J.M.G. Le Clézio, Desert, translated by C. Dickson (Atlantic, 2010)

When the French writer J.M.G. Le Clézio published Le Désert in 1980, it was something of a departure. Since his first novel, Le Procès-verbal (The Interrogation, 1963), his work had been characterised by experiment and boldness. Here now was a novel that was lyrical and – dare it be said – more accessible than its predecessors. The fact that it has suddenly, nearly thirty years later, appeared in an English translation is explained by the major fact that in 2008 Le Clézio won the Nobel Prize for Literature. For the Nobel Academy he was ‘an author of new departures, poetic adventure and sensual ecstasy, explorer of a humanity beyond and below the reigning civilization’.

Some, if not all of these qualities are to be found in Desert. It is a novel of two narratives: the major one concerns Lalla, an orphaned Arab teenager who we initially meet in the North African shanty town where she lives. Feeling an intense spiritual connection with the vast expanses of desert around her, an imminent arranged marriage is insupportable and abhorrent. We see Lalla flee to Marseille, where she works as a cleaner, until suddenly being taken up by a photographer as his model, and gaining some degree of freedom and financial independence. The supporting narrative, which opens the novel, follows a tribe in North Africa in the early years of the twentieth century, in a quest to find a home in the face of French colonial invaders who are driving them away from their roots. Unsurprisingly, their tale is not a happy one: by the end their spiritual leader has died and many of them are massacred by the invaders, leaving a depleted tribe condemned to homelessness.

Le Clézio’s style does not make for a difficult read. If the novel is poetic, this is only because the author strives to create atmosphere and sensuality through lyrical yet simple descriptions of the unending deserts. Lalla’s sections of the narrative are told in the first person, which brings us naturally close to her; the simple vocabulary mirrors a teenager’s perception of the world. Similarly, the use of the second person in the Lalla sections works to bring the reader into the text: ‘there are days when you don’t know where you’re headed, when you don’t know what might happen next’ (146). As such, her experiences are immediate and alive.

As the narratives progress, it becomes clear that the same spirit, and the influence of the same spiritual leader, haunts Nour, a young man through whom we see much of the secondary narrative, and Lalla: memories and visions unite them, giving a mystical tone to the novel which is a familiar ingredient of postcolonial literature. There is a literal wind of ill fortune, and a shepherd called the Hartani who, although he fathers Lalla’s child, never speaks and is a close to being a dream figure. All this is fine and well executed, if not particularly original; it will either repel or attract readers, as will the constant descriptions of heat and dryness: perhaps the monotony of the tone is meant to replicate the monotony of the scenes described. More interesting are the lacunae in the narrative: initially, we do not know what Nour’s tribe is fleeing from; later, we only learn of Lalla’s pregnancy when an outsider mentions it. We are not told at first how she comes to be on a Red Cross ship to Marseille (it turns out that she has collapsed in the desert after fleeing her marriage). Knowledge and understanding are not part of the fragmented world of Nour and Lalla; these hints of unknowability give the novel a gently postmodern air.

Rather than objectively narrate the imminent arranged marriage of Lalla, Le Clézio merely refers to a ‘man in a gray-green suit’. This incomplete view fits with Lalla’s vision of him.

The most satisfying parts of the novel are those covering Lalla’s life in Marseille, possibly because of the topical and contemporary nature of the subject matter. As an immigrant, Lalla is effectively imprisoned in the most deprived quarter of the city, a claustrophobic place of poverty and murder inhabited by Turks, Africans, Greeks, and Italians. The modern city is seen as a place of isolation rather than community, and Lalla and the other immigrants seen as shadows and ghosts; their lives stand for the lives of the displaced, world-wide:

They’ve lost everything, exiled, beaten, humiliated, they work on the roads, in the freezing winds, in the rain, they dig holes in the stony earth, they ruin their hands and their heads, driven mad by the jackhammers. They’re hungry, they’re frightened, they’re frozen with solitude and emptiness. (265)

This misery hangs over the novel, yet if there is a message in Desert, it is that the human spirit is indestructible, and that its power transcends time. Lalla gives birth at the end of the story, back in her homeland. Human beings survive, and this survival is aided by our unique ability to tell and hear stories: throughout this story, characters narrate and listen. The odds they are up against are terrible, and this is where we come to a criticism which could be levelled at not just Desert, but much contemporary literature. The topic of exile and immigration is a serious and sensitive one, and no one would deny for a moment the appalling lives of much of the world’s population under it. But it is as if our guilt, as the privileged, means we must write and read books where we shake our head in horror and shame. Humanity has, under the worst circumstances, an equally great capacity for joy and laughter. Moving as the stories of Nour, Lalla and their compatriots are, I just wished that, sometimes, Le Clézio could bring them out of suffering poetic intensity. But Desert is nonetheless a welcome addition to the canon of literature of exile, and is something more than yet another vogueish take on the immigrant experience.

Nick Turner