

Posthumous Louisiana: Louisiana's Literary Reinvention in Alfred Mercier's *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* (1881)*

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Alfred Mercier's 1881 novel *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars ou maîtres et esclaves en Louisiane, récit social* (*The Saint-Ybars Plantation or Masters and Slaves in Louisiana: A Social Narrative*)¹ portrays antebellum and postbellum Louisiana—with the Civil War functioning as a rupture, a foreign body that cuts the story in two. The first part of the narrative carefully describes the plantation and the personal dynamics between its members in the period up until the Civil War; the second part unravels the first by showing the plantation house's steady demise and the deaths of every member of its close-knit community one after the other. At the end of the novel, its main character Pélasse goes back to Europe, leaving nothing behind him—not even the graves of his loved ones, which are completely destroyed in a storm. Mercier's novel is a literary attempt to posthumously reconstruct a world its author used to know intimately, a meditation on what is left of *his* Louisiana in the wake of the Civil War and the Reconstruction period. Examining the novel's historical sources, narrative structure, and concern with the decline of French and Creole languages, I will argue that *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* is a Proustian remembrance of things past set in Louisiana—an attempt to undo the consequences of the Civil War by recreating a bygone world out of words. Admittedly, Proust emphasized involuntary memory, the phenomenon of recollection without conscious effort that he illustrates in various scenes of his masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time* (including the famous “madeleine

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episode” in *Swann’s Way*). This has no equivalent in Mercier’s novel, where the past is recreated by the use of third-person narrative and *autofiction*, a form of autobiographical writing that I will come back to later. But Mercier is very much like Proust in that he places the experience of grief at the very heart of his literary project.² He describes the irruption of a devastating conflict that provokes a complete reconfiguration of the society his characters used to inhabit—turning the recollection of the time before the war into so many memories of a lost world. Just as the advent of World War I had a dramatic influence, both on the elaboration of Proust’s œuvre and on its narrative content³, the same can also be argued about the Civil War’s impact on the structure of Mercier’s 1881 novel and the events it recounts. Proust and Mercier chose to depict the irremediability of the process of time and to represent the disastrous effects of war on individual lives. Mercier shares with Proust the hope that a work of art may capture the memory of a lost era and in so doing save that era from complete oblivion. Like Proust, Mercier is convinced that, something, at the very least, of the people we loved, of the experiences we lived, will be preserved as memory between the pages of a book—it is their artistic remedy for the turmoil of the upheavals their novels depict. Mercier and Proust produce posthumous representations of worlds gone by: worlds that no longer exists outside of the literary form given to them by authors who mourn the death of what they have lost all the while asserting their power to preserve its reinvented image for posterity.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

In *The Saint-Ybars Plantation*, Mercier uses memories of his own past to construct what is generally considered to be his masterpiece⁴. “The story’s accuracy cannot come as a surprise,” Edward Larocque Tinker observes, “since it is partly a literal transcription of the life Mercier was living on his father’s plantation” (Tinker 289).⁵ What exactly are the points of convergence between the writer’s life and the story he tells in *The Saint-Ybars Plantation*?

“Alfred Mercier’s roots run deep in the French colonial world,” observes Mary F. Cashell (6). His father, Jean-Baptiste Mercier, was born near Bordeaux in 1772. At the age of twenty-one, Jean-Baptiste headed to the United States in order to escape the social upheaval that followed the Revolution of 1789. He settled on a plantation in Jefferson Parish, just south of New Orleans, and married Marie-Héloïse Leduc, the granddaughter of a wealthy merchant from Louisiana. Located in McDonoghville, his plantation brought him close to one hundred and fifty-thousand dollars a year and made him an influential man in Louisiana. He was a man not dissimilar to Saint-Ybars, the patriarchal figure in the novel his son Alfred would write years

later. Alfred Mercier was born on his father's plantation on June 3, 1816. His French tutor, Pierre Soulé⁶ (1802-1870) was undoubtedly a source of inspiration for *The Saint-Ybars Plantation's* main character Pélasge. Mercier's elder by fourteen years, Soulé was passionately courting Mercier's sister, Henriette-Armanda, known as Armantine. During the reign of Charles X (1824-1830), Soulé had frequented progressive circles, the writers of the *Courrier français*, the *Constitutionnel* and *La Quotidienne*. He had been in jail and lived in London, Providence, and New York before landing in New Orleans in 1825. While waiting to be admitted to the bar, he made a living giving private lessons on Jean-Baptiste Mercier's plantation, then married his employer's daughter Armantine in 1828. The similarities between Soulé and Pélasge are many. At the beginning of the novel, Pélasge is described as a twenty-three year old who had "already suffered terribly for his political opinions":

Wounded and taken prisoner on the Paris barricades during the June Days of 1848, he had been deported to Africa. After having endured for sixteen months the hardships of captivity and the harsh climate of Lambessa, he managed to escape and embarked at Oran upon a ship bound for Cadiz. (77-78)

Where Soulé protested against the Restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in the 1820s, Pélasge is part of the June Days uprising of 1848 that railed against the closure of the National Workshops. Mercier most likely chose to link Pélasge to historical events from the middle of the nineteenth century rather than the beginning of the Restoration in order to include several decades of Louisiana history within a single book. In spite of its relative brevity (421 pages in the volume published by Éditions Guérin), *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* aims to give a panoramic view of the history of Louisiana during the second half of the nineteenth century and in many respects prefigures another work about the South, the Civil War, and its aftermath: Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*.⁷ If Soulé and Pélasge share similar political convictions, parallels may also be drawn between their occupation (tutor on a plantation near New Orleans) and private lives: the fictional character, like his model, marries his pupil's sister. These many points of overlap between biographical and fictional elements reveal a hidden dimension to the work. *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* is subtitled "a Social Narrative" in the Balzacian tradition of novels that depict whole sections of French society. Set during the first half of the nineteenth century, some of Balzac's most famous novels have as their protagonists ambitious social climbers (Eugène de Rastignac in *Old Goriot* and Lucien de Rumbempré in *Lost Illusions*) who try to become

part of a social milieu that is at first completely foreign to them. Similarly, Pélasge attempts to find his place in a community whose codes, values, and specific culture he discovers along with the reader. However, something is simultaneously taking place in the story for Mercier, something deeply personal that makes his work a metaphorical autobiography. In contemporary terms, we might call this an *autofiction*: a text where the author freely uses personal material, alluding to his own life without attesting through the use of an “autobiographical pact” the complete identity of the writer, the narrator and the character.⁸

Further details from Mercier’s biography reveal an even greater overlap between his life and the story told in the novel. As he spoke Creole better than French and did not speak English at all as a child, Soulé encouraged Mercier to continue his studies in Paris. On May 5, 1830, when he was about to turn fourteen, Mercier left for France. After a forty-five day journey, he arrived in Paris just as Louis-Philippe d’Orléans was ascending to the throne. In 1836, Mercier earned his *Baccalauréat* (high-school diploma) at *Lycée Louis-le-Grand*, one of the oldest and most prestigious schools in France. In *The Saint-Ybars Plantation*, the character Démon goes to Paris and studies at the *Collège Saint-Louis*. This interplay between the biographical and the fictional is representative of the way Mercier constructs Démon; Mercier does not make Démon his exact doppelgänger (the school he attends is not called *Louis-le-Grand*, for example) but he does suggest, through the similarity between the names of these Parisian institutions, that the memories of his own past permeate the fiction he narrates.

Following his graduation from high-school, Mercier enrolled in law school but had to drop out after his family suddenly found itself in financial crisis. In 1837, his father had been forced into bankruptcy by the New Orleans Improvement and Banking Company, of which Pierre Soulé had been made director in 1834.⁹ The Bank had sunk its fortune into the extravagant project of building the “Hôtel Saint-Louis”, which had cost almost one million dollars by the time of its completion in 1836.¹⁰ Jean-Baptiste Mercier’s fortune was severely diminished by this financial disaster (what remained of his wealth was to disappear after the Civil War). As a result, he could only afford to keep one of his sons in school: he chose to support Armand, who was just finishing his medical studies, and called Alfred back home. The less fortunate son then became a freelance journalist.

During the Civil War, Alfred Mercier lived in France where he tried to rally his father’s homeland to the cause of the South. In *Du panlatinisme. Nécessité d’une alliance entre la France et la Confédération du Sud* (*On Panlatinism. The Necessity of an Alliance between France and the Confederation of the South*), Mercier describes the “Latin” cultural heritage

shared by France and Louisiana in order to advocate a military alliance between France and the South. However, this political pamphlet did not win over the French authorities.¹¹ After Prussia's crushing victory over the Austrian Empire at Sadowa on July 3, 1866, Mercier grew convinced that war would soon break out between France and Prussia; it was at this time that he returned to the United States, arriving in New Orleans only to discover that the war had taken what few possessions his family had left.

Once again, Démon's life and the author's own experience converge: Démon goes back to Louisiana as Mercier did and finds his childhood home almost completely destroyed. These numerous parallels between Mercier's life and the story told by *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* offer us an interpretation of the novel as a literary attempt to overcome the personal disaster caused by the Civil War and the global destruction of the world of Mercier's boyhood.

A Narrative Rupture

"For the majority of the first and longest section of the book", notes Kristin Graves, "Mercier romanticizes Louisiana Creole and its antebellum plantation setting as an open discursive space of discovery, persuasion, laughter, storytelling, song, and fluid expression of lived experience" (121-22). Through the eyes of Pélasge, the reader discovers this "exotic yet perfectly ordered paradise" (122) at a slow pace that is metaphorically figured by the Mississippi river. When Pélasge arrives by boat to the plantation (Chapter II), the leisurely pace of the navigation imparts its rhythm to the first half of the novel: step by step, the reader becomes acquainted with the people living on the plantation. From the main character's perspective, the reader learns the particular occupations, nicknames, and physical characteristics of the plantation's inhabitants: for instance, chapters V-VII focus on several characters (Démon, Mamrie, Man Sophie, and her daughters).

After this detailed introduction, which vividly brings the plantation world to life, it is a shock to the reader to learn of the characters' fates in Chapter XXXI, creating a narrative rupture. The reader witnesses the sudden destruction of the community the novel has been describing:

Saint-Ybars' sons and sons-in-law all enlisted. Of these nine brave young men, six of whom were married, only three would come back. When the Union armies took Louisiana, Saint-Ybars was forced to declare himself for or against the United States. He responded proudly that he was the enemy of a union imposed by force. . . . Brought before General Butler, he had to submit to a barrage of questions each more ludicrous than the

last; after which, he was sent to Fort Lafayette where he died from what he had endured both physically and morally. (222)

Mary F. Cashell (15) notes the enduring influence of the Napoleonic Code on Louisiana's state law after the Louisiana Purchase: in the legal system adopted in Louisiana, deriving from the Napoleonic Code of 1804, the patriarchal authority of fathers over children and husbands over wives made the father a symbolic and legal authority. With Saint-Ybars's death, it is the social organization of the plantation that is suddenly beheaded. His brutal end is directly linked to the beginning of his home's decay: "His royal residence was transformed into a barracks" (Mercier, *L'Habitation* 222) notes the novelist after the excerpt quoted above, as if chaos was the immediate and inevitable consequence of the disappearance of the master of the house. The whole social organization meticulously described in the first section of the novel dramatically changes as everyone is forced to find a new place to live after the war: Pélasge welcomes Saint-Ybars' wife and children into his home while the daughters-in-law of Mrs. Saint-Ybars find shelter with their respective families (222-23).

Whereas every detail of the antebellum plantation is depicted in near photographic detail, the Civil War itself is barely described by Mercier; the reader does not witness the actual conflict and the destruction of Saint-Ybars' world but only its aftermath, its effect upon the community that the reader discovered in the first chapters of the book. Neither the battles taking place outside the plantation nor the occupation of the plantation house are represented. Instead, the reader is starkly presented with soldiers coming to the plantation and starting the process of destruction that will eventually be completed by slaves and wild animals:

The house of the former masters . . . was in turn attacked by the looters. The sun, the wind, the dust and the rain began to pierce right through the house as its doors and windows were removed. Mademoiselle Pulchérie was forced to flee; she ends up imposing herself upon Madame Saint-Ybars' sister. The floorboards gave way, followed by the columns, beams, panels, and staircases. Soon nothing was left but the brick carcass that was akin to an abandoned fortress after a siege. The bricks themselves were carried away; all that one could still see of the Saint-Ybars' magnificent house were a few sections of the first-floor walls, in the shade of which old wandering cows would come to rest. (223-24)

If the novel's first section is a literary recreation of a lost world, where every detail is catalogued precisely because the novelist knows he is describing a microcosm forever gone at the time of the book's writing, the second part can be interpreted as a moving meditation on what is left of the world Pélasge discovered when he was still a newcomer—a cruel narrative of decay in which everyone and everything apart from the main character come to their end. To use Biblical analogies, the first section depicts the Garden of Eden whereas the second reads like the story of Job.

Preserving the Past

If we accept the notion that Mercier is recreating a world turned topsy-turvy by the Civil War, we must then study the literary techniques he uses to preserve and recreate his childhood universe. One of them is the division of the book into short chapters, which allows him to devote time to each aspect of the plantation so its features can be saved from oblivion. A brief glance at the names of the chapters in the first section of the novel is enlightening in this respect. Each of them is devoted to a particular aspect of the plantation or to a character, sometimes both. Chapter III is entitled “The Plantation—Vieumaite”; Chapter X is “The Indians—Old Sachem.” Some characters are associated with the place they belong to: Vieumaite is the plantation's old master; the remaining American Indians live in the shadow of Old Sachem. Chapter VI (“Mamrie”) is exemplary of the novelist's typical procedure for introducing a new character. First, he describes Mamrie's physical appearance: “She was the very picture of a Creole negress . . . Mamrie had very fine skin of a glossy black, thick hair that was soft to the touch, and great languid eyes full of kindness” (Mercier, *L'Habitation* 113). Then, he tells her life story (113-17), stressing particular events and finally insisting on permanent aspects of her personality: “If Mamrie knew how to love, she also knew how to hate. She loathed Miss Pulchérie and Monsieur Héhé . . .” (113). Broadly speaking, the book's first section fulfils the role of an introductory act within a play, depicting the characters, their relations and the tensions between them in order to lay the groundwork for the events that will be revealed as the plot unfolds. For instance, Chapter IV (“The Family around the Table”) describes Pélasge's first impressions upon meeting new characters, impressions both positive and negative about their personalities that will later be confirmed by the events narrated in the book.

Nevertheless, this first section is not devoid of a certain tragic irony that relates to the fact that the characters introduced here will pass away by the end of the novel. Many details are arranged to foreshadow the characters'

fates, creating an effect of premonition that can only be fully interpreted in light of a second reading of the text. For example, when Mamrie intently and lovingly gazes upon Démon's face, seeming to mirror the little boy's expressions in her own face ("Her mobile, expressive features reflected everything that took place on the little boy's face as if he were speaking in front of a mirror." *L'Habitation* 140) the reader encounters the intensity of an intimate bond that will later drive Mamrie to commit suicide over the dead body of Démon.¹² Consequently, the first part of the book is meant to give a painstaking portrait of characters who will be dead by the end of the novel; their physical description, their affective bonds are represented in order to give them a form of literary existence. (We can only guess as to which traits Mercier borrowed from real people.) At the novel's ending, nothing remains of these characters apart from the posthumous account of what they used to be.

Creole plays a critical role in this undertaking to preserve the past. The Creole language is presented at once as a foreign body within the text and as an endangered species requiring immediate protection. The novelist gives entire sections of dialogue in Creole. While our edition of the novel provides translation of the Creole dialogue into French, when it first appeared in 1881, these sections were given without any translation or gloss to help the reader. The contemporary French reader would have been presented with whole sections they could understand only with great effort—if at all. By writing dialogue in Creole, Mercier infuses his text with a sense of foreignness, a choice that can be interpreted in two different ways.

First, it might be considered as an indirect means to make a claim for the singularity of French-language novels written in Louisiana. Indeed, Louisiana natives who spent a significant amount of time in France and were educated in the French capital like Mercier felt a great deal of deference toward French culture and its literary models. In the preface to *Les Cenelles* (1845), an anthology of poetry written by Louisiana Creoles, Armand Lanusse pays tribute to French writers of his time and encourages Francophone Louisiana poets to emulate their work: "But those for whom we feel the greatest sympathy are the young men whose imagination is much taken with everything that is grand and beautiful in the career that Hugo and Dumas followed with such glory . . ." (10). Lanusse's reverence towards the major figures of nineteenth-century French literature has much in common with the unconditional respect on the part of French writers of the Old Regime who took the side of the Ancients in the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns—asserting the superiority of Greek and Latin literature over anything modern men and women of letters might produce.¹³ Similarly, Lanusse wishes to defend the young Louisiana Francophone writers who

without having the mad ambition of ever reaching the same heights as the great masters of literature of whom we have just spoken, are nevertheless faced with all the same annoyances that these transcendent geniuses endured at the beginning of their literary existences . . . (10-11)

In nineteenth-century Francophone Louisiana, Chateaubriand,¹⁴ Hugo, and Théophile Gautier were held in the same regard as Virgil, Sophocles and Horace during the seventeenth-century, when poets and playwrights such as Boileau and Racine declared the artistic merit of these authors to be unsurpassable. Exemplary of this phenomenon of admiration for French writers, Mercier's first novel, *Le Fou de Palerme* (*The Madman of Palermo*, 1873) owes much to the tales of the French Romantics Gautier and Alexandre Dumas; the catalogue of Éditions Tintamarre¹⁵ presents Mercier's novel as a "delightful example of Louisiana Romanticism."

Nevertheless, Mercier's work in *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* cannot be described as a simple reproduction of French literary models in a Louisiana context. Indeed, the novel asserts its own specificity through the extensive presence of Creole within the text: this language is the reflection of the unique construction of the identity of Louisiana writers—its use allows Mercier to make an implicit claim in favor of the uniqueness of Francophone writing in America, a symbolic secession from the cultural hegemony of the French metropole. If *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* is widely considered to be one the greatest achievements of Louisiana Francophone writing, it is surely because Mercier wrote the work of a "Modern", so to speak, recognizing the greatness of his French literary predecessors while asserting a right to originality and linguistic verve.

By writing dialogue in Creole, Mercier pursues a second objective: *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* is also, as Laurence Rosenwald points out, the expression of Mercier's "doomed struggle" in favor of ". . . Louisiana Francophone culture in a world dominated by the Anglophone North" (228). Indeed, the extensive use of Creole can be interpreted in another way: as a testimony for future generations. While Démon is studying in Paris, he writes to Mamrie in Creole, attracting the interest of his Parisian host family:

He wrote to Mamrie in Creole; she replied to him in the same fashion. Mamrie's letters were greatly admired by Monsieur and Madame Garnier; they showed them to family friends and Démon translated them. Monsieur Garnier had several of the letters published in a philological journal accompanied by Pélasge's commentaries on the Creole language. (Mercier, *L'Habitation* 201)

These letters in Creole are not only translated into French—they even come with philological comments. To some extent, the Creole language itself is preserved through the reproduction of a sample and an adjacent linguistic study: its inscription into Mercier's novel written in French has a performative impact, expressing the author's opposition to the growing dominance of English and American culture in Louisiana after the Civil War.

Years before the publication of *The Saint-Ybars Plantation*, when Mercier tried to instigate a French intervention in favor of the Confederacy, he was already expressing his concern about Anglophone America's destructive influence after the Louisiana Purchase:

Let us consider what has become of the former French colonies of North America, assimilated less than a half century ago into the great Anglo-American family. What remains there of the primal character of the Frenchman as a political and commercial influence? As little as nothing. (*Du Panlatinisme* 14)

Seeing himself as the member of an “invaded people” (*Du Panlatinisme* 14), Mercier grew more and more concerned about the future of Louisiana Francophone and Creole culture, to such an extent that his struggle shifted from a political commitment in favor of the South to a philological endeavor expressing his desire to preserve remnants of a culture that he considered to be on the verge of destruction. In 1880, only a year before the publication of *The Saint-Ybars Plantation*, Mercier published a short essay called *Étude sur la langue créole en Louisiane* (*Study on the Creole Language in Louisiana*) in which he presents a grammatical study of Creole and gives the Creole version of “The Wedding of Miss Calinda” along with its French translation (378-81). At the beginning of this work, Mercier observes that: “Negro patois—Creole, as it is called—is still widespread in Louisiana; there is a whole neighborhood of New Orleans where it is used in intimate settings, as when speaking to servants or children” (378). On the surface, Mercier seems to express a certain confidence about the vitality of the Creole language; he writes that it is used in a whole area of New Orleans. But at the same time, the reader may detect an underlying anxiety about the future of Creole; Mercier writes that it is “still widespread”, as if its days were already numbered. After the disaster of the Civil War and the subsequent threats to the status of French and Creole in Louisiana, these linguistic studies (both the fictive and the real one) can be seen as attempts to preserve a language in danger of extinction. As Anne Malena points out of New Orleans Creoles:

. . . they were people of translation and their use of translation to ensure the survival of French culture in New Orleans represented a perfectly logical strategy for America, especially in the historical context of the United States, whose homogenizing forces, triggered by the Civil War, were at the root of the French language's disappearance in New Orleans.
(84)

A Retrospective Illusion?

If the novel can be read as the posthumous recreation of a lost world, we may wonder if Mercier is not the victim of a retrospective illusion that leads him to embellish the past through the experience of recollection. This phenomenon is most strongly present in the depiction of the intimacy between plantation members. Édouard Fortier goes as far as describing the novel's main subject as this positive representation of the relationship between masters and slaves: "In 1881, Doctor Alfred Mercier showed us the real Louisiana master in his *Habitation Saint-Ybars*. He wrote this novel in order to show us that that the relations between master and slave were wholly amicable. *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* is a charming story of harmonious understanding." (15). Indeed, Mercier describes the daily interactions between masters and slaves, cohabiting in a household where they grow up together and live in permanent familiarity. In several instances, slaves are literally members of the master's family, the reader eventually discovers that two of them share the same blood with Saint-Ybars: the "Duke of Lauzun" is his illegitimate son and "Mr. Salvador" his elder brother. In Chapter IX, the narrator describes the relations between the two brothers: if Saint-Ybars and Salvador follow the rules of their social environment by behaving in public as a master and a slave are supposed to, in private they treat each other with familiarity and are united by fraternal love. But the affective bond overcoming the social and racial split between masters and slaves is nowhere as visible as between Mamrie and Démon. In Chapter VI, Mamrie is described as a second mother to Démon, in many ways more present and affectionate than his biological mother: her very identity consists in her maternal role since her given name includes half of "Maman" ("Mommy") and sounds quite like the English "Mama." The novelist tells us that Mamrie gave up everything, including liberty and prosperity, only to live with Démon on the plantation. By insisting upon the existence of affection between whites planters and slaves on the *habitation* (a French word underlining the shared experience of a *habitat* where they live together), Mercier creates a world that is not the one he really witnessed when he was living on his father's plantation but

its reconstruction as an Edenic space tragically destroyed by the Civil War. Mercier's nostalgia for the antebellum South leads to the representation of a slave plantation as a utopia whose retrospective embellishment mirrors the description of the lost grandeur of the French Empire in the New World.¹⁶

The utopian aspect of the plantation world in Mercier's novel results in particular from the radical split between field and house slaves. While the latter are represented as unique individuals with a specific story and a rich personality, the former are shadowy figures—in the rare cases in which they appear, they are wholly undifferentiated from one another. In Chapter XIX (“The Flight”), the reader sees a number of field slaves standing on the shore, hesitating over whether to help Démon who is about to be drowned in the Mississippi, until Man Sémiramis forces them to save him. None of them is referred to name: they are collectively designated as “Niggers” or individually by the expression “a young nigger.” By placing field slaves in the background of his story and stressing the existence of sentimental bonds between masters and house slaves, Mercier organizes its representation of the plantation world around familiarity and affection while—consciously or not—drawing a veil over the violence, abuse and sheer horror unseparable from slave labor.

Mercier's insistence upon the familiarity and affection between masters and house slaves goes some way to explaining the paradoxical nature of the characters' position on slavery itself. While the characters regularly express strong anti-slavery sentiments¹⁷, they also emphasize what they call “attenuations to the slavery system”, in particular the masters' personal qualities that supposedly alleviate the harshness of the slaves' condition:

“One does not truly know a given social situation before seeing it in all of its aspects with one's own eyes. Pélasge could not under any circumstances give his approval to slavery; but living in Louisiana, he was compelled to initiate himself in those causes which may, in the households of kind and wise masters, lessen the ill of an institution based upon the violation of human rights” (*L'Habitation* 106)

The contradiction between anti-slavery opinions expressed by the characters and the utopian description of Saint-Ybars' slave organization may be reconciled if we recognized the role played by the recollection of the past after the destruction of the *habitation*. It has a pronounced effect upon the novelist's tendency to embellish the reality of what used to be the plantation world. Only in retrospect does life in Saint-Ybar's kingdom come to seem so pleasant for all, including its house slaves: through a sentimental remembrance of

things past, in the first half of the novel Mercier reinvents the antebellum plantation—presenting a repugnant system of human exploitation as a lost paradise.

“In Search of Lost Time” in Louisiana

In the second part of the novel, Mercier describes the progressive annihilation of the plantation. Eventually, nothing remains of either the *habitation* or its inhabitants, all of them slain during the war or fall victim to its aftermath. The last stage of the destruction occurs when a storm blows away the giant tree Old Sachem:

. . . the canopy of the ancient oak had disappeared; in the midst of the empty space it had left, its colossal trunk, stripped of all its branches, rose up like a funeral pyre. . . . The storm, while it raged, had uprooted all the trees of the oak grove; the lightning had scattered the branches of Old Sachem everywhere. The tomb of the Saint-Ybars, crushed and pummeled into the ground, had disappeared from sight beneath a pile of wood and leaves. Branches, thick as the trunks of great trees, were strewn pell-mell over the tombs of Vieumaite, Démon, Blanchette and Mamrie. (*L’Habitation* 307)

Describing the disappearance of a metaphor of life, this event is one of the most poignant symbols of oblivion imaginable. Old Sachem is a symbol of historical continuity, its roots run deep in the soil of Louisiana: in Chapter X, the reader learns that American Indians used to take refuge in its shade. The majestic tree was still standing after the destruction of the Native American tribes, witness to a new period in Louisiana history: the Creole world, dominated by white planters ruling plantations. Its downfall at the end of *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* is a metaphor for the extinction of the Creole world to which Mercier’s characters belong. Moreover, the accompanying annihilation of the tombs entails the complete oblivion of those who were buried there. The graves are meant to preserve people’s remains and afford their family a place to accomplish the process of grief: Pélasge is deprived of this possibility and no longer has any link to this part of the world where he first came as a foreigner but later made his home. Once again, he is a stranger in Louisiana, which has been radically altered after his efforts to become part of it. At the end of the novel, Pélasge leaves Louisiana, a place where there is no longer any hope for him since the political renewal he longs for can only come from the old but politically evolved Europe (this paradoxical

representation of the “old” world as the only place where progress is likely to occur is embodied in Mercier’s novel by the Count Casimir Dziliwieff, an old man animated by burning republican ideals).¹⁸

The physical destruction of the plantation serves as a metaphor for the progressive destruction of Franco-Creole Louisiana. In “La langue française en Louisiane” (“The French Language in Louisiana”), an article published in 1880 along with the above-mentioned *Study on the Creole Language*, Alfred Mercier expresses a fierce defense of French against the on-going Anglicization of Louisiana:

But just because we exert ourselves to speak English well, is it a good reason to forget our French? Believing that two languages is too many is, as a wit once said, to think in the same way as the madman, who, finding his two arms to be too many, cut one of them off. (402-04)

Published in the context of nineteenth-century Louisiana, this “defense and illustration of the French language” (to borrow the title of François du Bellay’s 1549 essay in favor of the use of French against classical languages) participates in a larger project, embodied by “l’Athénée Louisianais”¹⁹. In April 1876, along with several friends from the New Orleans elite, Mercier decided to establish a society whose main objectives would be the promotion of the French language in the South and the encouragement of literary, artistic and scientific works in French, with the additional role of serving as an association for mutual assistance. In July 1876, the first *Comptes-rendus de l’Athénée Louisianais* (*Proceedings of the Athénée Louisianais*) were published; Mercier remained secretary of the *Athénée* until his death in 1894. In the words of Rien Fertel, “The public voice of a very private organization, the *Comptes-rendus de l’Athénée Louisianais* sought to replace the mass of failing journals while making one last attempt to revitalize written French” (65).

By showing the destruction of Saint-Ybars’ plantation, Mercier expresses the end of a world that was characterized by the use of French language, among other things. Consequently, Mercier’s commitment to the preservation of both Creole and French can be seen as a war he knew he was fighting in vain: *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* is a melancholic and moving acknowledgment of failure on Mercier’s part since Pélasge’s decision to move back to Europe and to leave forever the ruined plantation resonates with the author’s definitive farewell to Louisiana. The horizon grows even darker in Mercier’s last work, *Johnelle* (1891): published a decade after *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* and only three years before his death, this novella

“. . . mourns the loss of Louisiana’s Franco-Creole future that might have been as figured in the specter of the beautiful Creole baby Johnelle, aborted at birth by her merciless mother from New York” (Graves 151).

Mercier’s colleagues in the *Athénée Louisianais* shared his melancholic view of Louisiana’s future. In a speech published in the 1894 *Proceedings of the Athénée Louisianais*, Alcée Fortier—professor of Romance Languages at Tulane University and author of numerous works on language, literature, and Louisiana history—gives a tribute to French culture in Louisiana that is at the same time a kind of funeral oration:

Our volumes from the nineteenth century will remain in libraries and give future generations a notion of the intellectual life in our State. A people that reads and writes, that concerns itself with literature and art, never perishes, and we have the satisfaction of thinking that we will have contributed to cultivating the cult of truth and beauty among our fellow citizens by helping preserve in Louisiana the French language, that admirable medium of human thought. (73)

The use of the future perfect (“we will have contributed”) betrays the fact that the orator considers his endeavour as something that is already set to end: while asserting that *L’Athénée* promoted the conservation of French culture in Louisiana, its spokesman implies that what remains of that renaissance exists only on the bookshelves of a library.

“Memory is but Regret”

“. . . the memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment; and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years” (Proust, *Swann’s Way* 462) observes the narrator of *Swann’s Way*. Proust’s relentless efforts to capture the fleeting images of lost objects signal his paradoxical ambition to seek reality within the images stored in one’s mind: trying to preserve the memory of a lost world through the power of writing necessarily implicates the simultaneous safeguard of its retrospective magnification. Mercier shared with Proust a tragic awareness of time as a permanent process of destruction, something he vividly expressed in his personal diary where he wrote: “Life is a shipwreck, save yourself” (qtd. in Hamel 29). And, like Proust, he created a representation in which nostalgia leads to a complete reinvention of a lost world: retrospectively, a slave plantation appears as an ordered paradise where masters and slaves, French and Creole, live together in perfect harmony. *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* is a literary attempt to save

from the abyss of time the last debris of a world shattered by the Civil War but also the reinvention of the microcosm it tries to safeguard for posterity as a posthumous and idealized image.

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NOTES

¹On Mercier and *The Saint-Ybars Plantation*, see Reinecke.

²In Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator falls in love with Albertine, who passes away in the sixth volume: *Albertine disparue*; Mercier's Pélasge also loses the woman he loves, Chant d'Oisel. Her agony is described in Chapter XXXIII ("After the War") of *The Saint-Ybars Plantation*.

³On this topic, see Chardin and Dyer.

⁴Laurence Rosenwald notes the existence of a consensus regarding the appreciation of *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars*'s significance within Mercier's literary production: "*L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* is often singled out as Mercier's best work for its loving and careful description of scenes Mercier knew from his childhood" (219).

⁵All translations are the author's.

⁶Before *The Saint-Ybars Plantation*, Mercier wrote a biography of his tutor and later brother-in-law: *Biographie de Pierre Soulé*.

⁷The depiction of intimacy between slaves and masters is one of the many points in common between the works of Mercier and Mitchell: the "mother-son" relation between Mamrie and Démon prefigures the "mother-daughter" relation between Scarlett and her Mammy, played by Hattie McDaniels in the 1939 film adaptation directed by Victor Fleming.

⁸On this topic, see Lejeune.

⁹On this topic, see Hamel, p. 9.

¹⁰Pierre Soulé wished to make the "Hôtel Saint-Louis" a center of financial and political activity in order to counterbalance the influence of the Anglo-Americans financiers living in New Orleans' Garden District. On Soulé's plans for the "Hôtel Saint-Louis," see Mercier, *Biographie*, pp. 45-48.

¹¹On the role played by three Louisiana Creoles (Paul Pequet du Bellet, Alfred Mercier, and Charles Deléry) in attempting to persuade France to support the Confederacy during the Civil War, see Nacouzi.

¹²See Chapter XLVII ("Tragedy") of Mercier's *L'Habitation*.

¹³On this topic, see DeJean.

¹⁴Chateaubriand, who described the southern part of what would become the United States in both *Atala* (1801) and *Les Natchez* (1827), was a particularly strong influence on Louisiana Francophone writers. Alfred Mercier's *La Rose de Smyrne et L'Ermite de Niagara* borrows images and themes from Chateaubriand's *Atala* and his *Itinéraire de Paris* (1811). On this topic, see Amelincks, pp. 65-72.

¹⁵On this press, see Bruce, pp. 223-41.

¹⁶On this topic, see Bancel, Blanchard, and Vergès.

¹⁷Démon writes from Paris: "In the conscience of the nineteenth century, slavery has been condemned. Dead as a belief even in the minds of the masters, it is nothing now but a brutal fact, a question of money, and the debate will resolutely decide against the South [...]. The freeing of negroes is one of the imperatives of our time [...]" (Mercier, *L'Habitation* 225).

¹⁸In " 'Vivre dans la vérité' ," Barstad compares the conclusion of *The Saint-Ybars Plantation* to the ending of Émile Zola's 1885 novel, *Germinal*.

¹⁹On *L'Athénée Louisianais* and Mercier's fight to preserve the French language, see Fertel, pp. 49-70.

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