https://doi.org/10.22364/lincs.2025.12

SCOTT MOMADAY AND THE AFFIRMATIVE *PO-ETHICS* OF LIFE

REDOUANE ABOUDDAHAB

Le Mans University, France

Abstract. This study examines Momaday's worldview, as transmuted into his poetic and highly visual writing, in a vitalist perspective, the aim of which is to bring to light the way the transcultural and eco-systemic perspectives interact in the text in a non-dichotomic guise, much open to the play of creativity. The singular world that Momaday's poems and novels have given shape to, celebrates an idea that can be called the life-ness of life, which is not only about the liveliness of life, but the active awareness of its creativity and inventiveness, a conviction that steers clear of the mechanistic vision of nature that has been promoted in Western philosophy at least since Galileo and fuelled by the euphoria of scientific discoveries during the last four centuries. Momaday's is rather a belief in the non-teleological movement of the forces of life that creates history in nature in its own way. By so doing, this analysis departs from the usual comments on Momaday's works that focus on ethnic issues and feed on identity politics.

Key words: vitalism, chaos and harmony, creativity, ecosystemic worldview, poetics

INTRODUCTION

Writing by Kiowa American novelist Scott Momaday is intensely visual and poetic; its formal build is informed by the production of energetic surface phenomena – light, sound, gaze, vibration, space, movement – that can be considered concurrently an experience of life and its never-ending holistic expansion. Momaday, who is also a painter, poet, essayist and autobiographer, combines his poetics and ethics into a unified vision that considers the freewheeling forces of life an open-ended creative system to be reckoned with. In this perspective, the private sphere of the protagonist is not to be dissociated from the harmonious system that life generates unendingly, and whose perception, acceptance, and open-hearted recognition make healing not only possible but effective. This insight feeds on the belief that harmony and chaos are two unified forces inherent in nature and in culture as well as in man's psyche.

Momaday's philosophy is structured by an ethical vision that gives shape to an idea that can be called the *life-ness* of life, which is not only about the liveliness of life, but the active awareness of its creativity and inventiveness, a conviction

that steers clear of the mechanistic conception of nature. What I call *life-ness* refers to the idea of the existence of something more than the practical and the functional dimensions of nature, whose living forms are not considered here prosaically iterative, and thereby subject to mechanistic, reductionist and deterministic explanations. The life Momaday writes about does not simply repeat itself; by repeating itself, it makes new relationships possible, and thus creates new forms and new transformable structures. The life-ness of life integrates into its ethical spectrum a principle of creative freedom and spontaneity that shuns the deterministic understanding of the forces of nature. Indeed, Momaday's *po-ethics* seems to be grounded on the belief in the non-teleological (that is, non-finalist) movement of the forces of life, a conviction which is transmuted at the textual level into a system of writing that values the unrestrained expression of one's emotions as they come, one's intuitions and feelings of wonderment. The writer's and the protagonist's capacity for wonder draws on the philosophical belief that life is not tiresomely predictable and repetitive; this is not Hegel's view on nature as offering 'nothing new under the sun', a philosophical outlook that keeps going and bolsters up not only the dichotomic approach to culture and nature, but also the belief in the superiority of the former over the latter.

It is useful to remember that Hegel's vision of nature intersects with his philosophy of history, based on the exclusive power of the 'Spirit' (*Geist*) in creating history, in a perspective that clearly posits the superiority of the human being over nature, dissociating somehow the latter from their environment and instinctual and bodily substance:

> Abstractly considered, historical change has long been understood in general as involving a progress to something better, something more perfect. Changes in the world of nature – infinitely varied as these might be – reflect nothing more than an eternally repeated cycle. In nature there is nothing new under the sun, so that the many-sided play of natural forms carries with it a certain boredom. Only in the changes that occur in the realm of Spirit is there anything new. (Hegel, [1833] 1988: 57)

This conception that submits life to the dictate of progress and disparagingly subdues nature to the alleged powerful advance of 'Spirit', had certain 'inevitable' political tragic consequences such as the disappearance or subordination of those cultures – like the Natives' in the Americas – that lived in harmony with nature, or, in Hegel's words, that were 'entirely immersed in Nature': 'About America and its original culture, namely that of Mexico and Peru, we do have some information, but only to the effect that this culture was entirely immersed in Nature, and that it had to go under at the approach of Spirit' (ibid.: 85). This implies, in turn, in the Hegelian implacable logic, the widely-spread and accepted idea that those cultures are 'impotent' and inferior in every respect: 'America has always

shown itself to be physically and spiritually impotent – and it still does so – or after the Europeans landed, the natives gradually perished at the mere breath of European activity' (ibid.).

Hegel's approach to nature feeds on a larger vision of nature that is starkly opposed to Momaday's. The philosopher reformulates in his own way the belief in the mechanist constitution of nature, and thus in the possibility to subjugate its forces once its laws have been unveiled. Life and all the natural forces it feeds on are to be subdued to the power of the so-called 'Spirit' or Reason, the real agents of history, while nature is ahistorical and blindly repetitive.

Contrary to Hegel's ahistorical subordinating vision of nature and, more generally, of the life forces, the nature Momaday poetizes and fictionalizes is eventful, temporal, and historical in its own way. It is the aim of this article to interconnect the formal, the spiritual, and the ethical visions of the writer in light of vitalism, an approach that shuns the mechanistic explanations of life, thereby offering fecund tools to shed light on the way the transcultural and eco-systemic perspectives interact in the Momaday text in a non-dichotomic guise, much open to the play of creativity.

'THE REMEMBERED EARTH'

One of the major concepts that arise from Momaday's body of work lies in the vision that the earth – and the land, the dwelling place of man, should not be considered solely through the objective and functional lens, that is, as an ever-available ground to human needs or the playground of man's drives. This misconception originates possibly in the dualistic division of reality into extension and mind, matter and intellectual power, that has led to the loss of the intimate bond between man and nature, and, by way of consequence, to the loss of the awareness of the sensual (aesthetic) potentials intrinsically present in the life that runs through nature and through the body of the human being. This is in part what Momaday brings out in his simply yet finely phrased prose poem 'The Earth' that inspired in part the title of this paper. The poet calls for a relation with the earth that is based on patience, respect, and communion:

> Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. (Momaday, 1997: 45)

The focus is placed here on the necessity of conceiving one's relation with the earth through a profound sense of communication, thanks to its internalization and not its mere observation that might spawn a transient feeling of pleasure or a self-satisfied certainty of cerebral command and inevitably a sense of distance and sharp feeling of otherness; it rather becomes part of the open self

(which is sharply opposed to the ego-centric self), committed to the full appreciation of the natural world out there, seen as it is, with one's 'all eyes' (Rilke, 1963: 67) thereby bringing forth some intimate, personalized relation with the earth. Here, Momaday underscores the importance of the senses in revealing the deep bond between man and the earth, thanks to the liberation of the vital power of the imagination:

> He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk. (Momaday, 1997: 45)

This minute capacity for remembrance presupposes that the earth has been seen in the first place with an open heart. Thus, through the act of remembrance, the senses can come alive, and the feeling of being part of a living whole can now be experienced sensually thanks to the liberated power of the imagination:

> For we are held by more than the force of gravity to the earth. It is the entity from which we are sprung, and that into which we are dissolved in time. The blood of the whole human race is invested in it. We are moored there, rooted as surely, as deeply as are the ancient redwoods and bristlecones. (ibid.)

The human being Momaday is referring to here is the one whose humanity is defined by the awareness of their holistic sense of belonging. The use of the plural pronoun in the last part of the poem ('*we* dissolve, *we* are sprung…'), along with signifiers pointing to human communal memory ('blood of the *whole human race*'), and also the ultimate comparison that incorporates plant life in the picture, enlarge the perspective where the human being can apprehend his or her own measures. The internalized and personalized experience of nature leads to the awareness and expansion of one's *beingness*, which brings together all the living 'creatures' under the same banner of vitality and mutual recognition.

Reading Momaday's poem has made Bruce Ballenger realize that landscape is a living element running in his own blood: 'I [...] begin to understand Momaday's call to surrender to the "remembered earth", and in doing so, see how landscape can live like a memory in my own blood' (Ballenger, 1997: 798). Until then, the landscape has been no more than a stage set for planned actions: '[...] in my memory the landscape of the suburban community where I was born and raised is often simply a stage set for my personal dramas of growing up' (ibid.). Patricia Clark Smith and Paula Gunn Allen shed further light on the nature of this relationship, writing that in the American Indian vision the land represents not a portion of reality, but its totality:

> The land is not only landscape as Anglo writers often think of it […]. For American Indians, the land encompasses the butterfly and ant, man and woman, adobe wall and gourd vine, trout beneath the river water, rattler deep in his winter den, the North Star and the constellations, the flock of sandhill cranes flying too high to be seen against the sun. The land is Spider Woman's creation; it is the whole of the cosmos. (Smith and Allen, 1993: 117)

This holistic vision is reflected in the way American Indian novelists and poets conceive of the land in their writings, as they constantly ritualize the relationship with the land and affirm a powerful, respectful relationship with it. Far from being based on gain, capitalization and objectification – an approach to nature that bespeaks a desire for control and domination –, the way American Indians consider the land involves a value system that feeds on the openness to and respect of the otherness of nature:

> Tribal people see it as something mysterious, certainly beyond human domination, and yet as something to be met and spoken with rather than confronted. For them the land is not just a collection of objects you do things *to*, nor is it merely a place you do things *in*, a stage set for human action. Rather it is a multitude of entities who possess intelligence and personality. (ibid.: 118)

The earth is thereby perceived as a living being worthy of esteem and paramount care, because it has a say of its own. The relationship with it takes account of its expectations and never loses sight of the need to preserve balance and harmony: 'People and the land hold dialogue within the structure of ritual, in order to ensure balance and harmony. Ritual is the means by which people, spirits, rocks, animals, and other beings enter into conversation with each other' (ibid.: 118).

This being said, Momaday's text has an all-encompassing tone that bridges the gap between different cultures into one unified vision of the human being. The utilization of the word 'earth' instead of 'land' in his prose poem, and, as noted above, of the inclusive plural pronoun 'we' as well as the generic noun 'man', points to the universal framework of his thoughts. In this sense, the experience Momaday calls for poetically is transcultural not only in the intra-human sphere, but in the all-inclusive sense of a vital belief in the relational equivalence between man and earth, culture and nature, as the poem but also the novels I am about to discuss now make clear. Thus seen, that is, as a partnership-based relationship, the transcultural becomes by way of reciprocity *transnatural*. Like Jakobson's scheme of communication, the relation between man and the earth is a two-way process – sender-receiver – that functions according to a third party, and that third entity is the recognized life itself, the common 'code' that gives a certain coherence and unity of meaning to the shared reality and concern.

The hale relation with nature lies in a system of values structured by *mutual* recognition. The modern way of thought only acknowledges one part of the relation, which is dynamically centrifugal, pushing toward the otherness of nature as a feeder and supplier of resources and raw materials that human intelligence has been adapting to all kinds of needs, wishes and necessities. On the contrary, what Momaday calls for is a sense of justice and wholeness inclusive enough to comprehend the centripetal dimension of the relation, which implies the awareness of the otherness of man *to* nature. The narcissistic self-admiring projection into the mirror of nature breaks down when the human being recognizes the presence of a gaze on the other side of the specular surface, that gives the observer the sharp illuminating awareness of being looked at and sensed by the forces of nature. In this sense, human and natural expectations should be considered mutually and symmetrically.

The poem points to the necessity of this awareness but does not formalize or put in shape the modus operandi of what seems to be a unified perception of creation, one that refuses to separate matter and mind, transcendence and immanence. This is buttressed by the underlying analogy identifiable in many of Momaday's works, between the disorder of the psychic creative energy that presides over the production of artistic forms, through the interaction between what Freud called primary process and secondary one. It is worth recalling that primary and secondary processes represent two different ways in which the human psyche functions. It is in *The Interpretation of Dreams* ([1900] 2010) that Freud hypothesizes the existence of these two types of mental process, both involved in dream-work. The primary process refers to unconscious mental activity, made up of fantasies and impulsive motions seeking satisfaction whose non-normative sexual content is symbolized and masked by the activity of the secondary process:

> The primary process endeavours to bring about a discharge of excitation in order that, with the help of the amount of excitation thus accumulated, it may establish a 'perceptual identity' […]. The secondary process, however, has abandoned this intention and taken on another in its place – the establishment of a 'thought identity'. (Freud, [1900] 2010: 598)

The primary process is subject to the continuous, undifferentiated flow of drives and fantasies, regardless of the constraints imposed by the principle of reality, which reigns over the secondary process. The primary process ignores contradiction, sequencing, rational transitions, or chronology; this psychic activity unfolds in an indefinite 'here and now' unaware of the limitations of space and time. The secondary process, on the other hand, implies the opposite: being ruled by the reality principle (and not by the pleasure principle like the former), it obeys normative rules and the order imposed by logic.

This tendency towards order and the 'translation' of the supposedly chaotic energies of the primary process into the secondary one, has long led classical art theory but also Gestalt psychology, to associate artistic structure and its interpretation with the cognitive activity of the secondary process at the expense of primary process. By so doing, these approaches have neglected what Anton Ehrenzweig called the 'hidden order' of art, and the profound vision capable of grasping visually the syncretism and undifferentiation of the deep structure (of the primary process), without having to pass through the discontinuities of the discrete signifying units (of the secondary process). Ehrenzweig writes in his *Hidden Order of Art*:

> The classical concept of the primary process (which forms unconscious phantasy) denies it any structure. Unconscious phantasy does not distinguish between opposites, fails to articulate space and time as we know it, and allows all firm boundaries to melt in a free chaotic mingling of forms. Art, on the other hand, appears the embodiment of rigorous organization. So it has been assumed that art's structure is exclusively shaped by conscious and preconscious functions, the so-called secondary process […]. (Ehrenzweig, 1967: 3)

According to Ehrenzweig, artistic form or structure is the result of the interaction of the surface activity and the deep substructure of the primary process, wrongly considered chaotic. On the contrary, the role of the primary process in artistic creation is major. The 'hidden order' of art appears when the observer identifies and recognizes the deep vision of the primary process, which is conjunctive, contrary to the disjunctive surface vision of the secondary process.

This is germane to the ongoing analysis of Momaday's transposition of the forces of creativity at work in nature, into the artistic scene of writing. I consider the chaotic, accidental, forces of nature as possessing a 'hidden order' whose harmony appears when they move to the surface where they interplay with elements that call to mind the rationality of the secondary process. It is as if nature, just like the human psyche, possesses both processes, and is thus endowed with the capacity to bring into play productive interrelations between continuity and discontinuity, chaos and order, in an *unpredictable* way, creating in this guise new forms and new structures 'under the sun'.

CHAOS AND HARMONY

Some of Momaday's most significant images draw on the systematic interaction of chaos and harmony, two forces that we can also call *Dionysian* and *Apollonian*, equally at work in cultures that have kept their original bond with nature, and within nature itself. They contribute to shaping the Momaday text where they take on an artistic value that recognizes spontaneity and lets in the forces of

contingency. The brief examples I am about to give suffice in demonstrating how Momaday conceptualizes and formalizes disorder as a process that celebrates liberty and chance, both producing beauty, liveliness, and coherence. Furthermore, Momaday shows us in his writings how the cultural integration of heterogenous forces, such as excess, evil, violence, disruptive event, is, in its very fabric, part and parcel of the same holistic vision of creation which is efficient enough at the triple level of myth (or magic thought), therapy, and art.

The point is illustrated by the recurrent oxymoronic or antithetical constructions that punctuate his narratives. This is the case, for example, when narrative voice mentions 'bright commotion,' the medicine woman to be, Kope'mah, can appreciate during an initiatory moment (Momaday, 1990: 21), or the 'brilliant disorder of motion' that brings back to life the so-far anesthetized senses of Angela (Momaday, 1989: 43), a white rich catholic woman suffering from back pain, who came from Los Angeles for treatment in the thermal baths of Jemez Pueblo, a small town located in New Mexico, a trip that coincides with carnivalesque festivities. The shamanic vision of Kope'mah and the initially cautious then progressively open perspective of Angela, refer both to the power of what Claude Levi-Strauss calls 'the effectiveness of symbols,' after observing *in situ* the resolution of an anatomic crisis through the action of shamanic myth in an Amazonian village (Levi-Strauss, 1963: 186). Except that, which the founder of structural anthropology calls symbolic order, here a natural order can also be considered.

The artistic vision assumed by Set, the painter and protagonist of *The Ancient Child*, brings this to the fore. The healing power of nature lies in its perception as an ecosystem that encompasses all the seemingly antagonistic forces of life. Many critics discuss the healing process at work in Native American literature and in some of Momaday's works in light of homing and relocation back to one's original environment. As Roberson contends, 'with relocation back to a home or a restorative environment, the individual undergoes a positive transformation or metamorphosis of the self. […] [I]n Native American novels and, in particular, in Momaday's *The Ancient Child*, […] attachment to place is compounded by the valuation of certain places as sacred and the sense that home is the matrix for the self' (Roberson, 1998: 34). I believe that the sacred here is not place as such, but its life-ness and consequently, its connection with what lies beyond it.

Set believes that disorder in nature is 'redeeming' because it is part of a process that leads to the emergence of beauty, and beauty is not only for admiration but also for internalization and subjective appropriation as the poem 'The Earth' shows. Thus, chance is freedom, and freedom produces beauty which is a healing power inherent in nature. Chance creates beauty when butterflies, stirred suddenly into motion by a dashing horse, emerge from disorder before aligning themselves in masterly visual harmony:

> The horse Dog bolted, and butterflies sprang from the grass. They rose to spangle the sky, to become the prisms and confetti of the sun, to make a wide, revolving glitter, an illumination on the air like a magnified swarm. (Momaday, 1990: 22)

Accident generates shape, geometry, radiation; but the pattern has also to do with necessity, inasmuch as these flying beautiful particles tracing out beautiful motifs, create a relation and hence – a new meaning: they have become indeed 'the prisms and confetti of the sun.'

Far from accidental, the image is structural and is part of the whole ethical system Momaday has put in place in his writings. The same principle of liberty morphing into necessity presides over this scene from *House Made of Dawn*, where wild geese can be seen or heard springing from the dark underworld in a chaotic frenzy, only to line up harmoniously, *one after the other* (which is the exact definition of order), when awakened from their sleep by the sound of a gunshot:

> But even before the gun roared, the black water shattered and crawled. The gray geese, twenty-four of them, broke from the river, lowly, steadily on the rise of sound, straining to take hold on the air. Their effort was so great that they seemed for a time to hang beating in the willows, helplessly huge and frantic. But one after another they rose southward on their great thrashing wings, trailing bright beads of water in their wake. Then they were away, and he had seen how they craned their long slender necks to the moon, ascending slowly into the far reaches of the winter night. They made a dark angle of the sky, acute, perfect. (Momaday, 1989: 119)

In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday presents through the character of Tosamah and other celebrants a sacred ritual known among the Kiowas and other Natives from South and North America, as the Peyote ceremony. Peyote is a small, thornless cactus native to Mexico and southwest Texas; it contains a psychotropic substance known as mescaline, which has been used by Natives for more than 6000 years during shamanic rituals (Schaefer, 2015: 32-36). During the ceremony as described in the novel, the purely visual sequence devoted to the dance of the flame placed at the centre of a circle traced out by the sitting celebrants, is followed, of necessity, by the sound sequence of the beating of the drum. The sound is 'deep and terrible' and grows more impressive fortified by the sound of thunder, which just happens to erupt at that moment, according to the regular interplay of chance and necessity or freedom and harmony. The sequence ends with the two Dionysian and Apollonian forces, becoming, for the space of an instant, the manifestation of one unique power: 'The drumbeats gathered in the room and the flame quivered to the beat of the drum and thunder

rolled in the somewhere hills. [...] The sound was terrible and deep, shivering like the pale, essential flame' (Momaday, 1989: 112-113).

Just as the self-created and creative spirit is immanent, palpable in the wide span of varied creatures that are granted the freedom to move on and to freely think up solutions that are not necessarily precoded genetically, the language used by Momaday and the meaning it keeps spawning, is dominantly formal, inherent to the visible, palpable world; the Peyote ritual reveals the primacy of form and, as such, proves more relevant than the sermonic comments of the so-called Priest of the Sun, where he reproaches John with having distorted truth after having seen it, that is, adding the idea of a Creator to the 'Word'.

Tosamah's intercultural sermon brings together the Kiowa myth of Tai-me, a symbol used during the Sun Dance ritual, which was prohibited by the American government during the last decade of the 19th century, and disappeared following the pressures of the Christian missionaries and the conversion of the majority of Kiowas to the Baptist, Methodist or Pentecostal faiths, especially after the Native American Church of Oklahoma was chartered in 1918 (Wishart, ed., 2007: 199).

So, the reader is supposed to guess or try to understand why Tosamah mentions the pre-Christian Kiowa beliefs and weighs up the analogies and differences with the Biblical cosmogony as narrated by Saint John. Momaday's fiction, through this impressive character, aims at bringing back to life some of the remnants of his people's memory. He reminds the Kiowa audience that

> [t]he story of the coming of Tai-me has existed for hundreds of years by word of mouth. It represents the oldest and best idea that man has of himself. It represents a very rich literature, which, because it was never written down, was always but one generation from extinction. But for the same reason it was cherished and revered. I could see that reverence in my grandmother's eyes, and I could hear it in her voice. It was that, I think, that old Saint John had in mind when he said, 'In the beginning was the Word….'. (Momaday, 1989: 96-97)

Tosamah claims the literary value of oral myths, the notion of literature being, as we know, only attributed to the cultures of writing, thereby setting side by side this myth or 'story' and other world myths that started orally, too, before being put in writing much later. Tosamah's interpretation of the incipit of John's gospel bridges both cosmogonies through an ethical adjustment that he undertakes in front of the captivated floor.

The mask worn by Tosamah does not play on the dialectics of the visible and invisible to slide meaning into spiritual depth; it *manifests* depth (Momaday, 1989: 110). Far from the idea of truth as *aletheia*, in Momaday's writings truth is there to be seen with the mind's eye not as an image or an ideal concept, but as the real shape and dimension of the incarnate force, beauty, and liberty of life.

To him, John came face to face with an epiphanic truth that was revealed to him just like the truth of Tai-me was revealed to Kiowa Power seekers, but the disciple of Jesus Christ was overcome by the intensity of the truth before distorting it:

> But he went on. He went on to lay a scheme about the Word. He could find no satisfaction in the simple fact that the Word was; he had to account for it, not in terms of that sudden and profound insight, which must have devastated him at once, but in terms of the moment afterward, which was irrelevant and remote; not in terms of his imagination, but only in terms of his prejudice. (Momaday, 1989: 97)

Like Sufis, Tosamah believes in the visionary power of the imagination and its 'creative power' (Halligan, 2001). This faculty, when put into action, creates avenues of connection through the senses with the spirit of creation, and reveals its work in all natural beings. This is why Momaday's writings are pregnant with references to the sacredness of life. However, beyond this, of particular interest in Tosamah's critique of John is the suggestion that the disciple's error lied in affixing the concept of one super-sovereign programming will, to something that *just* happened, that is, non-teleologically.

Tosamah, by leaving out that idea of a pre-existing super will operating outside the realm of creation, liberates the latter and lets it move multi-directionally, rather than determinedly toward a final predetermined end, whose ineluctable configuration would thus have been already traced out in the original cause:

> Say this: 'In the beginning was the Word….' There was nothing. There was nothing! Darkness. There was darkness, and there was no end to it. […] There was only the dark infinity in which nothing was. And something happened. At the distance of a star something happened, and everything began. The Word did not come into being, but it was. It did not break upon the silence, but it was older than the silence and the silence was made of it. (Momaday, 1989: 97)

The divine, God, whatever the name given to the 'Word,' is inherent in creation. Regardless of the ideological or scientific value of Tosamah's peremptory verdict, his performatively and energetically worded thoughts point usefully to a systemic vision that informs the writing of Momaday. Indeed, the writer fuses his aesthetics and ethics, his impulses and his convictions, into a powerful plastic poetics that levels the values of nature and culture in a system acknowledging the sacredness of creation conceived as an open, ever-moving, self-guided non-finalist intelligent and creative force, producing its own temporality and its own history. History is not the privilege of human civilized societies; it is also part of life itself and consequently – of the life of the so-called humble oral societies.

Whatever its form, the 'word' becomes creative when it forms into matter and transforms it into intelligent combined units.

The ceremony led by Tosamah testifies to the sacredness of matter and creation by the revelation of its complex and so finely built structures. The rites bring the participants closer to the true meaning of creation through a revelation that intensifies on the increasing sharpness of the senses. Matter itself, the unifying flame placed at the centre of the room-turned-into-the-universe, drives the symbolic meaning of the rite.

The contingent flickering of the fire produces a sensation of holistic connection and thus of absolute vitality; its immobility, conversely, produces a sensation of profound depression. Matter, pure energetic interaction, produces radiation, the poetic illusion of the wave and its unifying power: 'The flame wavered and danced. Everyone was looking at it, and after a while there was a terrible restlessness, a sheer wave of exhilaration in the room. There was no center to it; it was everywhere at once' (ibid.: 111-112).

Above all, this process produces not only the hale sensation of emotional oneness, but also brings forth intense forms of freely morphing matter. The language is as emotional as it is precise, plastic, which attests to the capacity for wonder and the intimate communicative bond between the observer and the observed. Cosmic creativity meets artistic creation in the concentrated purity of colour and varied beautiful shapes, the well-structured effects of a combustion of matter, of energetic explosions, fields of forces now brought into action:

> And slowly, slowly the flame hardened and grew bright. It receded to a point at the depth of vision; there was a pale aura all about it, and in this there began to radiate splinters of light, white and red and yellow. And the process of radiation quickened and grew. At last there was nothing in the world but a single point of light, brilliant, radiant to infinity; and from it there arose in the radiance wave upon wave of purest color, rose and red and scarlet and carmine and wine. And to these was added a sudden burst of yellow: butter and rust and gold and saffron. (ibid.: 112)

The ceremony leads to the irruption of beauty in the form of luminosity; hence the evocation of solar radiation, the supreme form of beauty, by way of metonymic association:

> And final fire—the one essence of all fires from the beginning of time, there in the most beautiful brilliant bead of light. And flares of blue and green emerged from the bead and burst, and it was not the blue and green of turquoise and emeralds, or of water and grass, but far more intensely beautiful than these, crystalline and infused with the glare and glitter of the sun. (Momaday, 1989: 112)

The solar form materializes an intrinsic, intradetermined aesthetic projection evidenced by the coherent and harmonious richness of colour, and by its powerful impact on the human subject who is but the receiver of that creative complexity. The emotion of narrative voice testifies to the intimate bond that brings creature and creation together; the imprints of that deep emotion can be perceived in the powerful beauty of the images themselves, but also in the fervour of tone (the deictic 'there' or the superlative, for instance) and in the phonological fabric of the passage (the triple alliterative stressed bilabial *b* in 'beautiful brilliant bead,' a voiced plosive sound that insists in 'blue […] bead and burst,' and in the stressed *g* in 'glare and glitter').

THE TEXT OF CREATION

The poetic wording is one with the belief in the power of the originally creative word. What is of interest here is not the meaning of it, the rational framing of the reality of things, but the effects produced on the living. Fiction unveils a creative process based on chaotic energetic interactions, turned into a celebration of the creative possibilities of spiritual matter. The participants' bodies and minds altogether are both receptacles and co-agents of creation. Active readers of the text of creation from which they are not estranged, they get closer and closer to its ardent core, of which they become a part just as any particle – be it a stone or a star – is also a part of the same ever-expanding whole, and of the same original impulse, according to the holistic vision that the ceremony ritualizes and gives shape and thus meaning to. The healing effects of the interplay of order and disorder on the cultural stage as witnessed and enjoyed by Angela, are the same as those that generate the powerful feeling of life in the celebrants' bodies and minds: 'No one was sick or weary. Everyone wanted to run and jump and laugh and breathe deeply of the air. Everyone wanted to shout that he was hale and playful and everlastingly alive, but no one said anything; they waited' (Momaday, 1989: 112). The descriptive discourse that fuses cultural celebrations with natural elements during the festivities reveals the same monist rhetoric of synaesthesia and synthesis.

Image and word are united, and both make known and manifest the beautiful and the sacred, the fine-looking shape being altogether an object of sensual admiration and of deep faith (related to the sun). The ceremony climaxes in the Apollonian solar achievement, but likewise – in the planned and contingent intrusion of sound, culminating in the harmonious though spontaneous emergence of voice. The presentation of the sound element reveals the 'hidden order of art': the sound of the drum (that refers to the world of manufactured objects) is interwoven with the sound of the storm and rain (the natural world), and redoubled in dramatic intensity by the purely contingent unleashing of the cosmic elements:

> And there was sound. The gourd danced in Tosamah's hand, and there was a rushing and rolling of rain on the roof, a rockslide rumbling, roaring. And beneath and beyond, transcendent, was the drum. The drumbeats gathered in the room and the flame quivered to the beat of the drum and thunder rolled in the somewhere hills. The sound was building, building. The first and last beats of the drum were together in the room and the gulf between was growing tight with sound and the sound was terrible and deep, shivering like the pale, essential flame. […] And at the center of the circle, rising and holding over the fetish and the flame, there were voices, one after another. (ibid.: 113-114)

What captures the attention here is not what the voices say, but the ordered, sequenced manner in which they are said. Hence, instead of placing the intensity meaning on the side of the ceremony's religious *signified*, and revealing its symbolist (or ideological) significance, Momaday unveils the action of the signifier as such, the creative process itself, and reveals in an implicit, essentially formal way how he conceives life in its ecosystemic dimension, relating this at the same time, and adding another layer of complexity to his work, the mechanisms presiding over the elaboration of his own art, which is placed formally at the level of life, i.e., of the celebrated creative non-teleological process.

The diachronic unfolding of the ceremony, though determined by a certain number of ritualized codes, incorporates accident and contingency, otherness, in other words, so much so that the heterogeneous, intrusive element is harmoniously woven into the fabric of the moment. The flame dances to the rhythm of the drum by virtue of a physical system transposed here into the sphere of aesthetics and ethics. The transition from one dimension to the other is immediate, in the sense that art and life, with their physical and energetic phenomena, are inextricably linked. The human dimension, of which the voice is the strongest expression, is tunefully and musically integrated into the whole. As with the butterflies rising and aligning themselves after the accidental clash of horse shoe and stone (*The Ancient Child*), or the wild geese rising one after the other from the initial disorder caused by a gunshot (*House Made of Dawn*), the voices rise at this stage in a steady and orderly fashion ('one after another'), a sequence that humbly places man's contribution at the periphery of the process.

Transculturally speaking, the ceremony can be read as the reconciliation of two artistic 'impulses' of nature (Nietzsche, [1872] 1999: 120): one Dionysian, sonorous, tracing out a framework of depth and terror. This pulsating reality is perfectly combined with the Apollonian figure, which is pictorial, apparent and radiant. Poetic intensity is the perfect metaphorical synthesis of the two. The depth of the sound becomes apparent in the following metaphorical rapprochement: 'The sound was terrible and deep, shivering like the pale, essential flame' (Momaday, 1989: 113). Thus, synaesthesia is not a mental trouble

the narrator suffers from nor an ornamental rhetorical device, but the deep expression of the ethical belief in the oneness of the vital forces that carry life forward.

The final effect of the ceremony, however, remains Ben Benally's vision, in which we hear the title of the novel and its essential meaning, namely the coupling between gaze and voice: 'Look, look, there are blue and purple horses . . . a house made of dawn . . . .' (Momaday, 1989: 114). The minute, microstructure, embraces the macrostructure, the book has become the transcultural ecosystem it has described. The connoted meaning: the dawn, light, cosmic movement of planets make, fabricate, invent objects like houses.

CONCLUSIONS

The fiction of Momaday can be considered a vital, affirmative compendium that celebrates the innovative sacred qualities of life, in an intricate pattern where aesthetics is in tune with an exacting sense of the spiritual realm. This unified vision appeals to individual and collective responsibility toward nature, which is but one expression of that life force, the same one that runs through plants or the blood and mind of humans and animals. Consequently, far from being negativistic or mechanistic like so many Western philosophies that have fed and shored up modern thought at least since Galileo, Momaday's writing is informed by the belief in the efficiency of literature as a life sustaining discourse and as an inexhaustible source of enchantment. Life is worthy of love and admiration because it is not only a life-giver but equally – a beauty-giver, and the death it also gives is part of a broader field of creation that produces life, just as chaos produces harmony.

This vision of creation and nature is not dualistic (as in Descartes' philosophy); nor is it transcendental (as in Kant's); there is no sense of the sublime, but only of the beautiful, nature (or the reality of nature and the world) being sufficient. The intense forms of beauty it generates are commensurate with man's capacity for wonder and comprehension. This is possible because the Native cultures that Momaday seems to draw upon while crafting his art, are not ego-centred, that is, the self is not that interfacial separate psychic entity built both by identification with and opposition to the external world, but a link in an extended chain including human otherness (hence the powerful transculturality that shapes Momaday's works), as well as biological and geological otherness, all recognized as worthy of admiration and respect, because invested with the same powerful, creative spirit of life. Nature or the earth is a common good that cannot be capitalized on, a dwelling place that cannot be possessed absolutely.

REFERENCES

Ballenger, B. (1997) Methods of Memory: On Native American Storytelling. *College English*, 59 (7): 789-800.

Ehrenzweig, A. (1967) *The Hidden Order of Art. A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*. Berkely, Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Freud, S. ([1900] 2010) *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. from the German and edited by J. Strachey. New York: Basic Books.

Halligan F. R. (2001) The Creative Imagination of the Sufi Mystic, Ibn 'Arabi. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 40 (2): 275-287.

Hegel, G. W. F. ([1883] 1988) *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. Trans. with introduction, by L. Rauch. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1963) *Structural Anthropology*. Trans. from the French by C. Jacobson and B. Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Basic Books.

Nietzsche, F. ([1872] 1999) *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. R. Geuss and R. Speirs (eds.). Trans. from the German by R. Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rilke, M. R. (1963) *Duino Elegies*. Trans. from the German by J. B. Leishman and S. Spender. New York: Norton.

Roberson, S. L. (1998) Translocations and Transformations: Identity in N. Scott Momaday's *The Ancient Child*. *American Indian Quarterly*, 22 (1/2): 31-45.

Schaefer, S. B. (2015) *Amada's Blessings from the Peyote Gardens of South Texas*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Smith, P. C., with Allen, P. G. (1993) Earthly Relations, Carnal Knowledge: Southwestern American Indian Women Writers and Landscape. In M. Graulich (ed.) *Leslie Marmon Silko, 'Yellow Woman.'* (pp. 115-150). New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.

Wishart, D. J. (ed.), (2007) *Encyclopedia of the Great Plains Indians*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

ANALYSED TEXTS

Momaday, N. S. (1989) *House Made of Dawn*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968. Repr. New York: Perennial Library.

Momaday, N. S. (1990) *The Ancient Child*. New York: Doubleday, 1989. Repr. New York: Perennial Library.

Momaday, N. S. (1997) *The Man Made of Words*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Redouane Abouddahab (Dr. of literature and full professor in American studies) teaches modern American literature, literary theory and transcultural poetics at Le Mans University, France. His research, which draws on philosophy, psychoanalysis, poetics, and anthropology, is centred on the notions of identity and otherness (in the sociocultural, psychic and ontological senses) in modern and contemporary American literature, and the way in which poetic writing brings repeatedly an experience of limits into play.

https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7695-0960

Email: r.abouddahab@free.fr