

Beyond the Sentimental: Slavery and Revolution in *Sarah*

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Abstract

This paper examines the novella *Sarah* (1821) by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore through the lens of colonial history at the intersections of the French Revolution and the revolution in the French Caribbean at the turn of the nineteenth century. The novella's realist depiction of the physical and mental ordeal of the enslaved records the author's living experience in the Antilles upon the reestablishment of slavery, and reveals the economic foundation of the colonial plantation system. Going beyond the sentimental and challenging France's metropole-centric view of history, Desbordes-Valmore's fiction makes a radical gesture of empowering the colonised to develop, maintain, and transmit a spirit of rebellion and resistance against the oppression of slavery and patriarchy.

Introduction

For the last two decades and increasingly since the new millennium, continuous scholarly attention to colonial slavery and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade has injected new vigor into French studies, bringing back from oblivion not only obscure works from minor authors but also lesser-known texts by well-studied writers. The novella examined here, *Sarah*, by Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786-1859), a major figure in French Romanticism, offers an example in the latter case. Initially published in 1821, the story of the eponymous heroine, a white girl on a Caribbean island plantation,

whose status oscillates between freedom and enslavement, attracted long-due critical attention when its modern edition came out in 2006 (Boutin). In a 2007 special issue of the journal *L'Esprit Créateur* on race, gender and French colonialism, four out of the ten articles of the volume focused on *Sarah*. In 2008, the Modern Language Association of America's Texts and Translations series published the novella in a twin set of French and English versions, making it more available to the general academic public. Current scholarship on this important work, however, has yet to achieve its full potential. So far critics interpret

Sarah as primarily a sentimental tale in which resistance is mainly located “in the repetition of emotional responses” (Boutin, 2007: 65), and those who agree that the novella engages with history and antislavery concede that it does so only “covertly” (Kadish, 2007: 99), “symbolically” (Jenson, 2007: 90), and “metaphorically” (Jenson and Kadish, 2008: ix). This paper’s historically informed and politically engaged reading endeavors to reveal the ways in which *Sarah* goes beyond the sentimental to represent an authentic plantation society, as well as to embody the revolution in the French Caribbean.

Transatlantic Memories under the Restoration

To call *Sarah* “the single firsthand literary witness of the Revolutionary Caribbean history” (Jenson, 2007: 82) is no exaggeration. By historical circumstances, the then sixteen-year-old Marceline Desbordes spent most of the year 1802 in the French Caribbean when crucial events with regard to slavery and revolution took place. In January, when Napoleon Bonaparte sent a French expedition army to Saint-Domingue with the mission of retaking the island from slave rebellion under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture, Marceline Desbordes and her mother boarded a ship in Bordeaux bound for Guadeloupe. Upon their arrival, unable to land on their intended destination that was blocked, mother and daughter stayed from February to May on Saint-Barthélemy, a Swedish possession that was at the time a shelter for masses of colonist refugees from neighboring islands. When they finally landed in Guadeloupe in mid-May, what awaited them were simultaneous eruptions of war and yellow fever. On 20 May, the French

envoy general Richepanse reestablished slavery despite military resistance led by the Martinican-born mulatto officer Louis Delgrès. On 28 May, the besieged Delgrès blew up his last refuge in the hills of Matouba, killing himself as well as his own and the French troops. Four days earlier on 24 May, Marceline’s mother died of yellow fever (Ambrière, 1987, 1:103). Before she could leave the island, the bereaved Marceline lived through Richepanse’s regime of mass execution, deportation and manhunt, and saw captured slaves “in an iron cage” (Ambrière, 1987, 1:103). In June Toussaint Louverture was kidnapped and sent to France where he would then die in prison in 1803. Marceline stopped in Saint-Domingue in July on her way back to France (Ambrière, 1987, 1:106), then sailed from Cap Français and arrived in Brest in August. When she returned alone to Lille in November, her friends organised a charity performance, labeling her as “échapée aux massacres de la Guadeloupe” (Ambrière, 1987, 1:116). Back in France Marceline resumed her career of actress, leading a marginal life in socioeconomic terms.

Circumstances surrounding its publication in 1821 make *Sarah* a pioneering intervention in matters colonial. Under the Restoration, apart from three major territory losses – Louisiane, sold to the United States, Saint-Domingue/Haiti, become independent, and Ile de France/Mauritius passed over to British rule, the ancient régime’s colonial empire was restored to the status quo ante, in which plantation-slave system reigned supreme. The slave rebellion and the Haitian Revolution still haunting the French consciousness, the metropolitan public would rather not hear about the recent past of revolutionary turmoil

on the other side of the Atlantic, so much so that in the beginning of the 1820s, a general “apathy” still prevailed in society at large with regard to colonial slavery (Debbasch, 1961). As for the slave trade, despite its official ban in 1818 and renewed abolitionist efforts from a liberal Protestant elite who formed in 1821 the Société de la Morale Chrétienne, ambiguous government attitude and lax law enforcement contributed to a new surge of the trade which reached a height between 1820 and 1825 (Kielstra, 2000: 119). In fact, to entitle the collection of novellas in which *Sarah* appeared *Les veillées des Antilles* [Evenings in the West Indies] in 1821 was a risky political gesture for its author, because it necessarily harks back to a time and place that metropole France would prefer to keep out of sight and out of mind. *Sarah* was a lone voice on the margin and from the bottom up, so to speak. This becomes obvious when we take into consideration a contemporaneous work, the short novel *Ourika*, written in 1821 (Miller, 2008: 162), about an African girl brought up by a French aristocrat who dies of melancholy because of unrequited love. As A. James Arnold (2008) pertinently assesses, the author Claire de Duras “uses *Ourika* to write back from a white Creole perspective against the revolution that had dispossessed her class in Saint-Domingue” (181). *Sarah*, in stark contrast, reveals the economic foundation of colonial slavery, depicts the physical and mental ordeal of the enslaved, and empathises with the rebels upon the reestablishment of slavery.

Africa the Mother/land

The close correlation of geographical displacement and maternal loss in Desbordes-Valmore’s early life experience enabled her to concep-

tualise a particular relationship between “mother” and “land.” The 1821 edition of *Les Veillées des Antilles* contains an *Avertissement* [Foreword] in which the semi-autobiographical frame narrator addresses the reader in an elegiac tone of loss, trauma, and mourning:

J’ai donné à ces esquisses le nom même du lieu où elles ont été tracées: c’est en traversant la mer, c’est en revenant de l’Amérique en France, que j’ai, bien jeune encore, senti le besoin d’adoucir de profonds chagrins. J’ai laissé errer ma plume, sans autre inspiration que le souvenir. Je demande grâce pour le sentiment de tristesse qui dominera trop dans ces futiles pages. Hélas! pouvait-il en être autrement? j’étais orpheline; j’étais assaillie de souffrances et d’orages entre la terre qui avait recueilli ma mère, et celle qui portait le nom de ma patrie! (Boutin, 2006: 3)

[I have given these lines the name of the place where they were first drafted: it was when crossing the sea, returning from the Americas back to France, that I, still very young, felt the need to relieve deep sorrows. I let go my pen, inspired by nothing but my memory. I beg pardon for the feeling of sadness that prevails too much in these futile pages. But alas! Could it have been otherwise? I was orphaned; I was assaulted by suffering and storms between the land that had received my mother, and the land that bore the name of my country!] (my trans.)

For the youngster, a foreign land where her mother reposes becomes a *motherland*, a lieu de mémoire that will always claim a part of her and compete with France in her sense of belonging. In the original French text, the syntactic position of “mère” and “patrie” at the end of two separated phrases in the last sentence conveys a sense of geographical, emotional, and political split. The balance of the narrator’s allegiance tips toward her mother, because on the one hand, the narrator announces herself “orpheline” with her father

presumably still alive in France, and on the other hand, the word “revenant” makes the narrator ghost-like, as if her mother’s death hollows her out and even causes hers. To write (“tracer”) lines on paper is to reenact the transatlantic voyage (“traverser” the ocean). Remembrance, however painful (“chagrins,” “tristesse,” “souffrances”), is therefore also therapeutic, allowing the narrator to get closer to the maternal body.

In making her novella’s main characters, the African-born Arsène and the Caribbean-born Sarah, both motherless like the frame narrator, Desbordes-Valmore explores the intricate relation of “mother” and “land” for those in the two other non-European poles of the Atlantic Triangle. The term “revenant” quoted above hints at the narrator’s awareness that access to a round trip is itself a European privilege, whereas for the enslaved Africans the journey is one of no return. With a consciousness rare among her contemporaries, Desbordes-Valmore goes beyond the standard abolitionist rhetoric that emphasises slaves’ humanity to entice sympathy, and denounces European enslavement of the African population by suggesting that forced migration caused even greater ruptures in the enslaved than that experienced by herself. As in a testimony, Arsène recounts to Sarah his departure from the native land in a first-person narrative:

Des hommes qui ressemblaient à Silvain abordèrent sur le sable où je courais joyeux; j’ai eus peur d’abord, car ils étaient blancs et je me mis à fuir. En retournant la tête, je les vis encore près de moi: ils m’offrirent, par signe, tout ce que je désirais trouver, et plusieurs choses que je voulus porter à ma mère. Quand mes mains furent pleines de leurs présents, ils m’enlevèrent dans leurs bras et m’emportèrent à leur vaisseau,

où je trouvais quelques enfants noirs qu’ils avaient enlevés comme moi. Nous nous mîmes à crier après nos mères, que nous voulions revoir; mais les hommes blancs, qui parlaient un autre langage, ne savaient sûrement ce que nous leur demandions, car ils se mirent à rire, et lièrent nos mains, que nous tendions vers eux. J’appris depuis que c’était pour nous vendre. Je fus vendu; je grandis dans les chaînes, où souvent, comme aujourd’hui je me rappelais mon rivage. Ma mère, peut-être, va tous les jours m’y chercher, en m’appelant à haute voix. Je crois l’entendre quand les flots accourent, quand le vent balance les grands palmiers, quand un oiseau de mer vole rapidement sur ma tête. (Boutin, 2006, 101)

[Men like Silvain disembarked on the sand where I was joyfully playing. At first I feared them because they were white, and I tried to flee. But I looked back and found them still there, making signs to offer me objects that I or my mother might desire. When my hands were full of their gifts, they snatched me up in their arms and put me on their ship, where I found other captured black children. We all began crying for our mothers, whom we wanted to see again. But these white men spoke another language and seemed not to understand our entreaties. Indeed they began to laugh as they bound our outstretched hands. I learned later that they planned to sell us. I was sold; I grew up in chains. But often, like today, I remembered the shores of my own land. Perhaps my mother still returns there daily, searching for me and calling out my name. Sometimes I think I hear her voice in the waves that pound ashore, in the murmuring of the great palm trees bending in the wind, in the rapid flight of the seabirds overhead.] (Jenson and Kadish, 2008, 17-18)

Evocations of the mother figure cadence this dramatised scenario of kidnapping and separation. The use of one single adjective (“joyeux”) highlights poignantly the briefness of the happy pre-abduction state of being followed by endless suffering afterward. The

abrupt transition from simple past tense to present tense toward the end of the passage implies the remoteness of the initial event, the long-lasting effect of trauma, and the tenacity of the victims' memory. In Arsène's narrative, becoming a slave is the direct consequence of being wrenched away from, therefore, losing, one's mother, motherland, and mother tongue all at once, damages beyond repair. While the mother's phantasmagoric presence in Arsène's mind exteriorises as natural elements that move between the two shores of the Atlantic, both mother and child have to live with the consequences of their separation, remembering and longing for each other for the rest of their days.

Depicting life in the Caribbean colonies, *Sarah* establishes an adopted mother-daughter relationship between Arsène and the eponymous heroine and in so doing recognises Africa as a mother/land for colonial subjects. Arsène's young former master falls in love with a poor white woman and the two have a baby girl, Sarah, out of wedlock. The young man sent away by his tyrannical planter father and Sarah's mother died soon after giving birth, Arsène, previously emancipated by his young master, sells himself to Mr. Primrose in exchange for Sarah's freedom. To let Arsène, a black male slave, assume the maternal function for Sarah, not only corroborates the historical experience of a slave society in which social ties were reconstructed through complex renegotiations of race, gender and class, but also alludes to the debt Europe and the New World owed to Africa, as implied in an "epiphany of maternal recognition" (Jenson and Kadish, 2008: xxiv) between the two characters:

– Dis-moi donc ce que c'est qu'une mère, reprit-

elle encore.

Arsène, après avoir hésité quelques moments, lui dit:

– C'est celle qui nous porte petit sur son sein, qui nous suspend à son cou jusqu'à ce que nous puissions marcher; qui chante pour nous endormir quand nous pleurons; qui nous cherche des fruits avant même que nous les demandions; qui oublie d'en manger pour nous les donner tous, et qui meurt quelquefois de douleur de n'en plus trouver pour nous rendre contents. Ses yeux se fixèrent sur la petite fille avec l'expression d'un triste souvenir.

– Je t'appellerai donc ma mère, s'écria-t-elle, puisque tu as fait tout cela pour moi.

[– Tell me what a mother is, she insisted.

“After a pause, Arsène replied:

“– A mother is she who cradles us against her breast when we are infants, who suspends us from her body in a sling until we can walk. She sings us to sleep when we cry, finds fruit for us to eat even before we ask, forgetting to eat any herself in order to give it all to us, and suffers when she cannot assuage our hunger.

“He fixed his eyes, filled with sad memories, on the little girl.

“– Then I will call you my mother, she cried, because you have done those things for me.] (101: 17)

Significantly, Desbordes-Valmore let motherhood be defined in African terms. Arsène describes out of memory the ways in which his mother raised him, knowledge that he carries through to the Caribbean and with which he preserves Sarah's life. Arsène's highly condensed summary, certainly pertaining to common features of African mothering practices, covers some basic elements of childrearing, from close bodily contact between mother and child, to early infant nurturing such as breastfeeding and forage for food, to constant attention to the child's physical and emotional needs. Arsène's success in fulfilling

maternal responsibilities in place of Sarah's biological parents refutes allegations of neglect African parenting in colonial discourse (Bush, 2010: 72-75) and acknowledges the maturity of African civilisations on a par with European ones. Furthermore, by making Arsène the primary if not the only source of qualities such as love, devotion, and sacrifice of the self for others, that Sarah exemplifies later in the plot, the novella advocates Africa's moral, ethical and spiritual superiority over Europe. When Sarah calls Arsène mother, she responds effectively to calls that Arsène's mother sends to her vanished child from the other side of the Atlantic, thus confirming the filiation between herself and Africa. In point of fact, "Sarah" was one of the French spelling variations of the Sahara at the time. Arsène's maternal role in Sarah's upbringing, therefore, establishes Africa as origin and progenitor of the New World. Victims of irreversible physical and cultural dislocation, enslaved captives and their descendants transplanted their values, beliefs, and practices to build new family and community relationships creatively adapted to the constrained circumstances of slavery.

Economy of Slavery *vs.* Paternalism

Critical attention has been paid to the representation of the physical and mental sufferings the characters endure in *Sarah* (Boutin, 2007; Kadish, 2007), but no one seems to have captured the novella's remarkable grasp of the economic foundation of colonial slavery. The entire plot of *Sarah* is initiated and continually propelled by sales and purchases of both properties and human beings. The pursuit of money – "l'amour de l'or" [the love of gold] (106; 26) – is the motor of the system.

Everyday business consists of "échanger les terres, les esclaves et les contrats pour l'or" [exchange land, slaves, and contracts for gold] (127; 64). Silvain, the overseer of the plantation, is obsessed with money. His first reaction to the idea of marrying Sarah is that she will bring him "une riche dot" [a rich dowry] (106; 27). He holds a grudge against Primrose's wealth and ends up exacting personal revenge by stripping him of his fortune. Sarah's father, sent away to Europe, was called back upon the death of his father who had to bequeath the family wealth. Mr. Primrose, who takes Sarah in, is "le plus riche Anglais de [la] colonie" [the richest Englishman of the colony] (98; 13). His responsibility as father of the family is to pass the family fortune and increase it through matrimonial alliances. There is no question that he approves his son's marriage with Sarah whose socioeconomic status is too incongruent with theirs. In the end, Primrose consents to the marriage mainly because he has lost his fortune and therefore "n'osa plus rien opposer [. . .] un bonheur si chèrement acheté" [no longer dared to counter . . . this reprieve so dearly purchased] (143; 93).

As legal proof of the frequent transactions, paperwork occupies an important place in the narrative, regulating the characters' lives. Without proper written document, anyone can be assumed a slave. When Arsène comes to M. Primrose for the first time, to prove he is a former slave now franchised, he produces "le gage de sa liberté" [the papers attesting to his emancipation] (98; 12), whereas Sarah cannot be free because there is no written proof of her identity. In this regard, Sarah may well be among the very first figures of *sans-papiers* in French literature.

When Silvain departs for Sainte-Marie on

a mission of selling the plantation, he is “chargé du contrat d’acquisition et de pouvoirs de son maître” [with the purchasing contract and his master’s power of attorney] (127; 65). Sarah suspects that Arsène was sold in the deal too, but M. Primrose denies it, “un papier dans les mains” [a document in hand] (134, my trans.):

Sarah, interdite, ne savait que répondre, et parcourait des yeux les noms des esclaves vendus par Silvain.

– Voici le nom d’Arsène, dit-elle, il est avec les autres.

– Sur mon âme, dit M. Primrose étonné, Silvain ne m’a point obéi; [. . .]

[Sarah, greatly surprised, hardly knows what to say as she read through the list of the slaves sold by Silvain.

– Here is Arsène’s name, she said, among those of the other slaves.

– You have my solemn word, Mr. Primrose exclaimed with astonishment, that Silvain expressly disobeyed me . . .] (134; 76)

Faced with the hard evidence, M. Primrose has to admit his mistake and displaces the blame. Thus the novella goes right to the heart of colonialism and reveals the deep causes of the conflicts between the metropole and the colonies. Whether before, during, or after the French Revolution, the metropole’s economic interest demanded that the colonies continue to produce for the metropole, be it for economic monopoly or war effort. After some experiments, the metropole believed that the slave plantation was the optimal means of production. When Bonaparte sent his agents on behalf of the Directory, he instructed them to take action so that Guadeloupe would “furnish the Republic with five million [francs] in commodities from the national plantations” (Dubois, 2004: 345). In the metropole’s

decision to reestablish slavery in the colonies, the imperialist ideology of the Napoleonic era was certainly at work (Jenson and Kadish, 2008: viii), but the determining factor was, rather, the economy. To a large extent, Napoleon followed what was predetermined by the metropole’s financial needs.

Once we perceive *Sarah’s* acute understanding of the driving force behind the economy of slavery, it becomes easier for us to evaluate the role sentimentalism plays in the novella. *Sarah* illustrates how sentimentalism, when having to function within economic constraints, necessarily fails to make the colonial society “a better place,” so to speak. The point is made primarily through Primrose’s paternalism. In *Sarah*, while Arsène plays the role of mother to Sarah, Mr. Primrose takes on the role of “bienfaiteur” [benefactor] (108; 31) in relation to Arsène and Sarah. But the novella makes clear that this paternalism is totally insufficient for the protégés’ well-being. By revealing the economic factor at work which makes paternalism an ineffectual velleity, *Sarah* answers Waller’s question in her introduction to *Ourika*. “When and how is paternalism a form of cruelty?” (1994: xx).

Compared to Silvain’s frankly villainous figure (“barbare” 99, “monstre” 135), the character of Primrose can seem sympathetic. But we should realise that, in the final analysis, Primrose is an irresponsible owner who abdicates his responsibilities and turns a blind eye to injustices happening on his property. The text hints at the nature of Primrose and Silvain’s relationship through the way the latter is introduced the very first time. Right after Arsène’s impending sale of himself:

M. Primrose appela Silvain, le régisseur de l’habitation, remit Arsène à ses soins, et

l'instruisit en peu de mots de sa volonté. Silvain écouta sans répondre, regardant si le nègre était jeune et fort: Arsène était dans la fleur de l'âge et de la santé. Silvain, l'ayant observé, ne blâma pas son maître d'avoir été trop charitable; et la grâce enfantine de Sarah fit presque naître un sourire sur la bouche sévère de ce gardien d'esclaves.

[Mr. Primrose summoned Silvain, the overseer of the plantation, and delivered Arsène to him after briefly communicating his instructions. Silvain listened silently, looking to see whether the black man was young and strong. Arsène was indeed at the peak of youthful vigor. Silvain, after this evaluation, did not blame his master for being overly charitable. And Sarah's childish graces almost brought a smile to the slave keeper's somber visage.] (98; 13)

Ongoing is a smooth communication between the owner and the overseer. Silvain approves the decision of his master who, in his eyes, has just made "a good deal." This passage illustrates the state of "symbiosis" of the master and the manager in the plantation system. Primrose enjoys his image of benevolent master only thanks to Silvain who "depuis quinze ans se fait haïr pour lui" [has made himself hated for Mr. Primrose's sake for fifteen years] (106; 27). Primrose judges that Silvain "deserves" Sarah ("Il me semble, en effet, Silvain, que vous la méritez," [It would seem, Silvain, that you truly deserve her] 106; 28), and agrees to give her to him as wife, without asking for the young girl's agreement first. He values Silvain and his service ("Silvain est brusque, mais intègre; il me sert avec un zèle sans bornes: sa probité mérite notre confiance," [Silvain has a brusque manner, but he has integrity. He serves me with boundless zeal. His probity merits our trust] 116; 46). In the end, he does not prevent Silvain from selling Arsène. Even when Edwin tells him about

Silvain's betrayal, he still has doubts and defends his foreman ("Ne dites pas ce mot [scélérat], Edwin! S'il est injuste, comment le réparerez-vous?" [- Dare you claim his guilt, Edwin! If your accusation is unjust, how will you repair the harm you have done?] (135; 79). Therefore, rather than seeing in Primrose and Silvain a dichotomy, it is necessary to consider the two as a dyad, an inseparable unit, what could be called a "double face" of colonial slavery rule.

Throughout the novella, the plot balances Primrose's paternalistic good will with the point of view of the enslaved locals, and therefore challenges "Europe's self-identification as [. . .] the 'good' slave master" (Jenson, 2007: 91). Early on, when taking Arsène into his estate, Primrose tells him: "Sois au nombre de mes serviteurs; je ne les appelle pas mes esclaves; j'ai besoin d'être aimé" ["Join the ranks of my servants; I do not call them my slaves; I need to be loved by them"] (98; 13). But Arsène knows better: "malgré les promesses et la bonté de M. Primrose, il sentait qu'il était esclave" [but he felt himself to be a slave, despite the promises and kindness that Mr. Primrose had proffered] (99; 15). Primrose so indulges in the self-congratulatory attitude that he "se sentait effrayé d'avoir été bon" [he was uneasy about the benevolent act he had performed] (108; 31). But the question is: how "good" can one be when one is a slave owner? Here too Arsène has the answer. Watching Sarah and Edwin playing their childish games, Arsène evokes a romance. Each stanza ends with the phrase "Jouez, dansez, beaux petits Blancs; / Pour être bons, restez enfants!" [Dance on, play on, sweet white children, / Your virtue depends on you tender age!] (100; 16). The thrice repeated refrain conveys

Arsène's anxiety for their eventual loss of innocence as a couple of plantation owners.

The union of Sarah and Edwin becomes possible only after a drastic reversal in their fortunes. For most of the novella, such a union is out of the question, though the narrative does not deny Primrose's good impulses. Shortly after he approves of Silvain's demand to take Sarah for wife, Primrose feels his conscience tormented. He hesitates, oscillates ("ses idées flottaient" [he was still plunged in a state of uncertainty] 108; 31) and even repents ("plongé dans un tardif repentir" [belatedly repentant] 108; 31). Pressed by his son, Primrose wavers again and promises to let Sarah choose for herself. Ultimately, though, he has to comply with the iron rule of socioeconomic forces beyond his control. Consequently, Primrose's goodness proves to be futile and fatuous: he comes to announce the news to Sarah himself, thinking that he is doing the young girl a favor. Sarah's emotional response ("vous ne donnerez pas Sarah pour femme à un autre qu'Edwin; c'est moi que vous choisirez pour rendre sa vie heureuse comme notre enfance qui finit à peine" [you must not give Sarah as a wife to anyone else but Edwin. Surely you will choose me to make him happy, as he has been in our childhood, which has barely come to an end] 110; 34) shows how unaware she is of her own status and the socioeconomic logic of the society in which she lives. Exasperated by Sarah's incomprehension, Primrose finally loses his composure, throwing harsh words in the young girl's face:

. . . et, parce que j'ai eu le bonheur de vous préserver de mille maux, avez-vous le droit d'attendre le sacrifice de mes volontés, de mes projets, de mes espérances, qui toutes reposent

sur mon fils, dont l'avenir doit se séparer du vôtre, de vous, Sarah, qui êtes pour nous une étrangère?

[. . . I have had the pleasure of protecting you from a thousand misfortunes. Does that give you the right to ask me to sacrifice my wishes, my plans for the future, my hopes, all of which reside in my son? Is it not just to expect that he be separated in the future from you, Sarah, a stranger to us?] (110; 34)

The crude division between "you" and "us," central in Primrose's speech, reveals the insurmountable obstacle to the fulfillment of the adolescent girl's naïve dream. The appellation of "étrangère" connotes social ostracism: Sarah has no place in Primrose's plantocracy milieu.

Once determined to sever the young adolescents' ties, Primrose forces obedience upon Sarah ("Vous êtes très bonne, Sarah! En vérité, vous êtes une fille très soumise" [You are so good, Sarah! Verily, your submission to your duty is complete] 131; 70) and reduces his son Edwin to inertia, employing coercion and deceit. Significantly, two subsections of the novella are titled "Une trahison" [A Betrayal]. While the second points to Silvain's running off, the first refers to Primrose's sending Edwin away to make the sale of their plantation with Silvain. The juxtaposition of the two "betrayals" makes Primrose a trickster tricked rather than an innocent victim. Primrose is thoroughly invested in colonial slavery and his cruelty has only a difference of degree with that of other plantation owners, not a difference of nature. Especially in separating Edwin and Sarah, he does exactly what Sarah's paternal grandfather did. The text establishes the link explicitly. After Edwin's forced departure, Sarah deplores: "Voilà donc

comme ils ont emmené mon père! Arsène, tu me l'as bien raconté. Voyez ma mère, voyez-moi: n'est-ce pas ainsi que vous étiez alors?" [This is how they took my father away! she thought. Arsène, you described it well. Look, Mother, look at me: are our situations not the same?] (128-29; 67). Toward the end of the plot, Sarah is about to go with her new master and be separated from Edwin forever, reenacting her parents' ordeal. The equation of Primrose with Sarah's paternal grandfather is complete. Of course, the dénouement, in which the man Sarah saved from shipwreck happens to be her biological father, does not part Sarah and Edwin. But such a self-consciously flimsy solution only reinforces the logic of colonial slavery, which renders Primrose's paternalism ineffective ultimately.

Revolution in the Caribbean

The pervasive theme in *Sarah* is the anxiety engendered by the uncertainty of be(com)ing slaves: "Sarah touchait à sa treizième année, qu'elle ne savait encore si elle devait commander ou obéir un jour" [Sarah had reached her thirteenth birthday, without knowing whether she would one day command or obey] (104; 23). The plot, in which Mr. Primrose retreats further and further from his initial promise until he reduces Sarah to the status of slave completely, corresponds to the historical swing: colonial slavery, abolished in 1794, was reestablished in 1802. The thinly veiled displacement of setting on Saint-Barthélemy and the plantation owner's being English should not dupe us. The revolutionary events in the French Caribbean occurred when Britain and France went through a brief period of cooperation in suppressing the colonies. I propose to read *Sarah* as a reflection and

critique of the metropolitan France's failure to live up to its promises, and a justification of the ensuing revolution in the French Caribbean.

Not just a "metaphor" of history (Jenson and Kadish, 2008: ix), *Sarah* alludes to the situation in Guadeloupe, which played a crucial role in the revolutions in the French Caribbean. Putting into focus Arsène's re-enslavement and Sarah's enslavement, the narrative reflects the reality of the ambiguous freedom of former slaves in Guadeloupe after the 1794 abolition and their impending formal re-enslavement in 1802. An ambiance of suspicion pervades the tale ("le silence y cachait le trouble, les soupçons et la crainte" [Beneath its apparent calm and silence lay trouble, suspicion, and fear] 123; 58). The characters "se taisaient et consumaient les jours dans une égale incertitude" [ceased to speak, their days equally consumed with uncertainty] (124; 58), fearful of seeing slavery re-imposed upon them. The dynamics between Primrose and Silvain on the one side, and Arsène and Sarah on the other, illustrates the complex interactions between the metropole and the colony. The numerous broken promises and acts of treason and deception on Primrose and Silvain's part allude to the French authority's treacherous behaviour when dealing with the people of Caribbean islands. To appease the local people, the French authority hid their real intention and deceived with false promises. Missions were dispatched to apply policies that were not officially declared until the fighting in the Caribbean had begun. Only after the Treaty of Amiens was finally signed in March 1802 did the government publicly proclaim its intention of restoring slavery in the Caribbean islands that were being returned by the British. In May, a few days before Delgrès and his companions

died at Matouba, the consuls signed a decree declaring “in the colonies returned to France in execution of the Treaty of Amiens. . . slavery will be maintained in conformity with the laws and regulations anterior to 1789” (Dubois, 2004: 370).

What makes the situation all the more poignant is the local people’s split feelings toward the metropole, embodied in Sarah’s difficulty in parting with Primrose. If Primrose ultimately ends up an oppressor, it is also undeniable that Sarah is attached to him. Sarah does see in Primrose a father figure and respects his authority. It is hard for Sarah, Arsène and Edwin to believe that Primrose would betray them, so much so that all three experience numerous moments of disbelief and speechlessness. Learning Primrose’s intention of marrying her off to Silvain, Sarah hopes she has misheard him (“elle attendait qu’il parlât encore, espérant l’avoir mal entendu” [she waited for him to speak again, hoping to have misunderstood him] 109; 33). After all he has done to reduce her to slavery, Sarah is nonetheless attached to him. Mistaken for Primrose’s daughter by the guest, “Sarah leva timidement les yeux sur M. Primrose. Ce nom de père, qu’il ne démentait pas, l’avait fait frissonner et rougir à la fois” [Sarah timidly raised her eyes to Mrs. Primrose. The name ‘father,’ which he did not deny, made her shiver and blush.] (133: 75).

Sarah’s dilemma vividly depicts the mixed feelings of the former slave population caused by the confusing litigational changes in the Antilles. Especially confusing was the fact that, very often, the reversals were executed by the same group of administrators. *Sarah’s* depiction of the physical and mental ordeal of the enslaved recognises the plight of the

revolutionary Caribbean in 1802 in a manner similar to that of Delgrès in his proclamation issued before his heroic last gesture. His address “To the Entire Universe” was a “Cry of Innocence and Despair” on behalf of “a class of unfortunates who are threatened with destruction, and find themselves forced to raise their voices so that posterity will know, once they have disappeared, of their innocence and misery” (Dubois, 2004: 391-92). Desbordes-Valmore’s novella answers the call: as the epitome of the oppressed and the down-trodden, Arsène and Sarah do not just endure their misery with resignation; instead, they develop, maintain, and transmit a rebellious spirit. While their legal status oscillates between free person and slave to the whims of colonial rule, Arsène and Sarah uphold their unalienable inner freedom. In his captivity, Arsène’s “souvenirs couraient dans sa mémoire” [reminiscences rose up in his mind], reviving “l’amour d’une patrie, le besoin de la liberté” [love of the native land, the need for freedom] (99; 15). The characters cherish their freedom more than life and refuse enslavement with the utmost determination. When Silvain reveals to Sarah that she is but a slave, the latter is devastated (“cet esclavage dont le nom me remplit d’horreur aujourd’hui” [this slavery whose very name fills me with horror] 113; 39), and makes it clear that she prefers death to loss of freedom:

– Je sais, reprit-il d’un ton de sanglante moquerie, que la mort vous effraie moins que moi.

– Oui! s’écria-t-elle avec désespoir, je l’aime! Elle délivre les esclaves.

Loin d’être touché du triste accent dont elle prononça ces mots, l’indigne se félicitait de l’avoir brisée, et s’éloigna content.

[“– So you fear me more than death, Silvain replied with biting mockery.

“– That’s right, Sarah cried out in despair. I embrace death ; it delivers slaves.

“Far from being touched by the pitiful accent with which she pronounced these words, the unworthy man congratulated himself on having broken her will, and he went away content.] (112; 38)

Sarah’s attitude mirrors that of the Delgrès insurrection. At the moment of self-destruction, the insurgents held each other’s hands, yelling “No slavery! Long live death!” After the explosion, Richepanse arrived on site and claimed victory with premature satisfaction (Dubois, 2004: 400).

Arsène shows the same endurance for physical pain and abhorrence of slavery: “Je pouvais des cris perçants lorsqu’on m’appelait esclave, tandis que les coups dont j’étais quelquefois déchiré n’avaient pas le pouvoir de m’arracher une plainte. Je regardais couler mon sang d’un œil sec, et je disais: Moi libre!” [“I uttered piercing cries when they called me ‘slave,’ even though I hardly complained about the blows that sometimes rendered my body powerless. I watched my blood flow with a dry eye, and I said: ‘Me free!’] (119; 50). The image of Arsène’s blood underscores the violence in Silvain’s verbal assault (“sanglante mocquerie”) in the previous passage. The phrase “Moi libre” is an authentic vernacular term in vogue during the emancipation period.

The culminating moment comes when Arsène, after a failed attempt to find Sarah’s father, returns to the plantation and hears the news that Sarah has sold herself:

Le ciel et la terre bouleversés ensemble auraient produit en lui moins de *terreur*; il s’élança *tout à coup* en écartant les conteurs interdits, criant de toute sa force comme un homme qui *a perdu le*

sens. Edwin, *effrayé* par ses cris, *croyant que les nègres se rebellaient entre eux*, sortit précipitamment de chez son père; et voyant courir Arsène, les bras au ciel, criant toujours, il l’appela de son côté. (Boutin, 2006)

[Arsène could not have been more stunned by what he was hearing than if the sky had fallen. He leaped and darted about through the shocked assembly, yelling at the top of his lungs like a man possessed. Edwin, hearing his cries, thought that the blacks were beginning a revolt on the plantation. He hurried out from his father’s house and saw Arsène running around, yelling, his arms outstretched to the sky. Edwin called him to his side.] (142, emphasis added; 91-92)

In this passage Desbordes-Valmore brilliantly condenses her personal experience during and her comments on the slave insurrection in the Antilles. In fact, the expression “heaven and earth upside down” was frequently used to describe the disorder the slave rebellions caused. The suddenness (“tout à coup”) of Arsène’s outbreak corresponds exactly to the impression the colonisers held with regard to the slave revolution: for them, the slave revolt started nowhere, with no warning sign. Arsène acts like someone “who has lost his mind,” which is also the way in which the whites described their revolting slaves. Edwin is duly “scared,” like all the masters of the rebels. All the elements can be found in a standard, metropolitan propaganda of the time on the slave uprisings, such as those Ourika would have heard in the salon of Mme de B. But all this, in the novella’s scenario, is the result of the perspective that Sarah should become a slave. Arsène knows what it means to be a slave and he cannot let it happen to Sarah. The word “terror” is of crucial importance here: it is the terror that Arsène,

the slave, *feels*, not that he *provokes*. Slavery is a *White Terror*, if the slaves revolted, it is because they could not stand the terror of being enslaved. Whereas the eponymous heroine of *Ourika* pines and dies in a Parisian convent, accusing blacks of committing “crimes” in Saint-Domingue, Desbordes-Valmore’s novella offers complementary yet fundamentally different perspectives on the transatlantic revolutions. Thus Desbordes-Valmore performs a writing-back on the Black Terror: it “resists the biographical fallacy governing Desbordes-Valmore’s reception, authorising in turn a reflection on slavery that challenges metropole-centric imperial history” (Paliyenko, 2007: 69).

Conclusion

The historian Laurent Dubois (2004) opines that the slaves in the Caribbean had, in the early 1790s, expanded the political imagination of the republic. The regrettable turnabout was the result of the limited political imagination of the metropolitan France and its administrators in the Caribbean (404). In contrast, Desbordes-Valmore’s *literary imagination* constructs a world of equal human beings who transcend racial and social barriers, as exemplified by the community centered on Arsène and Sarah but also including Sarah’s parents and Edwin. The plot of *Sarah* does not touch on the actual historical events of slave revolt, and even at its most “radical” moments, such as in the passage on Arsène’s violent reactions to Sarah’s enslavement, the panic is, after all, only momentary and the tension quickly dissolved, since Sarah and her father reunite, and Sarah and Edwin finally get married. Nevertheless, *Sarah’s* account of plantation life with all the realist details lays bare the mechanisms of

colonialism. The dramatic shifts of status imposed upon the African-born Arsène and the free-born local Sarah confirm the arbitrariness and fictionality of the various slave statuses. *Sarah* registers the dynamics between the revolutions in the metropole and the colonies, and gives voice to the French Caribbean revolutionaries’ heroic struggle for a universalist ideal against an imperialist ideology and an economic imperative.

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