either supersedes that of the past or which merely echoes it. Furthermore, in line 23, "traverse" self-reflexively contains the word *vers*, which is then phonetically reversed in "rêveur", simultaneously suggesting a parallel between verse and dream and a parallel between geographical crossing and psychological visualizing. Verse is a medium which unfolds in time and relies on the reader's memory of sound to create meanings, and the rhymes reinforce the blurring of time and space: the architectural "tours" rhymes with the temporal "séjour", as does "cimetière" with "héritière". The conjunction of concrete landscape with ambiguous sense here reflects what Sainte-Beuve observes of *Les Pleurs* as a whole: where Desbordes-Valmore's early poetry has "un ton vaporeux, pas de couleur précise, pas de dessin" (248), this volume has both a more distinct "paysage" and a tendency to greater elusiveness of meaning; he notes "cette obscurité de sens au milieu et à cause de plus de couleur." (252)

Where line 23 insinuates doubt about the presence of the speaker through the verb "remonter", line 24 does so though the noun "absence", which describes an abstract notion as a physical space. As the speaker's heart can cross this space, the construction simultaneously affirms both her presence and absence. Furthermore, Desbordes-Valmore, who often plays on pronouns, uses a plural "notre" here, suggesting that the speaker is including someone with her in her absence, possibly her dead mother. "Affligé" would be a commonplace adjective qualifying a heart, but here the affliction is transposed from the subject to the abstract notion of absence, indicating that this very gap is the source of the pain. This is a good example of the kind of intellectual control that Porter notes in Desbordes-Valmore, saying that she

combines “the ostensible helplessness of emotion with the mastery of analysis” in a way which goes beyond the limits of the “feminine” stereotype (187-8).

What is sought is the lost security of infancy; an apparent longing for a place turns out to be a longing for the time spent close to the mother, just as “ma natale” became “le maternel séjour”. Nostalgia was generally conceptualized spatially as a yearning for the place of origin, but some have argued that it is as much a longing for the past, with Julia Kristeva going so far as to say that what is desired is a representation which exists only in memory, in the imaginative space of the psyche and not in physical space (71).[11] “Tristesse” certainly draws attention to its own status as a constructed image of intimacy which is not a direct reflection of either a single place or a time. “Maternel séjour’ fuses mother and daughter in a play on the religious expression “terrestre séjour”, which emphasizes the transience of this time. The “maternel séjour” is a lost paradise for the daughter but nonetheless exists for the next generation—as Danahy and Boutin have shown, many of Desbordes-Valmore’s poems depict the mother from the perspective of a daughter who has children of her own.

The sixth stanza describes how the speaker’s childhood was already marked by an awareness of mortality, and is linguistically even more strange than the fifth, partly because of the continued play on pronouns; the speaker refers to her present self as “il” because she is still using the synecdoche “mon cœur”. The third person masculine splits off from her past self, which is referred to in the first person in lines 27 and 29 (the second time with a feminine agreement). Strangeness also results from the continuing difficulty of distinguishing past from present, which arises partly from the inversion admired by Aragon: “ ‘Une ironie qui remplace une pierre où Madame

[11] Kristeva draws on Kant’s and Starobinksi’s discussions of nostalgia as a longing for youth itself (71). Michael Roth views the fascination with history in the early nineteenth century as an indication that nostalgia is a temporal phenomenon (279).

va relire une croyance à un rendez-vous!' Je vois d'ici danser le ventre du commentateur *ex cathedra*, et pourtant ceci est la poésie" (10). Things of recent date are named before things which pre-existed them, but it is not immediately clear if the latter are replaced or simply overshadowed.

The present tense of "voit rire" (26) suggests the speaker is physically present in the scene, and the indefinite article of "un jardin" suggests it is being seen for the first time, but this seeing might be purely in the mind's eye, since "voit rire" suggests a repeated action, implying she can call up the scene when she chooses. The statement that a garden is laughing at a cemetery does not specify the temporal or spatial relationship between the two sites (26), although it is subsequently clarified that the cemetery has been replaced, in a formulation which refers to the garden with the metaphor "ironie embaumée". (28). "Embaumée" has a double sense: meaning "perfumed", it belongs in the paradigm of the garden and meaning "embalmed" belongs in that of the cemetery. The word straddles the sense systems of life and death, suggesting that despite the ostensible lament the cemetery persists in the garden which replaces it. While the speaker's awareness of mortality might seem at odds with the myth of idyllic childhood, the poem celebrates connections with the past as part of its acceptance of what is lost.

The speaker further regrets the loss of the cemetery in the seventh stanza, which refers explicitly to a physical return in the present: "Tristesse! après longtemps revenir isolée,/ Rapporter de sa vie un compte douloureux".[12] The nostalgia for a cemetery reflects a sentiment expressed in "Le Mal du pays" as "Je veux aller mourir aux lieux où je suis née". (1: 217). Danahy suggests the cemetery is not threatening for Desbordes-Valmore because of the number of people close to her who are buried

[12] As Danahy notes (137), the speaker describes her present self in the feminine with "isolée', but the following stanza describes the child she was in the masculine: "Mais cet enfant qui joue et dort sur la vie" and "Ce pauvre enfant heureux".

there; different aspects of the poet, as mother, child she was and child she had, are all united in the earth (142).[13] Boutin shows that her approach to the image of the maternal tomb reflects a cyclical view of time, as exemplified in "La Tombe lointaine", a poem that celebrates her mother as the source of her own continuing life (129). That poem also suggests that her own adult voice reminds her of her mother's voice in the past:

> Par instant si je pleure,
> A des sons de ma voix,
> C'est que'elle est à cette heure,
> La tienne d'autrefois!
> C'est qu'elle est de deux âmes,
> L'impalpable ciment. (2: 431)

Echoes of her mother's voice certainly resonate through Desbordes-Valmore's writing,[14] and this description of weeping at the sound of her own voice resembles one of the opening questions of "Tristesse", "D'où vient que d'en parler ma voix se fond en pleurs?" (5), as though the speaker were simultaneously speaking of and hearing her mother.

Line 29 emphasizes that she had been a "heritière" connected to the past, and the next stanza spells out her desire to visit the graves. This all reflects a profound longing for an existence in which she is connected to the ongoingness of time, in contrast to her contemporaries who sought to borrow stability from an external landscape. Michael Roth views nostalgia as a longing for a relatively recent past which was connected organically to a still more distant one, in which people were living amongst the tombs of their ancestors (279). The affection for the cemetery

[13] For Danahy, the tombs of her ancestors stand for the distant past, with which she wishes to reconnect. (144).
[14] As shown in great detail by Boutin.

suggests an acceptance of mortality, echoing that earlier hint at the healing power of time which allows one to forget insults: “Que le temps… que le ciel a dit de ne plus croire” (14).

In these two rich stanzas Desbordes-Valmore’s dense and knotted language presents remembering as a re-enactment of past losses. The strained syntax dramatizes the subject’s struggle with language, a medium used by others to wound and insult, but which she harnesses as a means to reconnect with her own past. The rest of the poem settles into a more conventional enumeration of memories, detailing specific places and events. In the fifth stanza, the past was described as a monolithic block, a “séjour”, but in the sixth it is broken down into repeated actions and the iterative mode is underlined by “souvent”. Genette, writing on Proust’s involuntary memory, suggests that the “madeleine” moment is a metaphorical trigger, but once that initial connection has been made, the past is resurrected in its totality using metonymic techniques (55-56). Similarly, once the speaker of “Tristesse” has established the complexity of the relationship between past and present, she goes on to trace a metonymic sequence of memories across fourteen stanzas, which eventually lead to the recovery of an epiphanic childhood experience of celebrating with her friend Albertine. These later stanzas underline how intimately verbal creativity is linked to the process of remembering and accepting loss.

Where the initial reflections on remembering had emphasized the power of others to insult, this part of the poem is marked by the speaker’s preoccupation with her own voice. The first stanza had emphasized the instability of her poetic voice in the present, “ma voix se fond en pleurs” (5), and this later part of the poem which recounts particular recollections repeatedly expresses a preoccupation with being heard as a child. She first describes her childhood voice as “faible” (57) and then

describes how she would sing “près du Christ mutilé qui m’écoutait peut-être” (59). In the present she asks the church “Mon frêle et doux *AVE*, ne l’écoutiez-vous pas?” (75). When she describes her father rescuing her from school, she asks “Mon père au loin m’avait donc entendue?” (93). Her hesitation about the force of her voice contrasts with the “voix résonnante” (88) of her father, but the poem ultimately tracks a movement towards affirming a stronger voice, and she exclaims in a “voix bondissante” at the joyful celebration with Albertine (98). As the father is initially referred to through the metonymy of his voice, the adjectives characterizing him at first are in the feminine, and thus the speaker’s “voix bondissante” phonetically echoes his ”voix résonnante”, suggesting a blurring of identities. Again, what is remembered and the process of remembering intermingle, because this speaker’s liveliness of voice is in the present as much as in what is remembered, and the preoccupation with audiences in the past reflects a present preoccupation with her role as a poet. The poem as a whole traces a movement away from an intimate union with her mother towards the wider world, represented by the school, father, and friend. It began by questioning an unknown addressee and ends by dialoguing with the voices of the past, in apostrophes such as “Voix de mon père, ô voix! m’appelez vous toujours?” (90). It is her own voice which here connects past and present, just as in “La Tombe lointaine” her voice is the “impalpable ciment” connecting her with her mother.

The Albertine epiphany suggests a joyous coincidence of self and world:

Oui! c’était une fête, une heure parfumée;

On moissonnait nos fleurs, on les jetait dans l’air;

Albertine riait sous la pluie embaumée;

Elle vivait encor: j’étais encore aimée!

C'est un parfum de rose… il n'atteint pas l'hiver. (101-105)

Previously her childhood awareness of the transience of flowers had been emphasized -- "Quel nom portait la fleur… la fleur d'un bleu si beau, / Que je vis poindre au jour, puis frémir, puis éclore, /Puis, que je ne vis plus à la suivante aurore?" (52-54) -- and now they are closely bound up with the privileged moment, underlining its ephemerality. Furthermore, the inevitability of decay is quickly recalled at the end of the stanza, and the speaker refuses to lose herself in the memory, reminding herself that this was but a fleeting moment and that time has moved on. The poem concludes by repeating the questions posed in the opening stanza, which now serve as an affirmation that she cannot identify with the "heure parfumée" that she is reliving with such pleasure, underscoring both her awareness of mortality and the impossibility of recovering either this joyful moment or the earlier "maternel séjour". What might have appeared to be spontaneous exclamations in the first stanza have now been made part of an artistic construct. We have seen first how "Tristesse" is based on a fundamental understanding that the past exists in the mind of the speaker rather than being stored in the external world, underscored by the constant blurring of spatial coordinates, and secondly how the poem narrates the recovering of a specific and rapturous memory. The end emphasizes how the subject remains aware of her "authentically temporal predicament" (de Man 209), by refusing to borrow stability either from nature or from past moments of intimacy.

This self-consciousness demonstrates the inadequacy of the received idea that Desbordes-Valmore's poetry consists purely of emotional outpourings. However, it is also striking that the poem starts with a series of lyrical exclamations which give the impression of instantaneity although they also contain its central preoccupations in embryonic form. Paul de Man theorizes that the lyric takes a nexus of feelings that are

simultaneous within the subject and gradually spreads them out along the temporal axis, giving them duration in the time of the poem (225). Hugo's "Tristesse d'Olympio" would be a good example of this – the speaker anchors his feelings in a remembered landscape, experiences a crisis when he returns to find it changed, but resolves it once he recognizes that his mind was the original source of meaning. In contrast, "Tristesse" starts by recording the very simultaneity of the speaker's feelings in the series of lyric questions. This exclamatory style creates the effect of immediacy which strikes many readers of Desbordes-Valmore's poems, and is perhaps one of the reasons why they are sometimes perceived as incoherent. In effect, she records the turmoil of feelings which other poets may organize into a more linear structure. However, "Tristesse" is striking in that it goes on to organize the turmoil expressed in the initial outburst to a very high degree, but follows a different kind of order from poems by her male contemporaries. "Tristesse" certainly suggests an ambition to create a more sustained meditation than Desbordes-Valmore's earlier elegies but, as we have seen, the more dense and highly wrought passages challenge the familiar posture of the Romantic poet as "alienated voice speaking to or about objects or an autonomous self dominating them" (Danahy 140). Instead, she evokes a genuinely reciprocal relationship between self and world, in which the speaker both mourns her mother and identifies with her.

In both its texture and structure, "Tristesse" shows the impossibility of separating the thing remembered from the process of remembering. The poem creates a complex picture of how unearthing memories provokes new pains, and how pain itself obscures the memories. This dynamic is articulated in the very texture of the verse, whose syntax makes it impossible to determine whether pain originates in the past or the present. Remembering is shown to be both a creative act and an

acknowledgement of separation from what is lost. Desbordes-Valmore is often perceived as writing nostalgically about childhood but this poem is far from being an idealization of the past, with its allusion to past insults, youthful vulnerability, and early awareness of transience.[15]

The poem hesitates between an ambition to universalize and a keen sense of the concrete particularity of experience, just as Desbordes-Valmore refuses the Romantic posture of seer looking beyond surface appearances to reach the absolute. Reworking the commonplace of disillusionment with life, she refuses to idealize childhood or the remembered landscape, but instead explores how a landscape has been internalized, how a daughter mourns separation from her mother and finds her own voice, how memories are physically engraved in the body, and how remembering is a searching movement and not simply a vertical plumbing of depths. This is a distinctive expression of the preoccupation with subjectivity and temporality which marked her generation. Readers may be frustrated at her apparent submission to gender stereotypes, but in order to appreciate her originality it is vital to pay careful attention to her unusual use of form and to scrutinize those passages which cannot readily be paraphrased. In "Tristesse" it is the subtle modulation of syntax and verse structure which shapes the most powerful images and builds up a sophisticated meditation on mortality.

[15] As Rosemary Lloyd points out, she is good at conveying childhood experience from the point of view of the child (90).

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