3-D Relationality: Horizontal, Vertical and Textual Connectedness in Christiane Singer's Derniers fragments d'un long voyage


Published in:
Modern and Contemporary France

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

Publisher rights
Copyright 2020 Taylor and Francis. This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access
This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback

Download date:31. Oct. 2023
ABSTRACT

Human beings are inherently relational and never is this more apparent than at the end of life. Yet our understanding of this relationality is often limited, as we think only in terms of the interpersonal, disregarding the other relational dimensions. Christiane Singer’s end-of-life memoir, *Derniers fragments d’un long voyage* (2007), calls us to reconsider this model of connectedness. As ‘le seul ouvrage de langue française où l’auteur illustre de façon détaillée ce qu’est une mise en pratique [ . . . ] des méthodes fondamentales de toute spiritualité et ce qui en constitue le fruit’ (Juguet 2013, 88), *Derniers fragments* offers a unique perspective on relationality at the end of life, adding both a vertical and a textual dimension to our understanding of the concept. This article will therefore advocate for a conceptualisation of relationality that goes beyond the established, horizontal model; expounding the benefits of three-way connectedness, on the horizontal, vertical and textual planes. By examining four key aspects of Singer’s end-of-life journey—connection, *accompagnement*, transcendence and *partage*—this article will advance a multi-dimensional model of connectedness, as it emerges in Singer’s text, and invite us to (re)consider the value of relationality, particularly the vertical (or spiritual), within holistic palliative care provision.

RÉSUMÉ

L’être humain est, par essence, relationnel et cela n’apparaît jamais autant qu’en fin de vie. Pourtant, notre compréhension de cette relationalité est souvent limitée puisqu’elle ne se conçoit qu’au niveau interpersonnel, au détriment de toute autre dimension relationnelle. *Derniers fragments d’un long voyage* (2007), le récit de fin de vie de Christiane Singer, nous invite à repenser ce modèle de relationalité. En tant que ‘seul ouvrage de langue française où l’auteur illustre de façon détaillée ce qu’est une mise en pratique [ . . . ] des méthodes fondamentales de toute spiritualité et ce qui en constitue le fruit’ (Juguet 2013, 88), *Derniers fragments* nous offre une perspective singulière sur la relationalité en fin de vie, en y ajoutant une dimension à la fois verticale et textuelle. Cet article prônera donc une conceptualisation de la relationalité qui va au-delà du modèle horizontal existant, en exposant les bénéfices d’une relationalité à trois dimensions, sur les plans horizontal, vertical et textuel. En examinant quatre aspects clés du cheminement en fin de vie de Singer—connexion, accompagnement, transcendance et partage—cet article proposera un modèle pluridimensionnel de relationalité, tel qu’il se présente dans le récit de Singer, et nous invitera à (re)considérer la valeur de la relationalité, surtout la relationalité verticale (ou spirituelle), dans le cadre d’une prise en charge globale du patient en soins palliatifs.

Introduction

In his 1961 publication, *Persons in Relation*, John Macmurray argues that ‘the Self is constituted by its relation to the Other; [. . . ] it has its being in its relationship; and [. . . ] this relationship is necessarily personal. [. . . ] Persons, therefore, are constituted by their mutual relation to one another’ (17–24). Macmurray then expands upon this fundamental concept, articulating it in various guises and relating it to an array of social contexts. Of particular note
is his assertion that religion is ‘the primary mode of reflective rationality’ (167). That is to say that religion encompasses both the cognitive and the relational, in a single mode of reflection. However, Macmurray’s understanding of the personal, or relational, is often based around knowledge and (self-)revelation and is, therefore, inherently two-dimensional, if even that (168–70). Furthermore, despite addressing relationality with God, Macmurray’s understanding of this relationship is quite linear, never appearing to step over into the spiritual or transcendental. (169, 179, 217). While seldom applied to the field of francophone literary studies, Macmurray’s philosophy is of interest here for the role it played in shaping the thinking of Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement.\(^1\) While substantive scholarship on Macmurray’s influence on Saunders is somewhat lacking, one need only look at a number of Saunders’ lectures and publications to identify the marks of Macmurray’s philosophy (Saunders 1969, 1971, 1972, 1974). Moreover, we know that Saunders owned nine of Macmurray’s works and she was particularly interested in his notions of relationality and community.\(^2\) As such, given that Macmurray was a significant contributor to Saunders’ thinking on relationality and that Saunders was, of course, the mind behind the core values of the modern hospice movement, out of which was birthed contemporary palliative care in Europe, it is apposite to take Macmurray as a lens through which to consider the problematic of relationality at the end of life, in the broader European context.

Taking Macmurray’s conceptualisation of relationality as a point of departure, this article will examine the manifestations of a need for such relational connection at the end of life. At this unique moment, when ‘le sens de la vie prend [. . .] une coloration plus intense’ (Châtel 2013, 11), this inherent need for connection is often expressed through an existential search in one of two forms: horizontal or vertical. Throughout this article, the term ‘horizontal’ will be used to refer to the connections that exist between human beings; while ‘vertical’ will refer to connections between humanity and a higher power or deity.\(^3\) In Christiane Singer’s \textit{Derniers fragments d’un long voyage} (2007), this concept of horizontal and vertical connection is central to the narrative. However, \textit{Derniers fragments} adds a further level of connectedness in the form of metatext and intertext. We thus find, within the narrative, a tripartite experience of relationality, centred on the palliative care context. \textit{Derniers fragments} is Singer’s last published work and is a version of the diary she kept from the days prior to her terminal diagnosis until a few weeks before her death. The text charts Singer’s end-of-life experience under the Austrian healthcare system, foregrounding connectedness, in all its forms, as the vital ingredient for a ‘good death.’ Although it has not received the critical attention it merits, \textit{Derniers fragments} is of extreme interest to French Studies Medical Humanities, not least for the singular perspective it offers on vertical connectedness in a palliative care setting.

As Marc Juguet (2013, 88) asserts, ‘à [sa] connaissance, [\textit{Derniers fragments}] est le seul ouvrage de langue française où l’auteur illustre de façon détaillée ce qu’est une mise en pratique intense et complète des méthodes fondamentales de toute spiritualité et ce qui en constitue le fruit.’ In this sense, \textit{Derniers fragments} is exceptional within the wider corpus of francophone end-of-life narratives. The text is also unique in that, despite her experience of end-of-life care being based exclusively in Austria, Singer writes in French and publishes with a French publishing house. This juxtaposition of the language and culture of care, coupled with the singularity of the spiritual perspective offered by the text, makes \textit{Derniers fragments} a standout work from which to draw rich, new insights on the problematic of relationality at the end of life. And yet, this text—indeed, the entirety of Singer’s oeuvre— has received limited
scholarly attention. Of the studies that do exist on *Derniers fragments*, almost all approach the text from the perspective of theology, psychology or care (see Juguet 2013; de Hennezel and Vergely 2010). A question thus emerges as to why this text has been so neglected by Medical Humanities scholars. Given the French cultural context, have the significant spiritual and religious dimensions of the text been considered too *épineux* to tackle thus far? By using three-dimensional, rather than two-dimensional, connectedness as a lens through which to read Singer’s work, this article will articulate the value of end-of-life relationality, particularly the vertical, and argue that, for Singer, while human identity is, indeed, created in relation, those relationships are not solely ‘personal’, as Macmurray suggests, but also spiritual and textual.

**Connection**

Beginning with the textual, and limiting our focus to the three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) which dominate the religious references in the text, it quickly becomes clear that the holy books of these religions, and a series of ‘life guides’ authored by individuals who follow them, have been integrated into Singer’s psyche as a means of processing her terminal diagnosis. On many occasions, it would appear that the nature of her illness is such that to express it in her own words is beyond her. As such, she must turn to the words of others, which can be seen to better express her thoughts and feelings, as she works through the conundrum of expressing the inexpressible. Moreover, these religious intertexts, and the belief systems behind them, also become invaluable to Singer on a horizontal level, as they contribute towards a shared understanding of death and dying—that is, a point of commonality from which connection might be built. The religious metaphors which emerge in Singer’s everyday discourse around death and dying offer a case in point. When describing her pain and suffering, Singer regularly refers to her ‘martyre’ and describes her present state as an ‘enfer’: ‘depuis hier me revoilà à l’hôpital [. . .]: expérience pénible de martyre et d’abandon cette nuit’ (67); ‘depuis que cette généreuse pompe qui neutralise la douleur est en place, le martyr a cessé’ (88); ‘enfer de la souffrance. Enfer jour après jour’ (31). This idea of suffering as hellish martyrdom is developed further with references to the crucifixion of Christ: ‘l’important n’aura pas pour moi de guérir à tout prix, mais [. . .] de saisir un pan peut être du terrifiant mystère de la souffrance physique et de voir si on peut en sortir vivant’ (28); ‘j’ai été couronné cette nuit. La couronne d’épines’ (124). This identification with Christ is also seen in a more positive light when Singer draws on an episode from the Qur’an, remarking: ‘j’ai reçu un sacré don avec la naissance: celui de tout magnifier. [. . .] Ce don le Nazaréen l’avait aussi en partage’ (22). Singer thus identifies with Christ both in his suffering and in his praise of Creation—notably, this gift is held ‘en partage’, which points towards a fundamental aspect of Singer’s search for connection: that of sharing.

The selection of examples above and later in this article show that, in the early part of the text, Singer does not hold to any one belief system, but rather can be seen to borrow from many. While these attempts to ‘bricole[r] son rapport avec sa foi’ (Cyrulnik 2017, 242) might lead us to conclude that Singer’s belief is more closely aligned with the Bellah’s et al.’s ([1985] 1996, 235) notion of ‘Sheilaism’—a belief system which places the human being at its centre and focuses on ‘transformat[ing] external authority into internal meaning’—the opposite is, in fact, true. Indeed, while Sheilaism is almost exclusively egocentric in its outlook and seeks only a superficial engagement with established faiths, Singer’s relationships with the belief systems that form the mosaic of her spirituality run much deeper. Singer exemplifies this when she takes the time to describe, in detail, what her engagement with each religion has brought to her
life. For example, she writes: ‘le bouddhisme [. . .] m’apprit à décrypter le fonctionnement de mon esprit, et tous les filtres de la conscience. L’exhême rigueur y rejoint la plus vertigineuse des bienveillances’ (92) and each successive belief system receives the same treatment, testifying to the depth of her connection with them (see Singer, 92–93). That said, the dominant belief system in Singer’s articulation of her suffering, and of life more broadly, remains Christianity.\(^5\) The culturally-appropriated religious images and discourses she draws upon allow for a level of social and linguistic connection as, at a communicative level, they provide a language for the sharing of her end-of-life experience. As such, these religious references offer a form of horizontal and textual connection upon which Singer might begin to construct a new form of identity post-diagnosis—a notion that we shall return to later.

Further to this development of a shared religious language around death and dying, Singer also offers an insightful commentary on the nature of modernity and the limits imposed by contemporary society when it comes to individual spirituality—an impediment to both horizontal and vertical connection. Firstly, she cites the business of life as an inhibiting factor in one’s connection with le vertical: ‘en lâchant sur nous les hyènes de l’urgence, la modernité rend l’accès vertical impraticable’ (14). Secondly, she cites an emphasis on promoting a homogenous set of beliefs as a further inhibiting factor: ‘malédiction d’une modernité qui réduit le niveau d’approche à la seule psyché, à la seule norme collective’ (103). One might argue, then, that Singer’s imposed hospitalisation, following the deterioration of her general health, post-diagnosis, serves as a means of breaking free of the realities of contemporary life which so inhibit one’s ‘accès vertical’. Moreover, the fact that Singer’s hospitalisation comes about as a result of a terminal diagnosis is also significant. Marie de Hennezel, a psychologist and personal friend of Singer, and Jean-Yves Leloup, a theologian, note in their co-authored work: ‘tout homme confronté à l’imminence de sa mort peut être amené à se poser des questions spirituelles’ (Hennezel and Leloup 1997, 17).\(^6\) Tanguy Châtel (2013, 29), a sociologist and former accompagnant on a palliative care ward, likewise states that ‘la fin de vie [lui] sembl[e] être de nature à faire ce type de question [existentielle].’ It should come as no surprise, then, that Singer’s existential ponderings begin almost as soon as she is hospitalised: ‘je ne raffole pas l’idée de considérer la Vie en soi comme une maladie dont il faille guérir’ (11). It is these musings on the nature of life which push Singer towards a deeper reflection upon what Châtel (2013) and psychologist Boris Cyrulnik (2017) would both term our ‘inherent spirituality’ and which guide and direct Singer’s end-of-life journey from beginning to end. It is significant, of course, that it is not the academic or rational mind which, in Singer’s view, is a limiting factor. As she states: ‘la faculté de discernement critique dont je suis bien dotée ne m’a pas empêchée d’être spirituelle dans toutes mes cellules et de façon inguérieuse’ (92). Singer argues, therefore, that the turn away from religion manifest throughout the twentieth century and persistent to the present day, resulted (and results) not from an individual’s inability to believe, but from social norms and societal models of being. As we shall see, it is these barriers to horizontal and vertical connection which Singer will regularly attempt to break down as she journeys through the final phase of life.

A further significant role of these religious and spiritual reflections is their use as a coping mechanism: a means of coming to terms with the inescapable reality of a terminal illness. One of the most intriguing of these religious reflections is Singer’s holding to the Jewish belief in not naming one’s illness: ‘on ne nomme pas la maladie dans la tradition judaïque [. . .]. C’est une façon de lui donner une légitimité’ (16). This refusal to name the illness that lies within
her is at once a method of self-protection and of self-assertion. On one level, the decision not to name the illness allows for a (perhaps somewhat deluded) hope that the illness might not be as serious as it seems. In this sense, Singer is able to lull herself into a false sense of security, boxing the illness away and, to an extent, legitimising a belief in its non-existence. On the other hand, the decision not to name the illness can be seen as an act of defiance and self-assertion. Speaking of naming her illness, Singer states: ‘C’est [. . .] une façon de dire: «Je vous présente madame la maladie une telle qui habite désormais chez moi», alors que derrière elle avance une tout autre visiteuse qui, elle seule, impo’ (17). By giving the illness a name, as per the Hebraic tradition of naming, Singer’s identity would be subsumed into the identity of the illness as the two are placed in apposition. We only have to think of the adjectival noun cancèreux to find the evidence of this. To name the illness is to shift Singer’s identity to that of a cancèreuse and, from that point on, her previous identity would cease to exist, as society brands her a terminally ill patient and her previous horizontal connections are transformed. Thus, by refusing to name her illness, Singer acts assertively in an attempt to prevent any loss of identity and protect the relationships connected with it. Further evidence of this is found when Singer writes: ‘une maladie est en moi. C’est un fait. Mon travail va être de ne pas être, moi, dans la maladie. Bon, je répète, il est possible qu’il y ait en moi ce qu’on nomme une maladie. Mais Christiane n’est pas contenue dans cette maladie. Elle en déborde’ (16). Her plea is clear: do not lose sight of me when you discover that I am ill. I am still me: I have an illness, but that illness is not the sum total of my being. This attempt to self-assert, limited as it is, is seen in the distancing of the self from the invasive other —‘une maladie est en moi’—and in the decision to refer to herself in the third person. The separation of the ‘moi’ from ‘Christiane’ allows for a division of the self that, in turn, permits Singer to maintain a level of horizontal connection, particularly within the world of work, while simultaneously fighting the invasive illness which threatens to engulf her. Singer also comments, quite bluntly, upon the inability of religious institutions to understand spirituality: ‘il est vrai que tout système sied mal à la spiritualité’ (91)—‘système’, here, referring to the religious institutions—and yet, those who represent the Catholic tradition are not painted in the same negative light. Singer remarks: ‘le christianisme est en moi comme un vide incendiaire que je n’ai pas voulu remplir. A jamais neuf. Et qui s’invente de neuf chaque jour’ (92), and perhaps it is this which prevents any overt criticism of the belief system. Even so, there remains an acknowledgement of the disjuncture between organised religion and spirituality. Gerben Heitink (1999, 271), author of Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains, argues that this turn towards a more spiritual faith is a result of the ‘fundamental deficiencies’ in contemporary culture, one element of which is, of course, the Church. Why, then, does Singer seem to develop such a deep connection with the various ‘sœurs’ (both religious visitors and nurses) mentioned in the text and, to an extent, with Pater Walter, a priest who visits and administers the sacrament to her during her hospitalisation? I would suggest that this connection results from an acknowledgement of the patient as the central figure in her own journey of life and a valorisation of her identity as Christiane, rather than patient.

**Accompagnement**

It is interesting that Singer uses the term ‘sœur’ to refer to a range of individuals. In her text, ‘sœur’ is used to refer to nurses, sisters, nuns and even a doctor. The Dictionnaire Larousse defines the word ‘sœur’ as: ‘personne du sexe féminin née du même père et de la même mère qu’une autre personne; celle avec qui on partage le même sort; ce qui est apparenté à quelque
chose d’autre (en parlant de noms féminins); nom qu’on donne aux femmes qui ont fait des vœux religieux et que les religieuses se donnent entre elles.’ However, looking into the etymology of the word, we discover that ‘sœur’ has always had a quality of love, care and compassion. When Singer chooses to use the French translation of the German word ‘(kranken)schwester’, she must surely be aware of the ambiguity which would be created for her French-speaking readership. This ambiguity would therefore seem to be intentional, and all the more when we see her use ‘infirmière’ elsewhere in the text. What lies at the heart of the relationships that Singer develops with these ‘sœurs’ is their ability to focus entirely on her, laying aside any other preoccupations and being fully present with her. As Cyrulnik (2017, 16) argues, ‘quand on est malheureux, une seule rencontre peut tout changer, à condition que notre structure mentale soit assez souple pour évoluer [. . .]. Ces rencontres nous métamorphosent parce qu’elles nous proposent une transcendance qui peut être sacrée, laïque, ou profane.’ The transcendental nature of the bond which develops between Singer and the ‘sœurs’ is fundamental to her end-of-life journey as, returning to the expression used in the Larousse, she becomes ‘apparentée à’ these women. Thus, out of what initially appeared to be an ambiguous term, using a single word, Singer can be seen to tap into the depths of the connection experienced between her and these ‘sœurs’. The discussions with the ‘sœurs’ are central to Singer’s end-of-life journey and it is arguably in these figures that we find the greatest examples of the accompagnement called for by Châtel. Such accompagnement, evidenced through the empathic connections established with the ‘sœurs’, enables Singer to overcome what Hennezel and Leloup term ‘le sentiment si répandu chez les malades d’être réduits à un «corps objet’’ (1997, 14). In the case of this text, however, most of these encounters are endowed with a degree of religious sensitivity and thus we might argue that the accompagnement of the ‘sœurs’ moves closer to theologian Richard Osmer’s concept of a ‘spirituality of presence.’ (Osmer 2008, 33–34). ‘Spirituality of presence’ is defined as: ‘a spiritual orientation of attending to others in their particularity and otherness within the presence of God’, while the concept of ‘attending’ is understood as ‘relating to others with openness, attentiveness, and prayerfulness’ (34). Both of these are at work in Singer’s interactions with the ‘sœurs’, shifting their relationship from solely horizontal, to one which is active on both the horizontal and the vertical plane. As Cyrulnik (2017, 40) remarks, ‘la religion est un phénomène relationnel et social’ and thus, by its very nature, there is a quality of presence inherent within it. This relational presence is foregrounded in Singer’s narration of her encounters with the ‘sœurs’ as it is this, above all else, that she seeks in their time spent together.

The first ‘sœur’ mentioned in the text is ‘une doctoresse du Nigeria, sœur J.M.’ (33) and she reappears some sixty pages later; however, on this occasion we are given her name in full: ‘sœur Jeanne-Marie’ (93). Sœur Jeanne-Marie is quite an unusual figure in that she is seemingly both religious sister and doctor. At their first encounter, Singer ‘lui demande de [la] bénir’ (33) and a saintly presence appears to enter the room: ‘à cet instant Padre Pio est comme présent dans la pièce, je pleure’ (33). The fact that Singer’s first instinct is to ask this individual to bless her might lead us to believe that there is something about her outward appearance which shows her to be a religieuse. Moreover, the fact that Singer experiences the presence of Padre Pio—a Catholic saint renowned for his prayerful union with God and his divine gift of healing—is symbolic of the blessing offered by sœur Jeanne-Marie. We might also read into this apparition a certain identification, on Singer’s part, with the physical sufferings of the saint. Padre Pio was known to have very poor health and yet, he bore his sufferings as a sacrifice to
the glory of God (Carty 2010). To some extent, we see Singer engage with her suffering in a similar way, using the final phase of her life to connect with and edify others. Following a night of physical pain and torment, Singer remarks: ‘une nuit dure. Souffrance, violence dans le dos. La certitude de sauver quelqu’un en traversant l’épreuve (j’ai son nom dans l’oreille: Yves Z.)’ (89). Her suffering is thus seen in a redemptive light, bringing honour and glory to God and being used to work out a greater purpose in the lives of others. Kathryn Conway (2007, 21–22) discusses this concept of suffering as a redemptive process, drawing on the crucifixion narrative; however, the pattern she identifies is one of personal redemption. This is not the case with Singer. Her suffering is not understood as redeeming her, but rather as serving and redeeming others. As such, it moves closer to the pattern of vicarious suffering, identified by Brian Sudlow (2011, 215–236), in the works of J. K. Huysmans and other Catholic authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That said, there is one notable difference. As Sudlow concludes, paraphrasing Huysmans’ biographer, Robert Baldick ([1955] 2006, 474), Huysmans’s suffering ‘was surely offered up as a penance of his own sins and the sins of others’ (224), thus redeeming himself and others. Conversely, in Singer’s case, there is no hint of her suffering serving any redemptive purpose in her own life. The positive outworking of her suffering is entirely focused on the redemption of others. In this sense, Singer’s suffering rings truer with the original crucifixion narrative.

The next ‘sœur’ we meet is sœur G. She, like sœur Ed., whom we shall discuss shortly, is a nurse responsible for caring for Singer in the latter stages of her illness. Sœur G.’s initial appearance in the text is very brief. We are told that she is ‘une femme très simple et dont les yeux sont de nougat clair’ (90)—a fairly underwhelming first description. However, sœur G.’s words, quoted in the original German, and then repeated in translation—‘Ah, vos pensées sont si belles . . . Je n’oublierai jamais’ (90)—give us an indication of the nature of the relationship that is beginning to emerge. As with other ‘sœurs’ in the text, Singer has a lasting impact upon sœur G. As sœur G. admits, ‘[elle] n’oublier[a] jamais’. This bond, presented in its initial stages at this point in the journey, is cemented by the account that comes in the final pages of Singer’s text. Three days before her final journal entry, on 26th February, Singer writes:

\[\text{Et ce matin, la sœur G. me fait une toilette qu’il faut oser appeler amoureuse tant elle me rend une peau, la sensation de me revêtir d’un corps. «Tu m’as coulée comme un fromage, tu m’as pétrie comme du pain.» Dieu fait femme, Dieu sous l’apparence de sœur G., Dieu paysanne et nourrice, mère et amante, me coule comme son fromage, me pétrit comme son pain. J’en pleure (134).}\]

In her care for Singer, sœur G. can be seen to embody all the traits of love, care and compassion carried by her title. Such is her gentleness that she is considered almost divine. Again, Singer turns to the religious sphere to find the metaphors which best capture her experience. The bond between Singer and sœur G. is evident and it is premised on a number of the ‘sept attitudes de l’accompagnement,’ identified by Leloup (1997, 484). In the four nouns used to summarise sœur G.’s roles, arranged in appositional pairs—‘paysanne et nourrice, mère et amante’—we come to understand sœur G.’s role as that of meeting an emotional and a physical need. These nouns speak of care and love, but also of sustenance and provision. These are the fundamentals of the relationship between the two women. For once, rather than Singer being seen solely to give of herself, there is also a significant return as sœur G. gently and lovingly cares for her.
Sœur E. then, goes further than her colleagues, drilling deeper into Singer’s faith: ‘“Etiez-vous croyante avant d’être malade?”’ (111), she asks. This question is very direct and seems insolent, even; however, rather than provoking any sense of annoyance in her patient, Singer writes: ‘je [l’]aime aussitôt’ (111). Sœur E. then goes on to, in a sense, justify her question: ‘Je remarque souvent que des gens se mettent à croire aussi longtemps qu’ils sont en danger, puis s’’ébrouent aussitôt après et ça m’énerve’” (112). Such an observation confirms what Leloup (1997) has remarked, from a theological perspective, regarding our approach to Christ during illness. In biblical times, ‘on venait la plupart du temps vers Jésus comme vers un thérapeute. Il apparaissait à ses contemporains comme celui qui pouvait les délivrer de la douleur et les décharger de la souffrance’ (40). This attitude remains a persistent feature of contemporary experiences of illness. Cyrulnik (2017, 59–67) discusses this ‘dieu thérapeute’ at length, noting that such a figure is seen to ‘sécurise.’ This is particularly prevalent in countries which continue to live with the legacy of the Catholic Church’s influence, of which France and, evidently, Austria are but two (Châtel 2013, 60, 112). Yet such an understanding of our attitude towards faith-based healing appears to run contrary to the sociological scholarship on this theme. Châtel (2013, 98) argues that ‘il est rare de devenir authentiquement croyant dans ses derniers instants quand on ne l’a jamais été au long de sa vie.’ Moreover, despite Singer’s initial liking for sœur E., she still skirts around her question, using the anecdote of a man praying for a parking space to stall for time: ‘Tiens, une histoire pour vous faire sourire’ (112). Ignoring this initial stalling, sœur E. persists: «Et vous, répète-t-elle, étiez-vous croyante ‘avant’?»’ (112). In Singer’s response to this question we gain the first insight into the origins of her faith and begin to understand the evolution that has taken place in her attitude towards religion. In shifting from a mindset under which ‘Dieu avait besoin de moi, de nous, de notre aide pour réparer ce monde si meurtri’ (112), Singer arrives at a place where serving others lies at the centre of her faith and where connection is the priority.

Sœur Ed. is the last nurse, bearing this title, to appear in the text. In contrast to the other ‘sœurs’, however, Singer does not immediately develop a strong bond with her, quite the opposite: ‘sœur Ed. travaille à notre étage depuis un mois. Je la supporte très mal avec sa voix aigre et frustrée dès le matin et les jappements qui lui tiennent lieu de conversation’ (132). This somewhat sharp and brash approach is completely repulsive to Singer, to the point that she remarks that sœur Ed.’s ‘agacement permanent [lui] ferme le cœur’ (132). This response to any form of aggressive or domineering behaviour is a persistent feature of Singer’s end-of-life journey.12 That said, when Singer is honest with sœur Ed. about the issue she has with her, despite the initial huffing—‘elle reste un peu interloquée, boudeuse’ (132)—sœur Ed. begins to open up to Singer about her own life journey and the special place reserved in her heart for the disabled children she previously nursed: ‘Mais vous devriez voir ce que, eux, ils voient! Parce que, eux ces petits, vous voyez, ils sont libres, c’est pas comme nous!’ (133). The way sœur Ed. talks about these children and her love for them is inspirational to Singer, ‘[lui] met[tant] le cœur en fête’ (133). The connection between the two women thus emerges on the basis of honest communication, valorising this aspect of the caring relationship. Although she risks hurting sœur Ed., Singer speaks plainly, in the hope of forging some level of meaningful relationship: ‘je lui dis combien son agacement permanent me ferme le cœur. Pourrait-elle peut-être m’aider?’ (132). The effect of this frankness is quite astounding: sœur Ed. opens up, the barriers are broken down and a meaningful relationship begins. Singer summarises this encounter beautifully when she writes: ‘je voulais entrouvrir tes grilles, sœur Ed., et c’est toi qui ouvres grandes les miennes’ (133). This is a lesson on not judging a book by its cover and
on the importance of honesty: stripping away the artifice of contemporary life to make way for what really matters, and all the more so at the end of life.

**Transcendence**

Continuing with this focus on horizontal connection, but drawing more on the potential for the horizontal to intersect with the vertical, Singer ascribes significant value to the identity of the Church collective as a body of believers. In her words: ‘l’institution ne peut que céder le pas devant l’expérience de «l’homme intérieur». L’Église qui se construit dorénavant a d’autres matériaux que les pierres: ce sont nos cellules’ (91). Without the believers, the Church would not exist and it is the privileging of the person over the institution which is central to her conceptualisation of Church. As such, the horizontal and vertical connection offered by the Church gives Singer some of the greatest comfort in her hours of need. One of the most powerful examples of this is found when Singer attends mass shortly after receiving her terminal diagnosis:

> Ce matin je suis allée à la messe. [. . .] Jamais je n’ai entendu jouer plus faux de l’orgue ni chanter plus faux, et pourtant ce prêtre noir qui lisait si mal l’allemand et son jeune acolyte m’ont émue. Surtout, surtout ne pas m’enfermer seule dans mon corps! «Des myriades de cieux et de terres partagent avec moi le même corps!» Oui, ma maladie a ouvert une incroyable brèche: un prodigieux champ de transformation pour beaucoup d’autres que moi (23).

This episode provides a valuable insight into the isolating experience of illness. Despite an earlier refusal to name her illness, the fact of being terminally ill brings with it a label. Most people have limited exposure to terminal illness; thus, our lack of experience causes us to back away. This is exactly Singer’s experience: the feeling of being ‘enferm[ée] seule dans [s]on corps’ and of her illness opening ‘une incroyable brèche’ between her and even those closest to her. Yet the connection experienced during the mass transcends her isolation. For a short time she is subsumed into the corporate body of the Church: she forms part of the ‘myriades de cieux et de terres’ as her gaze is lifted upwards and, despite the earthly difficulties which might, in other circumstances, have proven an irritation, she experiences a powerful transcendental connection, finding herself ‘touchée dans une profondeur inconnue’ (23). As philosopher Régis Debray (2005, 150) remarks: ‘le sujet croyant est en général une première personne du pluriel (on pense seul, on croit en chœur)’. Châtel (2013, 151) concurs, arguing that ‘le religieux comporte une dimension communautaire marquée (appartenance).’ Religion can thus be seen to offer a corporate identity: a sense of being part of something greater than one could ever be alone. It is this connection which gives Singer the courage and the strength to accept the reality of her impending death: ‘je n’aurais pas vaincu la mort, je l’aurais totalement, amoureusement intégrée. Voilà la vérité, elle est douce à dire’ (25). Singer thus integrates death into life as a fundamental part of it, rejecting the received idea of dying as an end to life, and demonstrating, in the broader context of this quotation, the power of connection as a means of overcoming death.

This brings us to the first mention of communion in the text and, on this occasion, it is administered by Pater Walter, an individual for whom Singer appears to have a great deal of affection. In her diary entry for 11th January, Singer writes: ‘je reçois des mains de mon Pater Walter si rayonnant l’hostie quotidienne, celle qui est venue s’éclairer comme nacre au creux de ma main à la première messe à l’hôpital voilà bien trois mois’ (91; emphasis mine). While
the use of the possessive pronoun ‘mon’ clearly points towards a bond between the two, this is the only mention of Pater Walter in the text. The emphasis of this account is not, however, on the priest, but rather on the sacrament. Communion holds a very significant place in Singer’s life and through this sacrament she makes the most profound connection with her spirituality. Debray (2005, 60) argues that ‘[communion] résonne à communauté, et le regroupement, avec une langue, des intérêts, des biens et un but partagés, sert de dénominateur commun à l’humanité (tribu, clan, cité, association, État, nation, fédération, etc.). Quand bien même l’étymologie latine du mot ne serait pas l’union avec (cum et unio), mais le fardeau ou la mission à partager (cum et munus).’ Such an understanding of communion would seem to explain why Singer views the sacrament as an iteration of profound spiritual connectedness.

We see this, for example, in the simile used to describe ‘la hostie quotidienne’: ‘comme nacre au creux de ma main’ (91). The light which exudes from the host has a perpetual impact upon Singer: its lifegiving light is still as remarkable as it was the first time she received the sacrament in hospital, over three months earlier. Moreover, the choice of the word ‘nacre’ to describe the colour of the host points towards the esteem in which Singer holds the sacrament and the value she ascribes to it. This is only emphasised further by the role it plays in her personal conversion, when Singer both humanly—through the consumption of the wafer, the body of Christ—and spiritually—through the Holy Spirit—comes to experience the presence of Christ within her.

Singer’s conversion thus represents a powerful spiritual experience, with the sacrament of Holy Communion—on this occasion, administered by a young, anonymous priest—at the heart of it. The initial set-up of this episode provides evidence of a recurrent trope in end-of-life narratives, namely an insistence upon the rights of the Church, to the detriment of the believer: ‘Voilà la scène: la porte s’ouvre, un jeune prêtre entre m’apporter la communion; il est flanqué de deux acolytes et porte l’ostensoir. Très sûr de lui, péremptoire dans sa gestique, entier contenu dans sa fonction, il commence de me fermer le cœur’ (99). The priest enters, quite self-assured and focused on the task at hand. With little or no insight into how Singer might be feeling and with no obvious compassion towards her, he proceeds with the sacrament without even greeting the communicant. However, despite the somewhat superior attitude of the priest, Singer’s attention is, again, directed towards the sacrament. The moment the priest pronounces the words ‘le corps du Christ’ (99), she is transfixed:

Mon saisissement est total. Aucune représentation ne m’eût jamais donné ce que je suis en train de vivre. Aucune. Car il n’y a personne qui se tienne là. Dans l’espace énergétique d’un corps d’homme sont contenues toutes les manifestations existantes du Christ, une infinie multitude de visages qui lui ont été donnés [. . .]. Je suis électrisée, en feu (99–100).

The receiving of the sacrament transports Singer to a higher plane and she experiences a time of intense spiritual connection. Similar to her previous experience of the mass, the spirituality of the encounter overrides everything. The intensity of this spiritual event is such that it results in a profound change in Singer, as she henceforth experiences the indwelling of Christ: ‘depuis, ce Christ m’habite’ (100). At this point, Singer can be seen to shift from believing in God to living with God, an important distinction which Debray (2005, 35) draws out from the Jewish tradition. Up to this point, we have seen Singer flit from one religion to another; however, from here on, a new peace and assurance reside within her. Through her conversion, Singer opens up a permanent vertical connection which, in turn, impacts the two other dimensions of
relationality. As some previous and other subsequent quotations will demonstrate, there is a marked shift in Singer’s attitude towards and engagement with others, as she comes to see her present situation in a new light. Similarly, these shifts in the nature of Singer’s interactions with others affect how she writes about them, thereby impacting upon the textual legacy through which Singer and the (imagined) reader might connect. Thus, this conversion marks a turning point on every level of relationality, transforming the actual and the imagined; the past, the present and the future; the horizontal, the vertical and the textual.

Partage

The thread which connects all of these encounters is one of ‘partage.’ This cuts to the core of Singer’s being and is a characteristic which, throughout the text, is shown as a fundamental part of her identity: ‘toute ma vie, une seule nostalgie: partager ce dont je fais l’expérience, ce que je vis!’ (36). Indeed, her experience of terminal illness has only served to intensify this: ‘maintenant cela ne fait pas exception, je n’ai pas d’autre choix que le partager’ (36). This sharing with others is not a chore for Singer, rather it is something which is completely natural to her: ‘j’ai toujours partagé tout ce que je vivais; toute mon œuvre, toute mon écriture, était un partage de mon expérience de vie’ (40). As we see here, Singer’s writing is a fundamental part of that sharing and thus we return to the notion of textual connection. In Cyrulnik’s (2017, 71) words, ‘la parole est le véhicule de l’âme’ and although, in the case of a text, the ‘parole’ becomes the written word, Singer’s writing can, indeed, be seen as a form of soul-bearing. She fundamentally needs to write. In justifying the writing/publication of her journal, Singer writes: ‘je voudrais simplement vous parler de ce que je viens de vivre’ (40). Moreover, this sharing is mutually enriching and appears to have a profoundly spiritual quality. Although Singer is often seen to give of herself, what she gains in return more than compensates for this: ‘j’ai reçu par ce livre le lumineux devoir de partager ce que je vivais dans ce temps imparti pour que la coque personnelle se brise et fasse place à une existence dilatée. Ce faisant, j’ai sauvé ma vie en l’ouvrant à tous’ (136). It is significant that, on this final page of her text, Singer draws on the metaphor of ‘being saved.’ On one level, this points towards her own redemption, which came about through opening herself both to the interventions of others and to the work of the Holy Spirit, who now indwells her, but also to the renewed purpose that Singer finds in sharing with others. These connections are what ‘sauv[ent] [sa] vie’ at a human level. Take, for example, the encounter with G.W.:

Au moment de partir, il me dit: «Quand je vois la joie qui t’habite, je n’ai plus besoin d’en savoir davantage. La situation est claire. Le chemin de souffrance, il est à toi, OK. Mais le chemin de connaissance, tu n’as pas d’autre choix que de le partager avec nous.» Je lui montre du doigt mon manuscrit sur la table. «Voilà.» Et je rayonne comme un enfant qui vient de réussir son tout premier pâté de sable (131).

The joy Singer gets from this act of sharing and from the knowledge that she will be able to continue to do so, even from beyond the grave, viewing her text as an ‘expérience partageable’ (Gefen 2017, 12), allows her to beam with contentment, knowing that she ‘[n’a pas] existé en vain.’ (Ricœur 2007, 82). This ‘partage’ is, according to Alexandre Gefen (2017), fundamental to contemporary French literary production. Drawing on his conceptualisation of this literature as one which seeks to ‘réparer, renouer, ressouder, combler les failles des communautés contemporaines . . . ’ (11), we see that Singer’s text fits very neatly within the current literary axis. That said, this text again moves beyond a two-dimension relationality (in this case,
horizontal and textual) by offering a profound spiritual connection within the human and textual ‘expérience partageable’ of her work. Moreover, Singer once more takes on the role of the teacher/guide, as she draws on her life experience to benefit others. As Juguet (2013, 79) argues convincingly in his analysis of *Derniers fragments*, ‘le moteur premier de sa prise de notes est son témoignage et son utilité pour ceux qui le liront’. G.W. is fully aware of the ‘connaissance’ he has gained from being with Singer at this pivotal moment and we, as the reader, are all too conscious of the contents of the manuscript she points to. Therefore, in a moment of metanarrative, we come to a much fuller understanding of what motivates Singer to write: the ability to share and develop connections with others, whether personal or textual; on the horizontal or the vertical plane.

**Conclusion: 3-D relationality at the end of life**

These three-way connections, analysed in this article, are central to the final phase of Singer’s life. The human, spiritual and textual connections which develop over the course of the narrative can be seen to facilitate a coming to terms with the reality of a terminal illness, while also easing much of the existential angst which often results from such a diagnosis (Châtel 2013, 11–12). By nuancing Macmurray’s (1961, 211) concept slightly, yet still holding fast to his belief that relationality lies at the heart of human existence, we come to see that not only are the horizontal connections fundamental both in the creation of Singer’s identity pre- and post-diagnosis, and in the communication of it, but so too are the vertical and the textual. Were it not for these connections, which seek to preserve the identity of the authentic Christiane (that is, the Christiane that Singer feels and knows herself to be), she would find herself relegated to the place of the other, identified only by the label of patient, nothing more than ‘un «corps objet»’ (Hennezel and Leloup 1997, 14). *Derniers fragments* thus invites us to (re)consider connectedness as a fundamental component of the holistic palliative care required to adequately support terminal patients at the end of their lives, as these relationships take on a new value and significance in the very specific circumstances created by terminal illness. In the context of this particular end-of-life narrative, although *Derniers fragments* is not alone in this regard, spiritual connection emerges as a privileged site of relationality. While the other forms of relationality retain a role in Singer’s end-of-life journey, it is the vertical which comes to the fore as the central relational dimension (Juguet 2013, 87) and which, in turn, heavily influences the other two. Thus, the ‘necessarily personal’ relationship of self and other, that Macmurray highlights, need not be solely human but rather becomes all the richer for the inclusion of other relational dimensions. Translating this model of relational healthcare to the French system, one cannot help but wonder how Singer’s end-of-life care might have played out differently in the context of laïque, and increasingly detached and impersonal, healthcare provision in France. Yet the fact remains that, regardless of belief system, nationality or place, an appreciation of three-dimensional relationality expounds our understanding of the end-of-life, and the role of palliative care therein, and provides new insights on the patient experience by allowing us to embrace connectedness, within the singularity of the each and every end-of-life journey.

---

1 In *Philosophers and Friends Philosophers and Friends: Reminiscences of Seventy Years of Philosophy*. Basingtoke: Macmillan, Dorothy Emmet (1996) is definitive on this point. Referring to one of Saunders’ lectures she attended, Emmet notes that Saunders felt ‘it was Macmurray’s books which gave her the moral backing she needed for her own work’ (55). In this sense, it is arguable that Saunders did, indeed, owe her thinking on relationality, at least in part, to Macmurray.
The Macmurray titles belonging to Saunders are held as part of the Dame Cicely Saunders collection at the Kings College London Archives. https://kingscollections.org/catalogues/kclca/collection/s/10sa88-1/.

These terms are drawn from Châtel’s (2013, 178) definition of ‘souffrance spirituelle’.

For more on the appropriation of religious and literary texts within illness and end-of-life narratives, see (Conway 2007, 75–97).

Alexandre Gefen (2017), discusses the widespread use of ‘[un vocabulaire] clairement chrétien’ in end-of-life narratives and argues that ‘[un] glissement vers une conception religieuse de la littérature est indéniable’ (249). This type of religious understanding of death and dying is thus not exclusive to Singer, but rather reflects of a broader trend in contemporary French literary production of this type.


For a better understanding of the role and significance of words and names in the Jewish tradition, see Amos Oz and Olivia Fani Oz-Salzberger. 2012. *Jews and Words*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press.

In the early part of the text, despite having to cancel many of her presential speaking engagements, Singer continues to work from her hospital bed. On one occasion, she even delivers her address via telephone. In this way, Singer is able to retain many of her horizontal connections and thereby prevent a level of identity loss. See, among other examples, *Derniers fragments*, 14–15; 39–43; 129.

Châtel defines accompagnement thus: ‘c’est manifester qu’on est vraiment là, soit par les mots, soit dans le silence. C’est une présence enracinée qui ne se laisse pas emporter dans les labyrinthes du malade, de peur de s’égarer avec lui. [. . .] C’est [. . .] s’efforcer d’être un ancrage dans la réalité pour le malade, un havre où il peut de temps en temps venir se reposer’ (227). For more on this, see (Châtel 2013, 225–235).

A further example of this is found in the encounter with sœur Dana, not analysed here for reasons of space. See *Derniers fragments*, 90.

Leloup discusses a model of accompagnement which emerges out of the *ars moriendi*. He lists the ‘sept attitudes de l’accompagnement’ as ‘la compassion, l’invocation ou l’évocation, l’onction, l’écoute, la bénédiction—le pardon, la communion, [et] la contemplation’ (484).

We also see this concept of ‘fermer le cœur’ in the encounter with the young priest, prior to Singer’s description of her conversion. See *Derniers fragments*, 99.

References


