"pro CREATION re CREATION" (Nunquam 91): The Doomed Kingdom in Lawrence Durrell's *Revolt of Aphrodite*

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The Revolt of Aphrodite, first published by Lawrence Durrell in 1974, throws the reader into a fascinating world, which both reflects our own and anticipates on the scientific inventions of a yet unborn society. *Tunc*, the first volume, introduces us to Felix Charlock, the inventor of Abel, a computer that can record and reproduce human memories. In order to have his invention protected, Felix trusts the Firm, a huge multinational founded by Merlin Pehlevi and now owned by his two sons, Julian, in London, and Jocas in Istanbul. However, the Firm soon tries to own both Felix's work and the inventor's genius by forcing him to marry Benedicta, Julian's sister, and thus be definitely bound to the Firm's destiny. As *Tunc* unfolds, the reader realises that no character can escape the Firm, despite some desperate attempts, like that of the architect Caradoc who eventually joins the Firm again. Not only does the Firm own everything that is being created or marketed in the world, but it also attempts to master life itself. Thus, *Nunquam*, the second volume, shows Julian trying to resurrect Iolanthe, a former film star whom he dearly loved in vain while she was alive. Now that she is dead he relies on Felix's invention and on his embalmers' talents to resurrect an artificial dummy that he hopes to master completely. Ultimately, the dummy, now in love with Julian, tries to free herself from bondage and in so doing kills both herself and Julian, leaving Felix sole master of the Firm.

Today, *The Revolt of Aphrodite*, although it does resort heavily to sci-fi techniques, no longer strikes the imagination as utterly innovating. This may be due to the evolution of technology, especially in computer sciences where recording discourse and synthesizing more and more human-like voice is widely practised. However, I would like to suggest that its biggest appeal lies in its reflection on the deliberate enslavement of a society that resorts to its most archaic cultural symbols in order not to create but to offset its innate sterility. This critical reflection is conveyed through the subtle handling of the Merlin motif, which

brings to light the fundamental perversion of Merlin's Firm where there can be no "pro Creation" and where the only "re Creation" is that of art.

Thus, we shall see how the society of *The Revolt of Aphrodite* is conceived of as a perverse distortion of the legendary kingdom of Merlin and how the magic art of creation is consequently debased into sterile imitation.

I. "As if it were a religious order" (*Tunc* 95)

a) The Firm's repressed origins and spurious holy quest

Right from the beginning, the Firm is introduced as an ill-defined organization, which is best explained through similes and metaphors. Indeed, we are never given the exact scope of its influence, though few seem to escape its widespread control[1]. Nor are the individuals' relationships to the Firm clearer since Felix, the homodiegetic narrator, is constantly led to wonder who is in and who is out while Sacrapant, who will ultimately be killed by the Firm's underhanded manoeuvres, has this ominous word: "Merlin's is a marvellous firm to work for—or to let it work for you.... Whether one is its slave or its master" (*Tunc* 95). The reader is then led to wonder who the hidden puppeteer might be and where he derives his power from.

All inquiries into the historical origins of the Firm are equally disappointing. Vibart, the lawyer, confesses his inability to trace down the birth of the organization:

> "As a matter of fact I know quite a lot about Merlin because I was once asked to do an article for *The Times* on our Levant merchants, and I started to research on him. But somehow or other I got sidetracked, couldn't get enough material; Pehlevi raised some trivial objections—not this one, Julian, who runs the London end. I was sorry because the story was a most romantic rags-to-riches one." (*Tunc* 123)

[1] We may remember Sacrapant's definition of the Firm: "You see, it is very wide. Old Mr. Merlin didn't believe in building up and cornering one market; he preferred to build horizontally" (*Tunc* 96).

The reader cannot but feel baffled by such a discourse, which both boasts to "know quite a lot" and eventually admits its own ignorance. Far from looking for facts, Vibart was in fact seduced by the romantic story, the legend built around the Firm by its founder and former owner, Merlin. As the story unfolds, the reader is left to ponder on similarly hampered quests, such as that of the writer Koepgen who is carefully prevented from finding the religious icon he is looking for before he has accomplished the task designed by the Firm:

> "He's holding me to ransom, *the old devil*. He wants me to go back to Moscow and deal with some contracts for the firm; I refused, it doesn't interest me. Now I see I will have to go if I'm ever to get my hands on *the bloody thing*." (*Tunc* 161; my emphasis)

By hiding its true origins and by using people's dreams as bait, the Firm maintains its employees in a state of perpetual enslavement and turns each of them into a parody of the medieval knight in quest of his sacred goal. Thus, Felix has to submit to the Firm's will if he wants his research on Abel, the computer memory, to progress. Likewise, Iolanthe, the film star, has to comply with the Firm's wishes if she wants her quest for happiness and wealth to succeed. Each character is deliberately held "to ransom" by whatever "bloody thing" he has set out for.

Consequently, the reader is soon led to see the novel not as mere science fiction but rather, to quote Felix, as a "science friction" (*Nunquam* 98) in both senses of the term "friction"— as 'resistance encountered when one body is in contact with another' and as 'conflict or discord'[2]. Indeed, the problematic encounter of man and robot and the ensuing discord leading to the destruction of the Firm's contracts point to another problematic encounter at a deeper level: that of the novel with its own intertext, namely the medieval legends of Merlin[3]. Thus, behind its obvious futuristic vein, *The Revolt* is also to be read as the playful intertwining of hypotext and hypertext or, to quote Gérard Genette, as "an undefinable as well as unpredictable combination of seriousness and playfulness

[2] *The Collins English Dictionary*.

[3] We include in our references to the Merlin myth its various rewritings, in particular, "The Vita Merlini by Geoffrey of Monmouth," Robert de Boron's *Merlin, roman du XIIIème siècle* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*.

(of the lucid and the ludic), of intellectual achievement and entertainment" (Genette 453)[4]. The reader is then invited to what Genette calls a "relational reading" (Genette 452), confronting two diametrically opposed texts in order to see what will come out of this unexpected rubbing of the enchanter's legendary kingdom against the brave new world of the "merchant prince" (*Tunc* 117).

b) The Accursed Prophet

The first piece of information on the late Merlin is given by Jocas, Julian's brother, and entices us to read the beginning of Merlin's fortune as a coded fable. We are told that Merlin built up the Firm by securing the friendship of a mad accomplice, Abdul Hamid, who was an intensely superstitious man and "had his horoscope made afresh each day" (*Tunc* 118). This harks back to the medieval Merlin, a double figure whom Geoffrey of Monmouth alternately refers to as "the madman"[5] and as "the prophetic bard" or "the prophet."[6] Therefore, Merlin in *The Revolt* strikes the reader as a slightly distorted rewriting of the medieval hero. Symbolically, Merlin is endowed with a fortune teller's gift: "He was as wise as he was foreseeing" (*Tunc* 118); in both cases the gift of prophecy is tightly linked to madness: the legendary Merlin went mad after the military disaster of Gwenddoleu[7], while Merlin's ferocious thirst for power leads him to put himself in the hands of a "madman," Abdul Hamid, who is "mad with a fear of assassination" (*Tunc* 117). Moreover, the legendary figure of Merlin was always followed in "The Vita Merlini" by his "dear companion" the wolf[8], who metamorphoses, in Robert de Boron's *Merlin*, into the faithful scribe Master Blaise—the name Blaise being derived from the celtic word *bleizh*, 'the wolf'—who would sit down and record Merlin's adventures[9]. Conversely, Abdul Hamid, Merlin's first companion in *The*

[4] « un mixte indéfinissable, et imprévisible dans le détail, de sérieux et de jeu (lucidité et ludicité), d'accomplissement intellectuel et de divertissement » [My translation].
[5] "The Vita Merlini," 43, 45, 47, ff.
[6] "The Vita Merlini," 31, 39, 41, 45, ff.
[7] "The Vita Merlini," 31-33.
[8] "The Vita Merlini," 37.
[9] Geoffrey of Monmouth also refers to scribes who are in charge of recording Merlin's words: "And let the same number of scribes be at hand, trained to my dictation, and let them be attentive to record my prophecy on their tablets," "The Vita Merlini" 63.

Revolt, does not write but can speak, repeating the faked prophecies of the court's astrologer bribed by Merlin, while Merlin has turned into the story-teller, in the literal sense of the term, spreading rumours and thus mastering the outcome of his own story.

While reinvesting and inverting the pairing system, Durrell remains faithful to Merlin's linguistic origins. We may indeed remember that the name Merlin can be read according to two etymologies. In the first one Merlin refers to a fish and is close to the French "merlan," the mackerel (*Merlin* 32)[10]. In *The Revolt*, Merlin first appears as a sailor who reaches Istanbul on a British yacht. Yet, Merlin also refers the English reader to the small falcon used for hunting (*Merlin* 123, *Le Devin* 12). This second etymology explains the apparently redundant references to falconry which first seem to be all too frequent in the novel. They become meaningful when read not as simple narrative pieces but as part of a mythological reconstruction which recalls symbolic motifs at strategic points. Thus Merlin, the sailor, who was also "a great one for peregrines" (*Tunc* 117), works in pair with Jocas the hawker, who appears for the last time in *Nunquam*, symbolically divested of his clothes and ready to die surrounded by his emblematic animal, thus echoing the legendary figure hidden in his secret *esplumoir* (Nitze 69), the archetypal nest where he sheds off his bird's mask:

> The birds! They would account for that heavy rotting fragrance in the vaulted air of the room. They were ranged like trophies along the end wall, *the darkest corner of the room, all but invisible*, but one could hear the tinkle of the bells as they stirred and sighed. His belongings stood about in isolation, *as if they* had lost context.... But now they were finished with him and carefully lifted him from the bath. He let them with the same air of weary innocence, smiling, but delightfully unashamed of his *nakedness*. (*Nunquam* 226; my emphasis)

[10] Geoffrey of Monmouth, Malory and Robert de Boron do not dwell on the watery nature of Merlin. However, the theme appears in a late XII[th] century text, *Guillaume d'Angleterre*, which offers a christianised rewriting of the mythical twin birth of Merlin in which Merlin's father is a sea demon (*Le Devin* 26-7). Moreover, we may note that Merlin in "The Vita Merlini" is not only a woodland creature; he also partakes of the watery element and has to be fished out by his pursuers: "Merlin slipped from his back and fell into the rapid waves. The servants lined the shore and captured him as he swam" ("The Vita Merlini" 59).

Therefore, the repeated motif of the fresh meat the hawks are fed on should not be read as part of the picturesque description of the East but as a code which sends the reader back to the "darkest corner" of his memory and compels him to decode the "invisible" beneath the visible. Consequently, we are sent back again to the pairing motif and cannot miss the continuity between father and son: Jocas and Julian are to be read not merely as Merlin's sons but as the embodiment, the reduplication of the initial dual figure Merlin / Hamid which repeats itself in the pair Julian / Jocas. Both brothers seem to inherit the legendary Merlin's characteristic features: mysterious birth, sterility, madness and farsightedness.

As a matter of fact, this pairing motif also accounts for the interruption of Merlin's problematic lineage. Thus, we may remember that, according to Robert de Boron, Merlin was known as an incubus, or a changeling, i.e., the child of a devilish spirit born from a virgin:

> The incubus is a demon who usually seduces women at night-time and fecundates them while they are asleep. According to popular traditions, children born from this union are called changelings and laugh at ill fortune. (*Merlin* 53)[11]

Merlin is not the fruit of a legitimate procreation, but the embodiment of the evil spirit who took possession of a helpless and nameless virgin. Later on, he is himself denied the position of the procreator when his wife, Gwendoloena is ravished by a rival. This is clearly the sign of Merlin's otherworldliness: Merlin is not truly born as a man, but is the bodily incarnation of an evil spirit and cannot give life. Likewise, the identity of the children's mother in *The Revolt* is carefully erased, as Benedicta's few words evince: "She hardly enters our story. She was ill, you know. In those days syphilis, you couldn't cure it" (*Nunquam* 32). While the mother is quickly disposed of and symbolically chastised by a venereal disease, Julian and Jocas are freed from a traditional lineage and can appear not so much as Merlin's sons but rather as his reincarnation. Interestingly, Jocas himself is

[11] « L'incube est un démon qui séduit les femmes généralement pendant la nuit et qui les féconde pendant leur sommeil. Selon les croyances populaires, les enfants nés de cette union sont appelés *changelings* et se mettent à rire lorsqu'un malheur survient » [My translation].

explicitly designed as "the illegitimate one, the changeling" (*Nunquam* 33) while Julian, his 'Merlinish counterpart', smiles at his brother's ill fortune. This dual reincarnation is in keeping with the figure of Merlin described by Philippe Walter: "Merlin is a revenant, it is also a dual figure that can put on a zoomorphic appearance and take various human forms. (*Le Devin* 11)[12]

In such a context, the emasculation of Julian by his father is not to be read as a mere instance of purposeless cruelty but as part of the mythical pattern imposed by the intertext. By depriving Julian of his masculinity, Merlin not only punishes him for his incestuous love for Benedicta but also ensures the paradoxical inheritance of the Merlins' sterility.

Consequently, it is no wonder that Julian should lose the living Iolanthe, just as Merlin loses Gwendoloena. But Durrell offers us another ironic twist in the form of the robot Io: the mechanical dummy's love for Julian cruelly mocks his sterility. As Felix aptly points out, the new Iolanthe "is only a machine, a love-machine" (*Nunquam* 260), that is, she imitates love, acts out artificial, albeit sincere, feelings, but these are aimed at a character who is wise enough to recognise the lure, disparaging the love object as "the parody of a woman" (*Nunquam* 265) while he is himself the parody of a man.

Julian is then turned by his own father into the reincarnation of the mad prophesying Merlin, "a raging maniac" (*Nunquam* 38) whose very impotence increases his power over his subjects, be they firm employees or relatives. As in the medieval legend, defeat—in the form of sexual defeat here—gives rise to an uncontrollable madness which is the necessary condition to power. Like Merlin's, Julian's power is also expressed through his words, and more specifically through his voice. Although he cannot foresee the future, he can cast a spell over his listeners. He is symbolically endowed with "that warm caressing voice... of Cain," with "a melodious lazy inflexion which was very seducing—the calm voice of the hypnotist" (*Nunquam* 84). Thus, Julian appears once more as the embodiment of the legendary Merlin who used to speak to the wild beasts in the forest, as Philippe Walter explains:

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[12] « Merlin est une figure de revenant, c'est aussi une figure dédoublée qui peut prendre une apparence zoomorphe ou qui peut adopter diverses apparences humaines » [My translation].

> Merlin enthrals his listeners by his magic words. Merlin is a fortune-teller because he can tell (*fari*) fate (*fatum*), because he embodies the captivating and binding power of the divine word. (*Merlin* 61)[13]

Once again, the magic power is shared by the two brothers; Julian is gifted with the seductive voice while Jocas utters the prophecy:

> Zeno has seen it all very clearly. He sees you give a last supper with twelve people in the big house. The same night you will completely burn every contract and announce it to the world. Very exciting. It will be a big fire. (*Nunquam* 231)

Unlike the court astrologer's predictions, faked to suit Merlin, Zeno's prophecy is introduced as a genuine one, although it has nothing to do with unforeseeable or unexpected events; rather, it conveys a deeply thought-out plan which has been haunting Jocas for years:

> 'I thought: suppose we destroyed the whole contracts—the whole of the written thing. What would happen?'....
> I suddenly felt myself face to face with one of those tremendously simple, but at the same time critical, veins of thought which belonged to what Marchant and I (in the case of Iolanthe) had labelled the contingency vector; it was the "supposing scale" (*Nunquam* 230)

Thus, the prophecy is deprived of its magic undertone and becomes fully believable as the expression of a cherished hypothesis, of a wild destruction scheme. And when Felix actually plans to burn the microfilm archives the reader does not expect the realisation of the prophecy so much as the fulfilment of Jocas's will, which is carried out by Felix who has come to recognise the old man's desperate need for freedom as his own: "Indeed I now feel it less as a prophecy than as a sort of command, from myself to myself, so to speak" (*Nunquam* 282).

[13] « Merlin captive ses auditeurs par sa parole magique. Merlin est un devin parce qu'il dit (fari) le destin (fatum), parce qu'il incarne le pouvoir subjuguant et lieur de la parole divine » [My translation].

Therefore, the binding word is no longer that of the sham prophecies of old times but that of the individual expressing his free will. Ultimately, the power of the written word—recorded and carefully stored away by Julian—will be destroyed by the spoken word of the dying Jocas enacted by the free hand of Felix. Julian and Jocas eventually meet in death, not in the mausoleum built in Turkey by Caradoc for the Merlins' but in St Paul's, where Julian's end echoes Merlin's tragic fate as recounted by Sir Thomas Malory:

> And always Merlin lay about the lady to have her maidenhood, and she was ever passing weary of him, and fain would have been delivered of him, for she was afeared of him because he was the devil's son, and she could not beskift him by no mean.... So by her subtle work she made Merlin to go under that stone to let her wit of the marvels there, but she wrought so there for him that he came never out for all the craft he could do. And so she departed and left Merlin. (Malory, Vol I, 118)

Iolanthe, like the Lady of the Lake, tries to avoid her devilish pursuer and in so doing, provokes Julian's death. Julian and Jocas are at last reunited under the vault of the cathedral, which appears as a hypertrophied projection of Malory's "great stone," and the resounding fall reverberated by "the echoing nave" (*Nunquam* 281) signals the end of the binding power of their words.

Durrell's Merlin will never be summoned back into the story to guide the knights, as Malory's Merlin was. The characters, once freed from his power—the power of the sly voice and the power of the written compact—will start living and stop recording. Eventually, the last supper given by Felix in the big house signals the end of the perverted quest and is to be read as the inversion of the Round Table. Whereas Monmouth's Merlin recovered his reason, engaged Maeldinus and Taliesin to worship God "in the bushes or the green glades" ("The Vita Merlini" 113-7), and abandoned his magic, which his sister Ganieda inherited, the doomed kingdom of Durrell's Avalon[14], which coveted knowledge, scientific

[14] Avalon is indeed referred to as Merlin's territory: "that kingdom Merlin had called Avalon. Sacrapant explained that it was a ruin when Merlin bought it" (*Tunc* 110). Significantly, it is the place where Felix is brought to sign the contract with the Firm and meet Benedicta, and it is also the place where Jocas dies, "among the jumble of forts and kiosks and shattered

research and erudition in order to make men subservient to its needs, is scheduled for disappearance in a final delirious act. The last boardroom conferences, votes of confidence, resolutions" (*Nunquam* 282) ultimately give way to the unexpected, to the unforeseeable: "So it will be either/or once again; it will be now or never" (*Nunquam* 283).

II. A Parody of Creation: "the illusion of life" (*Nunquam* 157)

The inconclusive ending, which seems to suggest, as James Gifford points out, that "the moment of greatest possibility is the leap into the unknown" (118) is not only reminiscent of other Durrellian conclusions; it also implies that the scientific knowledge of the Merlins inevitably leads to a debased creation which can never reproduce life but only "the illusion of life" (*Nunquam* 157). In so doing, it enslaves the inventor's genius and the scientist's art in order to imitate what is dead. Hence the ultimate failure of the firm, which is not merely explained by its maddening wish for power; rather, it stems from its obsession with repetition or imitation, which leads it to confuse "pro Creation" with "re Creation." We shall see how Julian's haunting desire to imitate nature necessarily implies his downfall and invites the reader to redefine the concepts of creation and art.

a) The Firm As "the reflection of something, the copy of something" (*Nunquam* 86)

Whereas Jocas provided us with the origins of the Firm, Julian enlightens us on its present pattern as well as on its symbolic value. For him, the firm is not to be seen as a superhuman structure, as a panoptic entity embracing the world, but rather as its expression: the firm springs from the culture it controls and reflects it in a mirror-like relationship. Thus, one only needs to look at the firm so as to understand the basic functioning of the society it springs from:

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palaces—the fabled Avalon of old Merlin's dream" (*Nunquam* 219). Durrell's Avalon thus appears as the debased refraction of the legendary island, a heavenly and luxuriant place which needed no human hand to produce fruit and which stood as a symbol of immortality.

> "If we are reflections of our culture, and our culture represents something like the total psychic predisposition of man in terms of his destiny, dare we not ask ourselves what makes it come about, what makes it last or decay?... Felix, it's my belief that you can touch the quiddity, the nub of the idea of a culture only if you realise that it comes out of an act of association of which the primal genetic blueprint in the strictest biological sense is the uniting of the couple, man and woman. In the compact and the seed." (*Nunquam* 87)

Consequently, the Firm and the creation of the robot are tightly linked in Julian's world picture. The contracts drawn between the firm and its employees clearly reflect the first human compact binding man and wife, this "fragile link upon which the whole structure depends" (*Nunquam* 89). Similarly, the creation of the female and male robots appears as an attempt to reconstruct the broken link. Thus, the firm stands for this vital need for association: "a kiss or a handshake or a firm or a religion" (*Nunquam* 91). But of course, it will never be able to repair what has been broken, namely the human association between man and wife and the gift of life. Not surprisingly, the creation of the male robot, symbolically called Adam, fails while robot Io rebels in her own special way, by choosing insanity, i.e., what James Gifford analyses as an "action contrary to programming, as created by the firm, much like human insanity can be seen as difference from the social programme" (Gifford 123).

Thus, Julian strives to repeat a lost model: that of the ideal couple which his parents never offered him and which his father ensured he would never achieve himself. It is no wonder then that he should feel the need to free the firm, i.e., to escape from the artificial programming of a system that can only repeat and never create. However, his break for freedom appears to be flawed right from the beginning since robot Io is conceived of as a lifeless reproduction, "a copy of the human dummy" (*Nunquam* 105), a "mummy" (*Nunquam* 164), i.e., a lifeless body, which is also a pale substitute for the mother Julian never had.

Moreover, not only is Io a "simulacrum of fertility" (*Nunquam* 135) but she also repeats the primeval act of betrayal feared by Julian and breaks the "compact". Indeed, she behaves like the perfect actress impersonating the real lover, so that Julian is both enthralled and terrified by her artificial yet all too real

love, her 'hypocrisy' in the Greek sense of the word. Meanwhile, the Firm ensures that the robot believes in the lie they built up for her and trusts her own faked nature. The renewed "compact" is consequently flawed from the start, while the "seed" cannot be reborn, implying the failure of any "pro Creation". Ultimately, the robot betrays the man by choosing the only form of escape man could choose: death instead of life. The "re Creation" breaks into pieces.

b) "Imitation self-destructs" (Deleuze 304)

Such a dramatic ending entices the reader to go beyond the mere symbolic level and to realise that the Merlins' fall also serves to convey Durrell's underlying discourse on the nature of artistic creation. Indeed, Julian fails not only for having tampered with what may be considered as God's privilege—i.e. bringing the dead back to life—but more essentially for having missed the true nature of art. Thus, we may remember Julian's prophetic words:

> "*If the firm could be freed, Felix!* On such a notion we could base a hope however faint of the freedom which you so desperately seek, which I too need. But the only road to freedom of such a kind lies through an aesthetic beauty of some kind. Beauty... which echoes back the great contrivances of nature.... in my own case Iolanthe's image is the model which suits our book, a universal beauty which has sent her round and round the world in celluloid and which has made her what she is for so many. (*Nunquam* 96)

Quite obviously, Julian conceives of "re Creation" in terms of the reproduction of a "model" which has itself already been reproduced a thousand times on the cinema screen and has thus lost any reality to embody "a twentieth century shallow trashy dream" (*Nunquam* 96). Thus, according to Julian, beauty is not an artistic construct, a free creation, but the imitation, the echo, of a primal contrivance of nature, implying an endless mimetic relationship to the object. Consequently, Julian suggests a 'creation' that is by definition, an anti-creation, if we follow Deleuze and Guattari's concepts:

> No art is imitative, no art can be imitative or figurative. Suppose a painter "represents" a bird; this is in fact a becoming-bird that can occur only to the extent that the bird itself is in the process of becoming something else, a pure line and pure color. Thus imitation self-destructs since the imitator unknowingly enters into a becoming that conjugates with the unknowing becoming of that which he or she imitates. One imitates only if one fails, when one fails. (Deleuze 304-5)

The strict reproduction of the model, including the living Io's memories, dreams and desires, leaves no room for a new becoming. And yet, the characters are forced to realise that the robot is not just the exact reproduction of the model: rather it exists as a becoming-woman. This explains why Felix and Julian are half in love with the robot and cannot refer to her as "it" but only as "she". They do not confuse the dummy with the real woman but they are trapped by their own creation. Having failed to recognise that creation is not simply imitation, they have missed the consequences of their deed. Interestingly, Io defies the linguistic barriers just as she defies the scientists' predictions and escapes the eye of the camera in the end. Iolanthe is not just an expensive dolly who can be taken out into the world and tucked back safely into her box; she can also act "out of character" (*Nunquam* 268), taking up the creator's role to shape out her own. Her reality is that of her own becoming, or, to quote Deleuze, "what is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming" (Deleuze 238).

Consequently, Iolanthe's problematic freedom appears as the mere refraction of the other characters', leaving Felix to wonder: "How will her freedom compare with our own imaginary freedom?" (*Nunquam* 263) Just as the robot is denied the freedom to walk out, to resume her career or to choose her destiny, the characters are strictly bound to act out a predefined role. As James Gifford remarks, the Firm "forces the characters toward a specific goal and restrictive social identity" (115), which explains why Abel, the computer, can easily reduce them to "cases": Elias Sacrapant is "case 225" while Benedicta is "case 226" (*Tunc* 122). Thus, each member is made to act as a piece of the intricate machinery of the firm and has no more freedom than the robot that comes to epitomise and dramatise the hampered becoming of all the characters.

Eventually, the novel reverberates the longing cry for freedom of Felix,

"the thinking weed," against "a culture tied to a stake," a society where "people as destinies are... mathematically predictable" (*Tunc* 11). The "thinking weed" comes to stand for the rhizomatic impulse which "may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but... will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines" (Deleuze 9). Thus Felix, at the beginning of a new era, following his son's death:

> Would you like to know my method? It is simple. While I am writing one book... I write another about it, then a third about it, and so on. A new logic might emerge from it, who knows?.... As far as Caradoc is concerned what ails me in gathering up this inconsequential chatter is that there are several different books which one could assemble, including some which couldn't have been foreseen by those who knew him; is everyone built on this pattern?—like club-sandwich, I suppose. But here for example is a vein which would be more suitable for Koepgen—perhaps it is the part of Caradoc which is Koepgen, or vice-versa. I mean *alchemy*, the great night express which jumps the points and hurtles out of the causal field, carrying everything with it. (*Nunquam* 16)

Felix's method is that of the boundless involution of the rhizome[15], leading him to resort to what Deleuze describes as "transversal communications between different lines" in order to "follow the rhizome by rupture; lengthen, prolong and relay the line of flight; make it vary, until... the most abstract and tortuous lines of *n* dimensions and broken directions" (Deleuze 11). The Firm's constant control ruling the characters' relationships, the money market and the means of production[16] builds up "a plan(e) of organization and domination" that is subtly counterbalanced by Felix's artistic creation opposing "a line of flight which creates" against "a line of destruction" (Deleuze 423).

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[15] We refer the reader to Deleuze's definition of "involution" here: "the term we would prefer for this form of evolution between heterogeneous terms is 'involution', on the condition that involution is in no way confused with regression" (Deleuze 238).

[16] We may remember at this point the argument dividing Julian and Felix when the latter suggests giving away one of his inventions to the public. By impeding him from giving anything freely, Julian clearly shows that every production has to pass "through the firm" (*Tunc* 284).

The writer's work of art thus appears as the counterpart of the Firm's robotic invention. However, these two poles do not simply exist as antithetical entities confronting each other since the robot eventually defeats the Firm by committing suicide. In other words, the Firm is beaten at its own game, trapped and betrayed by its very production, and fails to shape out man and robot to its own private needs as the new Io and the reborn Felix of *Nunquam* evade the Firm's grasp. This final escape which confirms the overpowering energy of the line of flight is eventually that of the novel which tries to reach beyond the mere reproduction of a certain world image and, in so doing, suggests a different kind of book which would be written from the point of view of "the thinking weed," from what Deleuze describes as "successive lateral offshoots in immediate connection with the outside" (Deleuze 19). These "offshoots" in the novel are materialised by the mischievous interplay of the dactyls, the invention of new words, the fragmentation of space-time, the destruction of chronological landmarks, the abolition of "the causal field," the proliferation of ellipses and overlapping realities. All these act as so many weeds disturbing the prearranged arborescent scheme—be it that of the Firm or that of the reader's conventional expectations. This is why there can be no real ending, no tightly-woven conclusion; rather, the end recaptures part of the setting and atmosphere of *Tunc* and alters it, changing its course as it were, to present us with "the big ballroom where *once* we shattered all the mirrors... transformed *now* into rather an elegant room" (*Nunquam* 283; my emphasis). The syntax reverberates this switching pattern bringing the reader to "jump the points" and enter what Deleuze calls "a field of celerity" (Deleuze 372):

> There is some fine black jazz *playing* / and we have been *dancing*, / *dancing* in complete happiness and accord. And we will keep on this way, / *dancing and dancing*, / even though Rome burn. (*Nunquam* 283; my emphasis)

As the characters are thrown into what Deleuze calls "a vortical flow... a continuous variation of variables" (Deleuze 372), the reader is led to bypass his initial quest for a constant, underlying, self-explanatory organization and to "re Create," to follow the line of flight of the revolt, not to reproduce or "pro Create" in Julian's terms. Such a process inevitably implies abandoning an all-embracing

point of view—that of the Firm as well as that of a univocal intertextual motif—and accepting to be drawn into the meandering flow of Felix's slow becoming as an artist. Seen in this new perspective, the failure of the magic kingdom of Merlin appears inevitable and stands out as an instance of intertextual "pro Creation" which ironically mirrors the robotic "pro Creation" at the diegetic level. Just as Felix is brought to "stop the whole works" of Iolanthe (*Nunquam* 282), the reader is brought to unravel the Merlin thread and to acknowledge its limits, to stop reading and start thinking where Felix leaves off recording. We are thus left to imagine this new world which may spring from the Merlins' burning empire but which hasn't yet come into being, the "durable, the forever, the enormous Now" which Lawrence Lucifer calls for at the end of *The Black Book* (244) and which is, by definition, unpredictable.

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