
REVIEWS

Michel Tournier. *The Mirror of Ideas*. Trans. Jonathan F. Krell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. 137p.

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Jonathan F. Krell's 1998 translation of Michel Tournier's *Le miroir des idées* (1994) brings to anglophone audiences a representative sample of the author's previous philosophically oriented works as well as his novelistic and autobiographical writing. The collection of fifty-eight essays that comprises *The Mirror of Ideas* reflects the humor, the thematic interests and even the imagery (most notably the ubiquitous image of the mirror) of Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967), *Le Roi des Aulnes* (1970), *Les Météores* (1975) and *Le Vent Paraquet* (1977) to name only the most familiar of his works. The essays embrace the *déjà-lu* or self-referential quality that, as Krell points out, is typical of Tournier's work; thus, they stand to provide an interesting introduction to his writing for newcomers or a nostalgic return for those well familiar with the Tournian world.

The philosophical premise of the book aims to present "key concepts" which help us to understand how thought functions. Furthermore, Tournier maintains, each of these concepts has a pair or opposite through which its deeper meaning is reflected. By coupling ideas with their mirror image — loosely progressing from mundane categories such as cat/dog, bath/shower, fork/spoon to ethereal pairs such as idealism/realism, absolute/relative, being/nothingness — the author explores the ways in which binary opposition creates our perception of each category. Thus, we see the maternal tenderness of the spoon thanks to the fork. The comparisons Tournier makes reveal interesting observations about certain concepts. For instance, "The Child & the Adolescent" presents an historical view of childhood since the seventeenth century, as well as current statistical evidence that the chances of dying are lowest at age eleven because "[t]he weaknesses of infancy have been overcome and the dangers of adolescence have not yet been encountered" (13). In other essays, Tournier explores the contradictory nature of the pairs. In "The Cellar & the Attic," he points out that while cellar windows let in subdued, deadened light and attic windows open to the sky, the cellar is nonetheless "a living place" with its maturing wines and other delicacies that represent hope for the future while the attic is a "dead place" with its tokens of a discarded past. In other

essays, the author demystifies or destroys binary oppositions all the while presenting them. For example, in “Animal & Vegetable,” he reconfigures our conception the herbivore which is shown to be merely a particular type of carnivore: “in reality these plants, absorbed into the animal’s stomach, serve to feed a culture of bacteria — unicellular animals — that constitute the true food of the herbivore” (31). The blurred boundaries of categories that we might otherwise see as distinct constitutes what the translator describes as Tournier’s postmodern perspective and, in my opinion, his most interesting essays.

The intertextual network that supports *The Mirror of Ideas* is as vast in its array of citations of Western culture as it is insular in its quotations of Tournier or his works. The epigraphs that punctuate nearly every essay range from Groucho Marx to Baudelaire to Ecclesiastes and include pseudonymous citations of the author: a certain Ibn Al Houdaïda (Houdaïda means to “turn” in Arabic) and Edward Reinrot (Tournier spelled backwards, minus the *u*). Such humor will delight Tournier’s fans who are familiar with his self-referential play. His critics too will find familiar viewpoints. As Krell points out in his preface, those who objected to Tournier’s statements against abortion in an 1989 interview with *Newsweek* will not find a reformed feminist stance in these essays. In “Man & Woman,” Tournier interprets the psychology of the two sexes through a reading of Genesis and determines that woman is “more substantially submissive to femininity than man is to virility. This is what the scholastics expressed by the formula *tota mulier in utero* (the whole woman is in her uterus)” (4). Furthermore, his vision of a feminist society finds support in the idea that women in some countries tend to abort female rather than male fetuses: “the coming of this feminist society will perhaps be hastened by the increasing scarcity of the feminine sex brought on women themselves” (5). Certainly, Krell’s description of Tournier’s writing as postmodern applies to certain essays more readily than others.

Tournier’s particular take on each of the concepts appears to be the true substance of this treatise, for if *The Mirror of Ideas* reflects his previous works, it also reveals Tournier himself. The open form of the essay is particularly conducive to self-revelations, as Michel Beaujour’s *Miroirs d’encre* and Reda Bensmaïa’s *The Barthes Effect* suggest. It is a genre which engages with cultural/philosophical categories and casts back, in a chiaroscuro effect, an image of the author. In his introduction to the book, Tournier hints at the revealing nature of the very structure of his essays:

if one considers the right and left columns [of the paired categories], one can detect a vague affinity among the elements of each. Are the dog, the attic, the sedentary, the right and God kinfolk? How about the cat, the cellar, the nomad

the left and the Devil? But that is a game best left to the freedom of the reader.
(3)

Although he leaves it to the reader to play, Tournier firmly establishes the rules of the game with the configuration of his text (we might recall here, Michel Leiris, the author of one of the most extensive and earnest explorations of self-portraiture, *La Règle du jeu*). This “little treatise,” as the author humbly describes his project, sets out to clarify the functioning of human thought and, as a result, reflects most interestingly on his own particular conceptions. ✱