

# Conflict and Duality in Romain Gary's *Gros-Câlin* and *La Vie devant soi* and in the life of the author

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**Abstract:** Romain Gary is the only French writer to have received the Prix Goncourt twice, once as himself and the second time as Émile Ajar. Parisian critics never made any connection between the two names, as they considered Gary to be a mediocre writer and Ajar a genius. This paper explains how by tackling different themes and presenting characters – in two Ajar novels - who were in direct opposition to those presented in the Gary novels, Romain Gary was able to avoid detection during his whole lifetime.

**Keywords:** pseudonym – duality – marginality – exclusion – otherness.

Recommencer, revivre, être un autre fut la grande  
tentation de mon existence. (Gary, *Vie et Mort* 29)

**I**n Roman mythology Janus was represented as a double-faced God, one of which was youthful and the other elderly, each face looking in opposite directions. Janus symbolized endings as well as new beginnings, and this duality rested on the belief that one must emerge through a door or a gate in order to enter into a new place. Janus became the God of progression from the past into the future, and of passing from one condition to another. Janus can thus be regarded as a metaphor for an individual with two identities, each one different from the other, while also symbolizing the complexity of the human nature. It is mainly associated with a quest for identity.

Nowhere can this allegory be more aptly applied than in the case of the well-known apatrid French author Romain Gary who, in the utmost secrecy, published four novels under the pseudonym of Émile Ajar while still publishing novels under his own name. He then led a double life: one as himself (Gary) and the other as his pseudonym (Ajar). In this paper, through an analysis of two of these Ajar novels, *Gros-Câlin* and *La Vie devant soi*, and a retrospective of the author's life, we aim to demonstrate how the allegory of the two-faced Roman God Janus can help to explain how Gary succeeded so masterfully

to orchestrate one of the most spectacular literary hoaxes ever imagined on the French literary scene when he created his alter ego Émile Ajar.

In the 1970s Romain Gary was at the height of his fame; he was one of the most prolific writers in France with twenty-four published novels to his name, many of which were best-sellers. After having served France well during the Second World War, he became a decorated war hero, and was made a *Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur*. Moreover, he had had a flourishing career as a diplomat at the United Nations; was married to the well-known American film actress Jean Seberg; and led a glamorous lifestyle in the upscale Rue du Bac in Paris. And yet, despite all these outward signs of success, he was suffering from a form of existential anguish, and struggling with identity issues. Cognizant of the fact that he was not a *bone fide* native-born Frenchman, but a writer of Russian and Jewish ancestry, he surmised that the Parisian literary critics would neither embrace him as one of their own, nor include him in the elite club of other respected contemporary French writers like Camus, Malraux, or Sartre (*Nuit* 55). He conjectured that the reputation of being a solid intellectual writer would forever elude him.

But in 1974, all this was about to change, when an unknown author by the name of Émile Ajar appeared on the French literary scene with the publication of *Gros-Câlin*. He received immediate critical acclaim, was declared a master of style and a literary genius. Yet, Ajar was the pseudonym of Gary. This subterfuge was Gary's way to renew himself, to turn his back on his older self - Gary - and to espouse the younger and more vibrant persona of Ajar. The pseudonym would allow his writings to be judged on their own merit and not on his established reputation as a writer. The whereabouts of Ajar remained unknown however, which added to the mystery concerning his true identity. *Le Nouvel Observateur* mentioned Raymond Queneau and Louis Aragon as the most likely writers behind the pseudonym Ajar, as the novel could only be the work "d'un grand écrivain" ("a great writer") (*Vie et Mort* 27).<sup>1</sup> A period of literary intrigues then ensued when Gary left misleading clues across his trail. He had his manuscripts mailed from Paris to Rio de Janeiro, and back again to his French publishers *Le Mercure de France*. He then, devised an artful strategy whereby he gave a human face to Émile Ajar by persuading his nephew, Paul Pavlowich who "avait la 'gueule' qu'il fallait" ("had the right 'mug'") (*Vie et Mort* 32) to impersonate Ajar. Forever moving behind the Ajar mask, Gary instructed Pavlowich to give interviews to the press and to the media as the supposed Ajar. When a few critics discovered the family relationship between Gary and Pavlowich, Gary replied emphatically that he had in no way collaborated with Pavlowich. Critics readily accepted his denial, convinced in their belief that Gary was well past his creative prime, and thus incapable of penning such a novel.

In 1975, *La Vie devant soi* was also published with *Le Mercure de France*, and soon after, it was awarded France's most prestigious literary prize, the *Prix Goncourt*. However, in 1956 Gary had received this award for *Les Racines du ciel*. Receiving it a second time

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from French to English are provided by the author of this article.

meant that Gary would violate a most sacred rule of the *Académie Goncourt*, namely, that this award can be handed out only once to any author. Gary had the supposed Ajar (Paul Pavlowich) refuse the prize; but the Academy retorted that refusing the Goncourt would be equivalent to refusing one's birth or death: it just cannot be done! Therefore, Gary/Pavlowich/Ajar was compelled to accept the prize. Meanwhile, Gary continued to publish two more novels under his own name with the prestigious Éditions Gallimard: *Au-delà de cette limite votre ticket n'est plus valable* (1975), and *Clair de femme* (1977) which went unnoticed by critics and readers alike. He also published two other novels under the Ajar pseudonym: *Pseudo* (1976) and *L'Angoisse du Roi Salomon* (1979) with the *Mercure de France*. On December the eighth 1980, on a rainy day in Paris, Romain Gary committed suicide in his apartment at la Rue du Bac; and to this day the reasons for this act remain unclear. Six months later, the publication of his posthumous confession *Vie et mort d'Émile Ajar* and that of *L'Homme que l'on Croyait* by Paul Pavlowich, both published in 1981, disclosed the extent of the Ajar imposture to the world. These two books allowed critics and readers alike to demystify the double disguise, namely, that Gary was indeed the author of all four of the Ajar novels. In *Vie et mort d'Émile Ajar*, his forty-page memoir, Gary elaborated the profound reasons which had motivated him to create this hoax, one of which was his existential malaise about being forever trapped in his Gary persona:

J'étais un auteur classé, catalogué, acquis [...] j'étais las de n'être que moi-même [...] las de l'image Romain Gary qu'on m'avait collé sur le dos depuis trente ans.

I had been pegged, catalogued, taken for granted [...]. I was sick and tired of just being myself [...]. I was tired of the Romain Gary label which had been pinned on my back for the last thirty years. (*Vie et Mort* 17- 28).

He also expressed his disdain for all those who had branded him as a second-rate writer, condemned the bias of the Parisian critics, their “cliques à claques [...] leurs copinages” (“cliquish mentality [...] their buddy-buddy system”) (25). He explained how he had enjoyed being a spectator at his own second life, how the pseudonym Ajar had allowed him to be reborn and renewed, and how everything was being given to him one more time.

In a previous study conducted on Gary and Ajar,<sup>2</sup> the author suggested that one of the reasons for the French critics' inability to make connections between the Gary and Ajar oeuvre, could be attributed to the fact that Gary had successfully adopted a different style, a different “linguistic fingerprint” when he wrote under the Ajar pseudonym. In retrospect, one could also say that, in the Ajar novels, Gary tackled themes and depicted characters who

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<sup>2</sup> Vina Tirven-Gadum, “Linguistic Fingerprints and Literary Fraud,” *Text Technology: Technologising the Humanities, Humanizing the Technologies* 8:2(Summer 1998): 22-44.

were in direct opposition to the ones portrayed in his Gary novels. The “Ajar” characters are the very antithesis of the typical “Gary” characters, the latter being for the most part imbued with great personal merit by acting heroically, and shouldering qualities found in most traditional heroes. In *La Promesse de l'Aube* for example, the narrator's mother sacrifices her own happiness in order to secure her son's future success; in *Les Racines du ciel*, the stoic Morel battles against corrupt government officials in Chad so as to save the wild elephants; and in *L'Education Européenne* young Janek Twardowski, at the age of fourteen, fights heroically in the forests of Wilno against the Nazi oppressors. All three are centered on an idealized character and are masters of their own destiny; they possess the greatest virtues found in typical fictional heroes, namely, bravery, love, intelligence, and will. Moreover, they deal with moral issues of resistance to Nazism, racial discrimination, cruelty inflicted in times of war, and violation of animal rights.

By contrast, the characters in *Gros-Câlin* and *La Vie devant soi* are devoid of any of these traditional trappings of perfection; for the most part, they are maladjusted, freakish, and eccentric individuals who live on the periphery of what one would consider to be normal. In *Gros-Câlin*, for example, the whole narrative is centered on the life of the main character, Michel Cousin, the intradiegetic narrator of the novel who lives on the fringes of normalcy. In all probability he suffers from a form of personality disorder, for his behavior and his inner experiences deviate markedly from the expectations of all those around him. The onset of his strange behavior, as well as his inability to adapt, can probably be traced to his childhood, when he lost both his parents in a car accident and was raised in foster homes. His personality disorder is characterized by a lack of interest in social relationships, a tendency towards a solitary lifestyle, secretiveness, and also by emotional coldness:

Je me (tiens) là discrètement, avec mon petit chapeau, mon nœud papillon jaune à pois bleus, mon cache-nez et mon pardessus, très correctement habillé, veston, pantalon et tout, à cause des apparences et de la clandestinité.

There I stand discreetly, nicely attired in my small hat, my yellow bowtie with blue polka dots, my scarf, my overcoat, my jacket, and my trousers, because of appearances and my desire to remain unnoticed. (*Gros-Câlin* 20)

Cousin's inability to form close bonds with others has brought about his troubled mental state. To counteract his feeling of alienation and emptiness, he has taken a morbid interest in numbers, and spends many sleepless nights “à compter jusqu'à des millions” (“to count numbers up to many millions”) (59). He now works as a statistician at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris where he spends his days “à compter par milliards” (“counting numbers by the billions”) (21); but this monotonous and humdrum job prevents him from finding his true place in the world. His feeling of isolation and alienation is further exacerbated by his

conviction that he is always being judged by his colleagues. He is also aware that they see him as an eccentric, which only adds to his feeling of isolation, inadequacy, and rejection.

He falls in love with “Melle Dreyfus”, a young Black woman from French Guyana who works in his office; believing that she is in love with him, he contemplates marrying her. Unfortunately for him, she refuses to have any kind of love relationship with just one man, and prefers instead to work as a prostitute so as not to give up her independence as a free-spirited woman. Unable to form ties with people, Cousin then visits “les bonnes putes” (“the nice hookers”) (76) and takes refuge in his internal world. He enrolls in a course on the art of ventriloquism; but when this leads to failure, he consoles himself with Gros-Câlin, a huge python that he has brought over illegally from the Ivory Coast. He allows the snake to roam around freely in his apartment and develops a perfect bond with this creature that is capable of offering him love by “s’enrouler affectueusement autour de vous, des pieds à la tête” (“wrapping himself tenderly around you from head to toe”) (14). When his supervisor asks him why he has adopted this python, he offers this simple answer: “Les python’s sont très attachants. Ils sont liants par nature” (“Pythons are very affectionate. They naturally cling to you”) (15).

But Gros-Câlin is a snake. As such, he is vested with all the traditional negative symbolism that is associated with such a reptile: he is regarded as a representative of Satan and as a manifestation of all that is Evil. Because of all these associations, Gros-Câlin also becomes a marginalized creature and falls within the category of the unloved. When Cousin’s Portuguese cleaning lady enters his apartment for the first time, she screams upon seeing Gros-Câlin and runs to the Police station to register a complaint against him; she then accuses Cousin of being “Monsieur sadista, monsieur exhibitionnista” (“Mister sadist, mister exhibitionist”) (37), as she cannot comprehend how a normal man can live with a python.

Not only does Cousin cohabit with his python, but he is also proud of leading a life that runs counter to the norms that regulate proper behavior within society. He strolls proudly on the Champs-Élysées with his python wrapped tightly around his neck. By this act, he wants to affirm his individuality and his distinctiveness. This is how he explains himself: “Je marche fièrement la tête haute, [...] je m’affirme [...] je me manifeste, je m’exprime, je m’extériorise” (“I walk proudly with my head held high [...] I am asserting myself [...] I’m making myself known, I’m expressing myself”) (83). Many times in the novel, he says: “J’espère bien que je ne serai jamais normal [...]. Je ferai tout pour ne pas être normal [...]. Non, je refuse de verser dans la banalité. Ça fait peuple” (“I hope that I will never be normal [...]. No, I refuse to participate in a world of trivialities [...]. That would be too common”) (123).

One could argue that Cousin’s relationship with Gros-Câlin is reminiscent of the French writer Gérard de Nerval’s attachment to his lobster “Thibault” whom Nerval had supposedly liberated from certain death in a pot of boiling water. In order to shock the conservative bourgeois mentality of his day, Nerval would take Thibault out for walks in the Gardens of the Palais-Royal in Paris “au bout d’un ruban bleu” (“at the end of a long

blue ribbon”) (Apollinaire 439). When his friends would question him about this “quirky” behaviour he would reply:

En quoi [...] un homard est-il plus ridicule qu'un chien, qu'un chat, qu'une gazelle, qu'un lion ou toute autre bête dont on se fait suivre ? J'ai le goût des homards, qui sont tranquilles, sérieux, savent les secrets de la mer, n'aboient pas.

In what way [...] is a lobster more ridiculous than a dog, a cat, a gazelle, a lion, or any other animal which we keep as pets? I like lobsters. They are quiet, serious; they know the secrets of the ocean and they do not bark. (Apollinaire 442)

Like Nerval, Cousin is attached to an unusual animal, one that is destined for the cooking pot and the other which is despised because of its negative biblical connotations in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Cousin is also trying to shock those around him; but unlike the poet, Cousin is convinced that his refusal to conform to society's norm demonstrates the failure of a system adopted by the majority of people.

One could also argue that Cousin's attachment to Gros-Câlin is reminiscent of Maldoror's attachment to the female shark in *Les Chants de Maldoror*. However, the similarity ends there: whereas *Gros-Câlin* is written half in jest, *Les Chants de Maldoror* is a truly surrealist and macabre work, celebrating evil for its own sake. The most feared marine predator of humans, the shark, is a symbol of cruelty which often haunts the human imagination with terrifying images of dread, agony, and death. Being eaten by a shark is not any kind of death, but of the most dreadful kind: of being eviscerated, gutted, ripped apart, dismembered, and dragged down in the depths of the ocean. We can see this in the following passage of *Les Chants de Maldoror*:

Une énorme femelle de requin vient prendre part au pâté de foie de canard, et manger du bouilli froid. Elle est furieuse ; car, elle arrive affamée. Une lutte s'engage entre elle et les requins, pour se disputer les quelques membres palpitants qui flottent par-ci, par-là, sans rien dire, sur la surface de la crème rouge [...], elle lance des coups de dent qui engendrent des blessures mortelles.

A huge female shark comes to feast on this meal of duck liver pâté, and cold, pulped-up raw meat. She is furious because she is famished. A great battle then ensues between her and the other sharks as they fight over the remaining pulsating limbs floating by silently on the red creamy surface. [...] She bites [...] and inflicts mortal wounds on all. (*Maldoror* - Chant Deuxième)

What is clear is that in *Gros-Câlin*, the python is not presented by Cousin as being evil, but as a docile, loving pet that is misunderstood by everyone except by him, whereas the shark in *Les Chants de Maldoror* epitomizes evil in its most vile form. There is also another striking difference between Gros-Câlin the python, and the Shark in *Maldoror*. We find this explicit scene of sexual union between Maldoror, the protagonist and the shark in *Maldoror*: “ils se réunirent dans un accouplement long, chaste et hideux” (“they came together in a long, chaste and hideous mating act”) (*Maldoror* - Chant Deuxième). The coupling of Maldoror with the female shark is symbolic; the shark agrees perfectly with Maldoror’s diabolical sadism, for Maldoror, himself states: “Je ne me sentais plus seul [...] J’étais en face de mon premier amour” (“I did not feel alone anymore [...] I had come face to face with my first love”) (*Maldoror* - Chant Deuxième). In the eyes of Cousin, however, there is nothing evil or diabolical about Gros-Câlin; there is never any hint of sexual union between Gros-Câlin and him either. Cousin’s attachment to Gros-Câlin results from the fact that, like Gros-Câlin, he is misunderstood and cannot find his place in a huge metropolis like Paris.

Cousin is a very complacent individual; he is not bent on hurting anyone. In fact, in the very first pages of the novel, Cousin introduces himself as someone who is eccentric, freakish, on the brink of madness and who fully embraces his oddity. He apologizes for the linguistic faux pas that will characterize his story: “Je dois donc m’excuser de certaines mutilations, mal-emplois, [...] crabismes, strabismes et immigrations sauvages du langage” (“I must apologize for mutilating the language, for using bad grammar, improper syntax and faulty structures”) (9). Further on in the novel, Cousin explains to a police officer how an employee at the Museum, the office boy -- his nemesis-- has insulted him: “Le garçon de bureau [...] m’a dit que [...] je devais ramper hors de mon trou et de me dérouler librement au soleil sur toute ma longueur” (“The office boy told me to slither out of my hole, to uncoil myself and to stay outside in the sun”) (43). The police officer, whose job it is to enforce the law and to sanction any infringement to the law, condones the traditional norms imposed by the majority of people (to which the office boy belongs). He tries to veer Cousin in the right path; but Cousin, who considers his marginalization as a source of his self-actualization, resorts to a verbal blunder and says: “Mon grand problème, monsieur l’angoisse, c’est le commissaire” (“The biggest problem that I have, Mr. Panic, is the Superintendent of Police”) (46).

Cousin chooses to express himself in a colloquial style which Bayard describes as the “désarticulation Ajar” (“the Ajar disarticulation of language”) (53). This new use of language is very different from the loftier style normally associated with the writings of Gary. Cousin’s verbal blunders can therefore be seen to function on two levels: firstly, to demonstrate that the narrator, Cousin, has lost touch with reality and secondly, as a shield to Gary’s true identity. One could postulate that by choosing a style and a language that run counter to the accepted norm, or rather by deforming the usual use of language to such

an extent, Gary/Ajar, through Cousin, is presenting himself as a quirky character. Besides, Bernard Lalane affirms that

L'emploi d'une langue qui est la déformation du français officiel est le signe sur le plan textuel d'un univers qui est une contre-société: la langue bourgeoise virtuelle renvoie à une autre virtualité, celle d'une société française dont les coutumes sont organisées en système.

By using a language that deforms formal standard French, the author is depicting a group of people who are outcasts; for proper middle-class French is used to describe traditional members of French society who follow rules and customs. (57)

At the end of the novel, as Cousin feels more and more alienated by French bourgeois values, he identifies completely with his python. Having given Gros-Câlin away to the Jardin des Plantes, he morphs into his python and becomes Gros-Câlin due to the alienating effect of mainstream society on his hyper-sensitive psyche. He eats the mouse that Madame Niate, his housekeeper, has brought to feed the python; and he ends up in a psychiatric hospital. According to Jørn Boisen, Cousin's total alienation from the France in which he lives, makes *Gros-Câlin* one of the darkest and most pessimistic Ajar novels. It shows man's defeat in this ever-increasing bureaucratic age, where individuals are completely pulverized to the point of losing their identity. It could also be viewed as a statement of Gary's own inability to be taken seriously as a writer.

The second Ajar novel, *La Vie devant soi*, depicts another aspect of life as it is experienced by a dissident minority group. Members of this group, all outcasts, operate in a very well-defined physical space, namely the seediest and slummiest part of Belleville, which is situated in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris. The story takes place in a tenement, located in a multiracial ghetto part of town. Belleville, for a long time, was regarded as an essentially "working-class" neighborhood where poor immigrants of all origins would conglomerate. According to the sociologist Daniel Normand, its identity rests on two bases: "tout d'abord, comme fief ouvrier, [...] et ensuite comme terre d'accueil des immigrés, pendant tout le 20<sup>e</sup> siècle" ("first, as a working-class stronghold [...] and then as a place of welcome for immigrants during the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century") (1). Belleville has always been the preferred place of settlement for immigrants of Algerian, Jewish, Sub-Saharan and Vietnamese origins. Therefore, in the 1970s, when this story takes place, Belleville housed many North African workers who came to France in order to meet the needs of the workforce. In *La Vie devant soi* they are portrayed as immigrants who live on the fringe of society.

First of all, there is young Mohamed, affectionately known as Momo, who is the first-person narrator of the novel. In fragmented French mixed with the slang of the Paris slums, he also tells the life of all those who live around him. Although Momo's verbal



expressions are often taken beyond the limits of good taste, they appear normal coming from a child brought up in the streets of Paris. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that he has been brought up in a foster home held by Madame Rosa, the only person who has ever taken care of him and who loves him like a real mother. He does not know who his real parents are; but has learned at school that he is an Arab, and that Arabs were born to be mistreated. For a long time, this did not conform to his reality, as no one had ever insulted him, until one day Madame Rosa, angry at his antics, called him a “cul d’Arabe” (“an Arab bum”) (14). As he often feels lonely and isolated, he looks for surrogates to replace his parents. To combat his feeling of loneliness, he strolls through the streets of Belleville carrying “Arthur” his umbrella, which he has dressed up as an “unijambiste” (“a one-legged person”) (76). Sometimes, he is even accompanied by a little poodle dog named Super which he has stolen from a kennel “parce que j’étais tout ce qu’il avait au monde” (“because I was all that he had in the world”) (25).

Madame Rosa is a sixty-five-year-old woman of Polish and Jewish origin. She too, is an immigrant; but is part of an earlier wave of immigration in France, namely that of the Ashkenazy Jews who left Central Europe in the nineteenth century and settled in France in order to flee anti-Semitism and persecutions that prevailed in that part of the world. During her younger days, Madame Rosa was forced to prostitute herself in order to survive. When the Germans invaded France during the Second World War, Madame Rosa was rounded up with many other Jews in Paris during the period known as “la rafle des Juifs” (“the roundup of Jews”). This move which had been instigated by the Nazis, with the full cooperation of the Vichy Government, allowed Jews to be sent to an internment camp located close to the Eiffel Tower, the “Vel d’Hiv”, and from there, they were deported to Auschwitz. Madame Rosa survived the concentration camps and the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and now, many years later, she suffers from some form of cerebral dementia which is slowly killing her. In her moments of anguish, she takes refuge in her secret cellar, located in the basement of her building which she has named her “trou juif.” She has furnished this smelly and dirty place with discarded odds and ends, and often hides there from her imaginary persecutors who no longer exist. She sees any encroachment from the outside world as an open aggression and equates all French bureaucratic institutions to the Nazi regime.

Madame Rosa keeps an unregulated and clandestine home for unwanted children on the sixth floor of an insalubrious building, located on Rue Bisson. They are children of poor immigrant parents, mainly of North African and Sub-Saharan origins, children of prostitutes, whose births were unplanned and whose mothers could not abort on time. Most of them were born of unknown fathers. There is, first of all, Banania who is “un Malien ou un Sénégalais ou un Guinéen ou autre chose” (“a Malian, a Senegalese, a Guinean or something else”) (21); Moïse, the young boy with blond hair and blue eyes whose Jewish mother was forced to hide at Madame Rosa’s because of his Gentile appearance. There is also Salima who had been hidden in a garbage can by her mother, when the neighbours had denounced the mother as a “pute sur trottoir” (“a street-

walker”) (27).

Many African families -- most of them illegal immigrants -- live in the same building. There is, for example, Madame Lola, who is a regular visitor at Madame Rosa's establishment. She is stocky, and her arms are completely covered with tattoos; she is thus “complètement à l'envers et [...] pas méchante du tout” (“completely topsy-turvy [...] and was not a bad person at all”) (141). Before coming to France, Madame Lola had been a boxing champion in Senegal. Now, to earn her living, she plies her illegal trade at the Bois de Boulogne, a well-known cruising area for prostitutes. In fact, Madame Lola is not a woman at all, but a transvestite who is receiving hormone treatment in order to grow women's breasts. According to Momo, because of her ambiguous sexual identity, Madame Lola can flaunt her masculinity and her femininity at the same time for she possesses both “de belles niches et un zob” (“beautiful tits and a pecker”) (140).

There is another regular visitor at Madame Rosa's “foyer,” who also refuses society's norms. His name is Monsieur N'Da Amédée. Momo informs his reader that this rich man who is often decked out in pink silk suits, pink shirts and pink hats and wears diamond rings on each finger, comes from Niger. He is “le plus grand maquereau de tous les Noirs de Paris” (“the biggest and most important Black pimp in the whole of Paris”) (43). According to Momo, he is also a murderer, for he has already killed many Black men who were also pimps. Because they were living illegally in France and were also Black, the Police never bothered to investigate their murders, for the Police is only concerned with those who have legal status in France and live according to bourgeois values. It is safe to assume that neither Gary nor Momo is condoning this state of affairs here; on the contrary this observation by Momo probably constitutes an indirect criticism of racism in France, for Momo considers this situation to be quite normal. He is not aware that this is not acceptable in any just society.

There is also living in this building, Monsieur Waloumba, who is described according to racial stereotypes and generalizations, that were normally reserved for Black Africans in the Paris of the nineteen seventies. Momo explains that Monsieur Waloumba “était venu en France pour la balayer [...] et avait laissé toutes ses femmes et ses enfants dans son pays pour des raisons économiques” (“had come to France in order to sweep the pavements of Paris [...] and had left all his wives and children in his country for economic reasons”) (170). Later on in the novel, Momo tells us that Monsieur Waloumba laughed a great deal and that he had very white teeth. Through the description of the African with white teeth, Momo conjures up the stereotypical image of the Black African who laughs a lot. It also evokes the French advertising campaign for a brand of hot chocolate called *Banania*, in which a Senegalese infantryman would say in broken French “Banania Y'a bon” (“Banania it so good”). This advertisement showed a Senegalese with white teeth professing the virtues of this brand of hot chocolate, while his eyes rolled up in his head and his smile mimicked the shape of a banana. He also spoke in gibberish, pidgin-French. Of course, to-day, most people would consider this advertisement to be racist and beyond the bounds of good taste, for it nourishes the caricature of the African

man smiling like a simpleton, possessing a childish mentality and being incapable of expressing himself correctly in proper French. Most would regard it as a symbol of French colonialist and racist views which was prevalent at that time.

However, although *La Vie devant soi* may appear, at first, to contain a zero degree of political correctness, Gary/Ajar, through Momo, is not defending French lingering colonial attitudes here; on the contrary he is exposing it to his readers in order to shake their conscience, for as Anne Foulter-Smith has rightfully observed:

Pour l'enfant qui parle et qui n'a jamais rien connu d'autre, ces préjugés font partie d'une réalité qu'il accepte sans la questionner- car il a vite appris que la vie n'est pas tendre. Le contraste créé par le décalage entre le tragique de la situation évoquée par Momo et le ton très simple qu'il prend pour en parler est la technique préférée d'Ajar pour secouer la bonne conscience et les préjugés de son lecteur.

For the child who is uttering these words, and who has never known anything else, these types of biases form part of a reality that he accepts without any question – for he has learned that life is not easy. The contrast that is created by the juxtaposition between the tragic situation evoked by Momo and the simple tone which he adopts to discuss this matter, is Ajar's favorite technique to shake the conscience and the biases of his reader. (689)

In an adjoining building there are many other African families who live “par tribus, comme ils font ça en Afrique” (“in tribes as they all do in Africa”) (12). Momo expresses best the difficulties of French society to assimilate these poor Africans, and whom they exclude from mainstream society. Thus, we learn, through Momo's narrative, that these Africans live mainly in hovels and slums, where there is a lack of the most basic necessities of life, such as heating and toilets. In fact, “ils sont cent vingt, avec huit par chambre et un seul W.C. en bas” (“there are one hundred and twenty of them living eight to each room and sharing only one toilet on the ground-floor”) (76).

Momo also recounts how, in Aubervilliers, there was a building where “on asphyxiait les Sénégalais avec des poêles à charbon en les mettant dans une chambre avec les fenêtres fermées” (“Senegalese were being gassed in rooms with shuttered windows and heated only with coal-burning stoves”) (33). These people died because they had inhaled poisonous gas in their sleep. It is clear that what the author is saying here, is that those in power look the other way when people who live on the fringe of society die. He also seems to imply that governments are only interested in parading their successes and that they are not interested in dealing with their failures. In fact, this incident is based on a real situation, for on the first of January 1970, five African workers had died from gas poisoning in Aubervilliers. It had mobilized many journalists and writers, such as Gary

and Marguerite Duras, who had militated against the appalling conditions under which poor illegal immigrants were forced to live (Lecarme-Tabone 213).

In Momo's neighborhood nearly every transaction is conducted in secret. Momo is surrounded by people who are often deprived of judicial rights; in light of the lack of protection from the police, they devise ingenious ways to protect themselves. Madame Rosa has an accomplice, a Jewish man, and a survivor of the Nazis extermination camps, who provides her with false documents which can prove that she is someone else: "Elle disait qu'avec ça, même les Israéliens n'auraient rien pu prouver contre elle" ("She said that with these, even Israelis would not be able to prove anything against her") (28-29). She also has a stash of forged papers for all the children who live with her, in the event that the welfare department should decide to remove them from her care. Momo does not know his real age "je n'ai pas été daté" ("I don't have a birth date"), he says (29), and Madame Rosa has fake birth certificates to prove that he is ten years old as well as fourteen years old. These fake papers allow both Madame Rosa and Momo to be someone else and offer them a means to elude the authorities. They also demonstrate Madame Rosa's and Momo's refusal to behave in accordance with accepted norms and practices.

Contrary to Michel Cousin, who is incapable of forging close relationships with people around him, the inhabitants of Rue Bisson in Belleville show solidarity with each other; they back one another up and protect those who are threatened by the standards imposed by the mainstream groups. Madame Rosa takes care of the children of prostitutes to prevent the social services from rounding them up and incarcerating them in institutions. She provides a false alibi for Madame Lola who has beaten up a sadistic client at the Bois de Boulogne; she does this in order to save Madame Lola from prosecution by the Police. When Madame Rosa's health starts to fail, a whole chain of support springs up around her: one of the Zaoum brothers brings food for the children; a group of African musicians dance around Madame Rosa in the hope of chasing away evil spirits; Monsieur Waloumba performs his fire eating tricks in her presence in order to keep up her spirits. This is a world where people who live on the fringe of society help one another, so as not to be integrated with those who lead a conventional and normal lifestyle. This is what the sociologist Patrick Simon calls "le mythe de Belleville" ("the Belleville story") (167), for the inhabitants of this area see their neighborhood as being exceptionally tolerant and cosmopolitan. Therefore, although *La Vie devant soi* paints a disturbing picture of society's outcasts in a big city like Paris, it also describes a world of brotherly love and of compassion, a world which is inhabited by people with noble hearts.

One could even say that in this marginalized world which is populated by the misfits and rejects of society, each person is proud to flaunt his or her difference. Cousin feels a connection with his reptile; he is in perfect symbiosis with the much-reviled Gros-Câlin. Because of this, he too, is rejected by others. Momo makes a plea in favour of prostitutes "Je peux vous dire que les femmes qui se défendent sont parfois les meilleures mères au monde" ("I can tell you that women who practice this profession are often the best mothers in this world") (51). Each member of this fringe group has a favorite item

which is unlike the preferences of “normal” people; but which allows them to actualize their potential. There is Monsieur N’da Amédée’s “bagues diamentaires,” Madame Rosa’s “trou juif,” Momo’s “parapluie Arthur,” and Cousin’s Gros-Câlin. Cousin explains better than anyone else his need for this animal, when he says this to his priest: “Écoutez mon père, ne me parlez pas de Dieu. Je veux quelqu’un à moi, pas quelqu’un qui est à tout le monde” (“Listen father; don’t talk to me about God. I want someone who belongs only to me; I don’t want someone who belongs to everybody”) (78). He goes even further than Madame Lola, the transvestite who simply wants to become a woman. Cousin’s main desire is to be one with his python: in other words, he would like to be an animal, and at the end of the novel he starts to metamorphose into his pet. It is clear that these odd, quirky characters seek recognition through their individuality, and through their desire not to act in accordance with the ideology of mainstream society.

One lingering question remains; it is the following: why did Romain Gary feel this insatiable urge to detach himself so completely from his Gary signature -- both in terms of the themes he tackled and the style that he so successfully created -- and to hide so completely behind the Ajar persona? Perhaps the following explanations may help to throw some light on this fascinating topic. As has been stated earlier in this article, Gary felt throughout his life that despite his success as a novelist, the French media would always label him as a second-rate writer, because he did not belong to the Parisian intellectual elite. In fact, when *Les Racines du ciel* was published in 1956, Stephen Hecquet from the *Bulletin de Paris* had asserted that Gary’s novels should be placed in the same category as that of the “mediocre” writer Pierre Boulle, the author of the science fiction novel *Planet of the Apes* as well as *The Bridge over the River Kwai*. This meant that Gary’s oeuvre could, in no way, be compared to that of Camus, Sartre or Malraux (Bona 179). Martine Tessier, another literary critic, had asserted that *Les Racines du ciel* was so riddled with grammatical and syntactical errors that the author was probably illiterate (Bona 180). But the most virulent critic of all had been Kléber Haedens, who had described Gary as a very bad writer and had declared that it was important “de fonder un comité de défense de la langue française contre Romain Gary” (“to create a committee in the defense of the French language against Romain Gary”).<sup>3</sup> The general consensus of these critics was that Gary was very bad writer because he had not mastered the complexities of the French language.

It is a fact that Gary was not French at all; he was born in Vilnius, Lithuania in 1914, just a few years before the Bolshevik revolution, of Russian and Jewish parents. At first, he was brought up in the Russian language and in Yiddish, which is the language of

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<sup>3</sup> *Paris-Presses- L'intransigeant*, 1er décembre 1956.

“les pauvres ouvriers” (“poor working-class people”) (Bona 36). In 1928, at the age of fourteen, he emigrated to France with his mother and settled in Nice, quickly learned the French language, and, according to Jean-Marie Catonné did well in his studies (211). He also obtained a law degree in Paris. That did not prevent him from having identity problems throughout his working life. In 1938, for example, he came face to face with the forces of French intolerance. He had completed his advanced military training at the French Air Force Academy, which was a necessary step for those who wanted to join the French army. Among the three hundred candidates who wrote the final exam, he came out fourth; but he was the only one in his class not to receive the officer's commission, but to be made a basic airman. He was told by the army administrators, that only French born candidates or those naturalized French for at least ten years, could be considered for the rank of officer. He remained convinced, throughout his life, that racism was at the heart of the sanction which had been imposed on him. He was half Jewish, and he suspected that anti-Semitic sentiments were very much alive in the French army at that time. This is how he explained it later:

Dans le mauvais coup qui venait de m'être fait, je n'avais aucune peine à reconnaître la main de Totoche, le dieu de la bêtise, celui qui allait bientôt faire d'Hitler, le maître de l'Europe.

I immediately recognized Totoche's work at play here; Totoche, the God of stupidity who would soon make Hitler the master of Europe. (*Promesse* 218)

Even when he became fully integrated in the French family of “Les Compagnons de la Libération” during the war, he sensed that a naturalized Frenchman would never be a fully-fledged French person, but rather someone to be viewed with suspicion and a certain amount of derision. As he states in one of his autobiographies, he sometimes heard others refer to him in the offensive and racist term of “un mètèque” (“a wog”) (*Nuit* 23).

Another reason that could account for the shunning of his “oeuvre” by some literary critics was probably political. During the Second World War in France, Général de Gaulle had been the leading figure of French Resistance against the German Occupation. Gary had joined him in England in his fight against the Nazis; consequently, Gary had vowed allegiance to the General who had helped to save France from German domination. De Gaulle did become President of France after the war; but in the late sixties and in the seventies due to economic and political turmoil in France, admiring de Gaulle was seen as a mark of political incorrectness. Gary never wavered in his loyalty to him, however, and he talked openly about his admiration for the General. Gary had also amassed substantial wealth from the sales of his books and from the big-budget movie adaptations of his novels. He was living the high life of a jetsetter; he resided for a long

time in Hollywood and rubbed shoulders with many film stars like Marilyn Monroe, Charles Boyer, Edith Piaf, and Maurice Chevalier. Perhaps, in the eyes of the critics, these trappings of wealth “à l’américaine” meant only one thing: that Gary was merely a “dilettante” and not someone to be taken too seriously.

It is easy to postulate that Gary sought to avenge himself on the critics by creating the Ajar pseudonym and by engineering the entire Ajar hoax. In his posthumous confession, Gary did elaborate the profound reasons which had motivated him to create this hoax. He mentioned his existential malaise about being forever trapped and pegged in his Gary persona, and how he had been branded as a second-rate writer. He also explained how he had enjoyed being a spectator at his own second life, and how the pseudonym Ajar had allowed him to be reborn and renewed. Perhaps he felt the urge to recreate his existence and -- to use the Janus analogy -- to turn his back on his old self, look in the opposite direction, restart his writing career, and to inhabit this new fictitious creation. His metamorphosis was so complete that it allowed him to populate his Ajar novels with a stream of marginalized characters who were unlike his Gary characters; but with whom he felt a certain bond. Through them, he succeeded in thumbing his nose at the critics by saying: “Je me suis bien amusé. Au revoir et merci” (“I have really had a good laugh at your expense. Good-bye and thank-you”) (*Vie et Mort* 43), and he rejoiced at the thought of having fooled so many critics.

In other words, like Maldoror, Gary had placed himself at the physical vantage-point of an avenging God, where the blessed - Gary/Ajar- enjoyed the suffering of the damned (i.e., those critics who had disparaged his work). Beginning at a distance from the stricken vessel, like Maldoror, Gary guides us - in *Vie et Mort*- through the stages of his metamorphosis and emphasizes his distance from all his detractors. Because Gary had so successfully hoodwinked the literary establishment in France, he suffered a great amount of posthumous resentment after his death; but in the 1990’s, things started to change. Gary was taken seriously as a writer and brought within the broad scope of Holocaust literature. Also, today, he figures on the canon of serious French literary works of the twentieth century. In 2014 the Éditions Gallimard celebrated the centenary of his birth by releasing two unpublished texts by Gary: *Le Vin des morts* as well as one of his interviews. Also in 2019, Romain Gary was consecrated in Gallimard’s prestigious *Bibliothèque de la Pléiade* almost forty years after his death. As Louis-Philippe Ouimet, journalist at the Société Radio-Canada remarks “Au bout du compte, les fidèles et nombreux lecteurs de l’œuvre auront eu raison des détracteurs de la première heure” (“In the end, the many faithful readers of the work got the better of his first detractors”) (*Romain Gary parmi les immortels de la Pléiade*).

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