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Borderless Territories: The Worlding of Religious Totalitarianism in Boualem Sansal's Dystopian Writing

Ewa A. Łukaszyk *
Department of Romance Studies, University of Ostrava, Czech Republic

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Abstract

The article examines Boualem Sansal's novel *2084: La fin du monde* (*2084: The End of the World*) in relation to George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the dystopian genre, and Sansal's broader body of work. It argues that Sansal's novel, as a synthetic allegory, expands Orwell's concept of totalitarianism by exploring its potential fusion with monotheistic religions, creating a post-secular form of religious totalitarianism. Due to its involvement in religious thinking, Sansal's novel will be read according to the traditional line of reinterpreting apocalyptic texts, producing an ever-shifting range of readings dictated by the events and anxieties of the readers' time. The central topic analysed is the tendency of totalitarian regimes to equate their state with the entirety of the inhabitable world, erasing the possibility of alternative spaces. This is why the concept of border, excluded in the official propaganda, is crucial in the personal quest of the novel's protagonist. In Sansal's view, borders are a positive element: a warrant of pluralism and a promise of alternative ways of life.

Keywords: Boualem Sansal, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, totalitarianism, fundamentalism, border.

Introduction

Boualem Sansal's dystopian novel *2084: La fin du monde* (*2084. The End of the World)* is an excellent starting point for a reflection on the worlding of religiously (rather than ideologically) grounded totalitarianism. My aim in this paper is to demonstrate the sharpness of Sansal's allegory as a cognitive tool revealing the problematic node connected to the shifting place of religion in relation to totalitarianism.

As suggested by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), twentieth-century totalitarianism rose in the space left by the dissolution of religious rituals, beliefs, and communities. Another relevant contribution was given by Eric Voegelin in *The Political Religions* (1986 [originally published in 1938]), which explores how totalitarian movements adopt characteristics of religion to exert control and provide the missing sense of belonging in Western modernity that has lost its spiritual foundations. Those ideological movements played a structuring role in the mental universe, affects, and the everyday life of post-religious man, both in Europe and secularized Algeria. Yet after the turn of the millennium, the post-secular return of the religious, residual in the life of postmodern man, creates

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* Corresponding Author: **Ewa.Lukaszyk@osu.cz**

radically new conditions justifying the writer's active engagement. The point of intersection of Sansal's diverse activities and enunciations (the literary texts as well as his track of extra-literary publications such as essays and interviews conceded) indicates the gist of his intervention. It consists in formulating and fostering a warning against the dangers of a hybrid, religiously motivated totalitarian system.

The presence of the religious factor makes a crucial change between the time of Orwell's original *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Sansal's *2084: La fin du monde,* which should thus be considered as an important literary achievement rather than a mere sequel derived from the vogue of dystopic writing created by the Orwellian masterpiece. The synthetic vision of religious totalitarianism in Sansal's allegory is broader than the reference to Islam alone. His warning is extensive to systems founded upon other faiths.

Preliminary considerations: Sansal and his time

Any interpretation of Boualem Sansal's literary work requires a glance at the author's biography and creative path, initiated late in his life. He started writing novels in his fifties, after a successful career in the Algerian government (Ministry of Industry). As Robert Mortimer relates,

> One might not have expected Sansal to become a political novelist nor indeed a writer at all. [...] This high-placed civil servant had a degree in engineering and a doctorate in economics. He had taught and managed a state enterprise before being appointed to the ministry. Presumably, Sansal could have pursued his career in the upper reaches of the Algerian bureaucracy blissfully until retirement but it is now evident that he had other things on his mind (2008, 119).

In 2003, Sansal was dismissed from his governmental functions, allegedly because of the novels he had published. His intransigent writing may thus be qualified as a literature of a disenchanted high-ranking official. The reasons for becoming dystopic are quite clear: they lie in the political reality of the writer's homeland around the turn of the new millennium. Sansal, just like many other Algerian writers and intellectuals, started to see his country, with a growing anxiety, as a bastion of fundamentalism. Two years before the publication of his Orwellian novel, he expressed the same anxiety in a less figurative way, namely in the essay *Gouverner au nom d'Allah. Islamisation et soif de pouvoir dans le monde arabe* (2013). He evoked the long, devastating way his country went since the 1960s, when Algeria used to be called the "Mecca of the revolutionaries" – with rather a romantic undertone. That old country that ceased to exist could be resumed by such adjectives as "socialiste, révolutionnaire, tiers-mondiste, matérialiste jusqu'au bout des ongles" – "socialist", "revolutionary", "third-worldist", and entirely "materialist" (Sansal 2013, 10). That Algeria of the first post-independence years, also the Algeria of the writer's own idealist youth, was soon transformed under the influence of the "fous d'Allah" – "madmen of Allah" (Sansal 2013, 14) who started to work hard to eradicate "l'hérésie socialiste" – "the socialist heresy" (Sansal 2013, 16). In 1991, the country entered a civil war that would linger for twelve years. What is more, as the author claims, the end of armed conflict and the national reconciliation, proclaimed in 2006, brought about no definitive solution. Algerian Islamism merely entered a kind of dormant stage. No

wonder the new phenomenon observed by the writer is the despondent transformation of the Algerian from the relentless defender of his or her country into a *harraga*, figure portrayed in the novel under the same title (Sansal 2005). As Sansal explains in an interview, a *harraga* "c'est un fuyard, il fuit un cauchemar, et ce cauchemar l'accompagne dans sa fuite" – "someone who flees a nightmare and is accompanied in his flight by that nightmare" (Abderrezak 2010, 339).

It is important to notice that the Orwellian novel Sansal published in 2015 is not his first attempt at comparing the destructive potential of hybrid, religious and ideological fanaticisms. Already in his novel dating back to 2008, *Le village de l'Allemand ou le journal des frères Schiller* (published in the United States under the title *The German Mujahid*), Sansal explored the resemblance between Islamism and Nazism. At first glance, such a comparison may seem just a rhetorical use of the hyperbole. The confrontation gives the impression of being based on a mere ethical judgment (both may be equally condemnable, but not necessarily similar as to their exact roots, premises, and mechanisms of violence). Yet probably Sansal wanted to show much more than that, exploring the peculiar logic of the life of Hans Schiller, an officer of the Third Reich naturalized in Algeria, where he gained respect as a military instructor during the fight against the French, and was subsequently killed in a massacre organized by the GIA (*Groupe Islamique Armé*, Islamic Armed Group). The fact that the old German is brutally murdered in an event that might closely resemble the random massacres of the civilians he had himself organized in his youth gives a troubling image of a cyclical history. At each turn of the screw, it returns in a new configuration of elements, yet their rearrangement reflects the same profound mechanism of violence. What is more, the legacy of the twentieth-century destructive ideology lives on in Schiller's youngest son inhabiting, – together with other members of the Algerian diaspora –, one of the problematic districts of Paris. Just as his strange name Malrich is a synthesis of Malek and Ulrich, the mental universe he lives in is a fusion of the religious fanaticism Algeria exported to Europe and the European heritage of bloodthirstiness transmitted by his father. Hassan Hans, the naturalized ex-Nazi converted to Islam, creates a hybrid legacy with a particularly corrosive potential.

Although *2084: La fin du monde* has been highly valued by the critique and received, jointly with Hédi Kaddour's *Les Prépondérants*, the 2016 *Grand Prix du roman* of the French Academy, the novel may be seen as an exemplification of the Saidian concept of the "late style", a specific aesthetic quality appearing at the end of life of certain creators. Not just because Sansal was sixty-five when he wrote this text but more importantly because it may be read as a characteristic expression of the old age in which the writer reaches the stage of bitter awareness concerning the non-resolvability of contradictions. He realizes his complete inability to achieve prosperity and social harmony through conventional, worldly means, such as the practical problem-solving of an engineer or the actions of a benevolent government official—roles Sansal himself once held in his youth. This is why the definition of the "late style", originally applied by Edward Said to the musical work of Beethoven, equally fits the peculiar aesthetics of Sansal's dystopian writings. They remain "unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis: they do not fit any scheme, and they cannot be reconciled or resolved, since their irresolution and unsynthesized fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else" (Said 2006, 12).

Sansal's literary work speaks of an experience of collapse, of a strident disharmony that emerges, after half a century, from the modern hope of harmonious secularity. The rise of Islamism and its pervasive influence on Algerian life pushed the writer to the margins of his country's development. As a result, he identifies with the Saidian sense of being out of place and time, rejecting – together with many other exilic intellectuals and writers, such as Tayeb Salih or Abdulrazak Gurnah – whatever his homeland and era have to offer (Laboudi 2024).

From *1984* to *2084:* Sansal and Orwell

As a prospective reader glances at the cover, Sansal's novel strikes not by originality, but quite the contrary, by an ostentatious connection with the tradition established by a great predecessor, George Orwell, who in 1949 published the famous *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Over the years, this obvious filiation has constantly attracted the attention of the majority of researchers commenting on *2084: La fin du monde* (e.g. Fieu 2017, Vurm 2018, Vuillemin 2019, Slimani 2021, Pâcleanu 2023). Just like many books and other cultural texts containing a variation on the Orwellian year, Sansal's novel illustrates the availability of dystopic clichés as a way of evoking and criticizing the current reality. No wonder that the Orwellian intertextual line soon found a continuation, namely in the Arab-speaking novel of Waciny Laredj, *2084: Hikayat al-arabi al-akhir* (2016), copying in the title the date used by Sansal. Overall, the Orwellian texts enrich the general landscape of recent Arab dystopian literature, illustrated by such novels as Ahmed Khalid Towfik's *Utopia* (2011 [originally published in 2008]), Mohammed Rabie's *Otared* (2014) or Ibrahim Nasrallah's *The Second War of the Dog* (2016).

The plot of *2084: La fin du monde* presents the life in Abistan, a vast empire ruled by the principles of a religion introduced by the prophet Abi, from the individualized perspective of Ati, an outsider standing apart from the mass of the country's citizens. The date indicated in the title is the only event in Abistan's history, the Great Holy War against the Great Heathendom, which, as the reader may guess, involved a nuclear Armageddon. Together with his friend Koa, Ati will undertake a journey in search of the truth forbidden by the official propaganda. He discovers an underground of heretics and continues his quest, musing on times before the advent of the religious system and on space that might eventually exist beyond Abistan's frontiers.

Abistan, an imaginary land-locked country, seems to be situated somewhere deep in central Asia, among mountain ranges and vast deserts crossed by caravans, as if somewhere between Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan. Meanwhile, the novel also contains hints that might point out to Egypt (a certain marginalized group called the Hurs seems to descend from the people who worshipped a god falcon, called Huros or Hurus). There is also an allusion to Jerusalem, or Al-Quds (literally "The Holy"), as the city is called in Arabic: the capital of Abistan is called Qodsabad. Those contradicting hints isolate Abistan from our everyday geography and transform it into a synthesis of many locations.

Sansal's novel is rich in linguistic inventiveness associated with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In Abistan's fictional world, the destruction of language is presented as one of the clearest traits of

totalitarian oppression. After the nuclear war and the advent of Abi as the "Delegate" of the all-powerful divinity designated as Yöllah, a whole new, simplified language, *abilang*, is created to replace the plurality of ancient, complex, and sophisticated tongues. Aided by his friend Koa, Ati makes a strange, disturbing discovery concerning the new tongue's mysterious power of wreaking havoc in people's minds: its "electrochemical" nature, presumably derived directly from the nuclear event that destroyed the old world before the advent of the new religion.

Curiously, the neologism *abilang* is not derived directly from the Orwellian term *newspeak*. It bears a closer resemblance to the term *koalang* created by the Polish science fiction writer Janusz A. Zajdel, as he paid homage to Orwell in his novel *Paradyzja* published precisely in 1984. Hypothetically, such a similarity might indicate that Sansal intended to establish an intertextual relationship not exclusively with Orwell's source novel, but rather with the broader tradition of "84" dystopian writing. Yet Zajdel's *koalang* was not an impoverished language of control just like *abilang;* rather, it was a particularly imaginative, figurative, and florid way of speaking used to delude the omnipresent vigilance and control exerted by the authorities of the outer space colony described in *Paradyzja*. Incidentally, in Sansal's novel, Koa is the name of the friend of the main protagonist; he is a professor of *abilang* and in this capacity, someone who remains able to transcend its limitations. He studies the devastating effects of *abilang* acquisition in young pupils who grew up speaking old, clandestine tongues in neglected neighbourhoods.

Sansal's newspeak brings about a novel (in the fictional perspective), yet strangely familiar vocabulary built around the supreme divinity called *Yöllah* (as if derived from the Arabic vocative expression *ya Allah!*). The central religious notion of Acceptance, *Gkabul*, seems to be almost equivalent the notion of submission (literally, *al-Islam*). It is the name of the religion of Abistan and, at the same time, the title of its holy book. Also, the formula used as a salutation, "Yöllah is great and Abi is his Delegate" sounds disturbingly familiar as a parodic equivalent of the Islamic profession of faith. Sansal's text provides a great deal of other examples, yet there is no need to linger here on this aspect since it has been presented more systematically in Ismail Slimani's analysis of the "lexical field of Arab-Muslim sacred" in *2084* (Slimani 2021, 130-132).

On the other hand, the social institutions of the fictional country appear as variations on Orwellian themes. Some elements may be regarded as relative innovations, without a direct equivalent in Orwell's world. For example the *Bowo*, the Booklet of Worth, where the Inspection inscribes the results of moral evaluation all along the life of every inhabitant of the country; the rating influences everything: remuneration, housing, social benefits, ration cards, and even the inscription for the pilgrimage. Instead of a Big Brother in singular, there is a collective Just Brotherhood (*la Juste Fraternité*), a congregation of forty apostles who maintain constant vigilance against the *makoufs*, skeptics and unbelievers, partisans of the Great Heathendom, as well as other *balisians*, the adepts of *Balis*, the *Chitan* (the Devil, once again a denomination derived from his Arabic name). The *makoufs* epitomize the internal enemy that replaces the opposing power after the nuclear conflict. This internalization of the enemy may be regarded as a development based on the Orwellian world of shifting alliances. Be that as it may, their presumed

presence marks the characteristic paranoia of all totalitarian regimes:

> Le pays vivait des guerres récurrentes, spontanées et mystérieuses, cela était sûr, l'ennemi était partout, il pouvait surgir de l'est ou de l'ouest, tout autant que du nord ou du sud […]. On l'appelait l'Ennemi, avec un accent majuscule dans l'intonation, cela suffisait […]. L'Ennemi prit une dimension fabuleuse et épouvantable. Et un jour, sans qu'aucun signal ne fût donné, le mot Ennemi disparut du lexique. Avoir des ennemies est un constat de faiblesse, la victoire est totale ou n'est pas. On parlait de la Grande Mécréance, on parlait des *makoufs*, mot nouveau signifiant renégats invisibles et omniprésents. L'ennemi intérieur avait remplacé l'ennemi extérieur, ou l'inverse. […] Plus tard, après avoir surmonté d'autres empêchements, on donna enfin au Diable, le Malin, le Chitan, le Renégat, son vrai nom : Balis (Sansal 2015, 18).
>
> The country was built on recurring, spontaneous, and mysterious wars about which one thing was certain: the enemy was everywhere, could suddenly appear from east or west, or from north or south; […]. They were called the Enemy, with a capital letter in the intonation, that was enough […]. The Enemy acquired a fabulous and frightening dimension. And one day, without warning, the word Enemy disappeared from the vocabulary. To have enemies is an admission of weakness; victory is either total or it is not. There was talk of the Great Heathendom, of the *makoufs*, a new word signifying invisible, omnipresent renegades. The internal enemy had replaced the external enemy, or vice versa.[...] Later, after other obstacles were overcome, at last the Devil, Satan, the Chitan, the Renegade was given his true name: Balis (Trans. Alison Anderson; Sansal 2017, 12).

Ati, the main character of the novel, is one of those rare dissidents indulging in free thinking and falling into the temptation of individualism. With some help from his influential friend Koa, he explores the underground of heretics before departing for his final, solitary quest of the border.

Despite the multiple anchors that immobilize the text in the Orwellian tradition, Sansal's novel does not deserve to be dismissed as a secondary, derived text. The writer goes beyond the standard, stereotypical criticism of religious fanaticism. Unfortunately, this aspect has not always been treated with sufficient attention and perspicacity by the scholars venturing into the interpretation of Sansal's novel. Islamism, the problem that causes a constant preoccupation of the writer, is often hastily qualified, to quote the Romanian scholar Elena-Brandusa Steiciuc, as "the gangrene of the contemporary world" (Steiciuc 2008, 168), requiring no further explication or analytic approach. Sansal, however, offers a more nuanced perspective. As I argue here, his message is not solely about the dangers of Islamism as a phenomenon linked specifically to Islam. Instead, by creating hybrid configurations that bridge the East-West divide—such as the story of Hans Schiller and his sons—Sansal addresses a broader spectrum of totalitarian religious fundamentalisms. In his view, the widespread failure of modern secularization has resurfaced the "monsters" lurking in the depths of the human soul. This is why the diversity and range of

hybrid totalitarianisms in the contemporary world may be even larger than that of the twentieth-century ones. At the time Orwell wrote his novel, the expression "religious totalitarianism" might eventually be seen as an oxymoron, a *contradictio in adiecto*. Even if the English thinker was deeply skeptical about Christianity and the Church, the main danger he pointed at was associated with ideology, not with religion. Trying to elucidate the mechanisms of the corrosion of liberty and individual thought, Sansal makes a step in a new, unexplored direction, a step that would have seemed quite improbable in the times of the triumphant, secular modernity.

Gkabul: a synthetic allegory

The relation between Islam as an extra-literary phenomenon and the fictitious religion of *Gkabul* described in the novel is quite understandably a controversial matter, rising voices of criticism, such as that of the Lebanese author Iman Humaydan protesting against the "partial understanding of Islam" allegedly presented by Sansal in his novel. Commenting on *2084*, she concluded:

> Such writing does not allow room to consider how people stand up to dictatorships – both religious and non-religious – and confront whatever tyranny they are faced with. Works like this underestimate genuine diversity and tolerance; they discourage us from questioning and re-questioning what is true and what is right. Indeed, in its judgment of the other, Sansal's work is itself a tyranny of a kind (2016).

The polemics triggered by excessively literalist or intuitive reading of Sansal's novel encouraged the researchers to return to the often exploited distinction between the reality and the "possible worlds" of literary fiction (e.g. Belkhous 2022). Is *Gkabul* quite simply a portrait of an extra-literary religion under a literary mask? Some researchers seem to come close to such an understanding (e.g. Drab 2018), while others, like Ismail Slimani, create sophisticated concepts striving to capture the gist of the matter. Slimani proposes the term "cloning," taken from the biological sciences to speak about the interpretation of religion that appears in Sansal's novel. In his opinion, the fictional construct is a kind of "genetically modified Islam" ("un Islam « génétiquement modifié »", Slimani 2021, 123), growing on the basis of the religion existing in the extra-literary world. Nonetheless, I believe, this biological metaphor does not help to explain the relation between two spheres that, precisely, share no common generating mechanism and no common genetics: the literary text such as Sansal's *2084*, with its transformations and links to other texts, functions quite independently from the flux of extra-literary reality, its evolution and marking phenomena. My interpretation contradicts the influential opinion of Frederick Jameson voiced in his seminal book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), who claimed that postmodern fiction tends to blur the boundaries between the real world and its representations, leading to the creation of simulacra and hyperreality, in which the extra-literary world is perceived as a construct rather than an objective reality. The connection between the novel and the world is established *a posteriori* by a potential reader who explores the text in search of clues that might help him or her in the never-ending, yet usually unsuccessful endeavour of understanding the mechanisms that shape reality and predicting the future. This is why in the subsequent part of this analysis I speak of the apocalyptic

strategies of reading that Sansal's text appears to trigger.

As far as the relation between reality and fiction is implied, Sansal does not make the analytic task any easier. On the contrary, he deliberately blurs the frontier between the literary and the real. In an interview given shortly after the publication of *2084*, he not only affirmed that Islamic totalitarianism is plausible; he also indicated an estimated time of its advent: in fifty years, counting from the moment of the enunciation, i.e. the interview conceded (Sansal, Toranian 2015). Such a prediction transforms the date 2084 into something more than just an element of an intertextual game; the title of the novel is supposed to indicate a point in extra-literary time. Meanwhile, the peremptory statement concerning the advent of Islamic totalitarianism as a plausible event enters in a curious contradiction with the "Warning" placed at the beginning of *2084*:

> Non, véritablement, tout est inventé, les personnages, les faits et le reste, et la preuve en est que le récit se déroule dans un futur lointain dans un univers lointain qui ne ressemble en rien au nôtre (Sansal 2015, 11).
>
> No, in truth, everything has been invented, the characters, the events, and all the rest, and the proof of this is that a story is set in a distant world, in a distant future that looks nothing like our own (Sansal 2017, 7).

Despite all the intricacies of the post-structuralist literary theory that stresses the clear cut between the text and the extra-literary reality (deconstructed by Jameson), as well as the writer's attempts at blurring this obvious distinction by the subsequent negation of his own statement, any novel exploits the potential of reality. In doing so, the text preserves a degree of referential elasticity: it may develop an almost documentary reflection of reality or, on the contrary, strive to articulate the counterfactual. Rather than creating a simulacral hyperreality, Sansal's text, describing the events in an imaginary country, stands clearly on the position of the counterfactual value of his text. He does not speak of the factual Islam "under a literary mask", as Slimani presumed, but constructs an allegory of human religion (the term 'human' being used here as the antonym of 'revealed' or 'divine') that exists merely as a *potentia*, unrealized, just as it is described, anywhere in the extra-textual reality. The allegory is based on the fusion of many elements taken from the triple tradition of monotheism (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) as well as other sources (including the religion of the ancient Egyptians), but it has direct genetic links only to other texts. What I postulate is the return to the pre-modern apocalyptic modality of reading, i.e. a peculiar mode of blurring the frontier between the text and the world as it invites the reader to constantly reinterpret the text in the light of the extra-textual events in search of warnings, textual hints that precede or predict a catastrophe (Kermode 1967). To build up such a modality, quite distinct from the postmodern simulacra and hyperreality criticised by Jameson, the dystopian text exploits the transcultural legacy of apocalyptic writings created in the interpenetrating spheres of the monotheistic religions.

As an allegory of faith in the broadest sense, *2084* criticises the deep mechanisms that enable human beings to structure the social and symbolic reality in which they are living. The human mental universe, with its constant longing for unshakable foundation implied in faith, is structured in a way that imposes multiple restrictions on free thinking. The allegory built up in the novel puts in the limelight the totalizing

potential of religion as a model structuring human life in its everyday routines and broad world-view notions. In this way, the text can be read as a universal warning against dangers that should be connected with general tendencies of the human mind but cannot be connected, in a reductive way, to a single denomination or society.

Last but not least, as a synthetic allegory, Abistan and its religion Gkabul is an exploration of such mechanisms of fusion and expansion that justify the use of the term "worlding" in relation to religious totalitarianism. The longing for religion as a structuring factor in life and the rise of totalitarian tendencies as a response to the human appetite for order, unambiguity, and univocality go together.

Eschatological legacies: a *pact de lecture* based on the apocalyptic tradition

The novel 2084 has often been read in the light of European literary and philosophical traditions (e.g. Boulksibat 2024). Inexplicably, the fact that it evokes the legacy of Islamic eschatology has been overlooked. The major apocalyptic figure in this tradition is al-Dajjāl (The Deceiver), characterized primarily as a prince of mendacity. The figure of al-Dajjāl (despite the general aniconic orientation of Islamicate cultures) is usually imagined as that of a one-eyed, plumpy man with curled hair, identified by the Arabic letters k–f–r written on his forehead. It is a false messianic figure who rises shortly before the end of time. After a reign of forty days or forty years, he would be utterly destroyed by Jesus. As it is well known, the figure of Jesus – as one of the prophets – appears in Islam, where the Second Coming is a major apocalyptic event just like in Christianity. The question of preaching false truths is at the center of Sansal's novel. This is why this Islamic background is a crucial element, unexplored in the majority of existing scholarly readings of Sansal's novel. Certainly, it is not an accident that the tyrant of Abistan, although no one has actually seen him as he is guarded by the specially recruited *leg-abi*, i.e. Abi's legion, is imagined as one-eyed:

> Borgne, de naissance pour les uns, par suite des souffrances qu'il avait endurées durant son enfance selon d'autres, on a dit aussi qu'il avait réellement un œil au milieu du front, ce qui était la marque d'un destin prophétique, mais on a dit avec la même fermeté que l'image était symbolique, elle signalait un esprit, une âme, un mystère (Sansal 2015, 31)
>
> From birth, according to some, or due to the suffering he endured in his childhood, according to others; it was also said he actually had an eye in the middle of his forehead and that this was the mark of a prophetic destiny, but equally firmly it was posited that the image was symbolic, signalling a spirit, a soul, a mystery (Sansal 2017, 29).

The clue of the mendacious message of that novelistic al-Dajjāl sketched by Sansal is the denial of multiplicity and the reduction of the world to a monolith of one borderless territory, one faith, and the only one permitted language. The totalitarian system relegates the seekers of truth, the skeptics, to the condition of marginalized and persecuted *makoufs*. This neologism contains a vanishing echo of the Arabic language, as it contains only two consonants from the radix k–f–r (signifying unbelief,

heathendom) that according to Islamic tradition should be written on the front of the apocalyptic al-Dajjāl. In the novel, the oppressive system inverts the valorization, accusing its opponents of what is its own major crime: *kufr*, the ignorance of truth, the distortion of true religious values. In this way, faith appears associated with madness and truth with fear. No wonder that, at a given stage of his inner progress, Ati discovers that it is not religion that he truly hates and rejects, but "l'écrasement de l'homme par la religion" (Sansal 2015, 81) – "the crushing of mankind by religion" (Sansal 2017, 82). He is in this instance the *port-parole* of the author.

Contrary to the case of Islamic eschatology, the legacy of Christianity seems evoked, in the first place, not through its early apocalyptic traditions, but rather through the dystopian potential of Western modernity. The allegorical Second Coming that actually takes place in the novel is not the advent of luminous, resurrected Jesus, but the explosion of a nuclear bomb. On the other hand, the productivity of post-Christian *apocalyptica* is exemplified by a network of literary allusions. The novel is a palimpsest of Western modernity, evoking not only *Nineteen Eighty-Four* but also Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain.* The Abistani hospital is situated on the top of the mountain Ouâ in the region of Sîn. Just like Hans Castorp, Ati is "at the mountain's mercy", trying to get rid of his tuberculosis. But it is also where he learns, through the illness, how to doubt the official truths. The crucial importance of the somatization has been put in the limelight byJolanta Rachwalska von Rejchwald, who treats the protagonist's malady and healing not only as a metaphor for the mental process of liberty and identity acquisition but also as the general concept structuring the novel as a "pathography" (Rejchwald 2019). As von Rejchwald believes, Ati's tuberculosis should be read as a somatic reaction of the subject internalizing the history and politics of the totalitarian land. On the other hand, as it should be added, the broad vision of pathography opens up the apocatastatic horizon of apocalyptic writing, i.e. the understanding of the end of the world as a return to its original order and harmony. Novels taken as a modern eschatological genre strive to revert the profound pathology of the world described and to narrate a story of healing.

In the apocalyptic time of Abistan, described as an eternal present, the gist of human life is translated by the idea of pilgrimage, or just a certificate of inscription for a pilgrimage, inherited by the oldest son. The rituals celebrate the Expectation:

> Dans certaines régions s'était installée la coutume de se rassembler en foules immenses, une fois l'an, et de se flageller abondamment au fouet à clous, dans la joie et le chahut, pour dire que la souffrance n'était rien rapportée au bonheur d'espérer le Jobé; dans d'autres régions, on se réunissait en jamborees fameux, on se mettait en cercle, en tailleur, genoux contre genoux, et on écoutait les vieux candidats, arrivés au bout de l'épuisement mais pas de l'espoir, raconter leur long et bienheureux calvaire, appelé l'Expectation (Sansal 2015, 23-24).
>
> In some regions it had become customary to gather once a year in huge crowds for a mass self-flogging with studded whips, amid a joyful uproar, to show that suffering was nothing compared to the happiness of awaiting the Bidi [i.e. the great departure]; in other regions, people came together at extraordinary jamborees, sitting

> cross-legged in a circle, knees touching, and they listened to the oldest candidates, who'd reached the limits of exhaustion but not of hope, tell their long and blessed ordeal, known as the Expectation (Sansal 2017, 20).

The New Era is a millenarian time without time, without calendars, memory, or historiography, buoyant in the eternal present. This time without structure is filled exclusively with religious practices, such as incessantly repeated sacrifices and an incessantly planned and deferred pilgrimage. Little attention is given to the worldly needs of men; their standard of living is entirely irrelevant. According to Hannah Arendt's suggestion included in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), one of the characteristic traits of totalitarian societies it that they tend to push their members into an ever-deepening destitution (used as a means of control). No wonder that, in Sansal's novel, the pilgrims, not the merchants, are the only travellers in the emptiness and desolation of the country:

> Les pèlerins étaient les seules personnes autorisées à y circuler, non pas librement mais selon des calendriers précis, par des chemins balisés qu'ils ne pouvaient quitter, jalonnés de haltes plantées au milieu de nulle part, des plateaux arides, des steppes sans fin, des fonds de canyons, des lieux-dits sans âme, où ils étaient comptés, divisés en groupes comme les armées en campagne qui bivouaquent autour de mille feux de camp dans l'attente d'un ordre de rassemblement et de départ. Les pauses duraient si longtemps parfois que les pénitents s'enracinaient dans d'immenses bidonvilles et se comportaient comme des réfugiés oubliés, ne sachant plus trop ce qui la veille nourrissait leurs rêves (Sansal 2015, 16-17).
>
> The pilgrims were the only people who were allowed to move about the country, not freely but according to precise calendars, on specified roads that they could not leave, roads that were staked out with way stations in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of arid plateaus, boundless steppes, deep canyons, abandoned hamlets, where the pilgrims were counted and divided into groups like armies on the move, bivouacking around a thousand campfires while they waited for their marching orders. At times the pauses lasted so long that the penitents put down roots in vast, spreading slums and behaved like forgotten refugees, at a loss to remember what only a day before had nourished their dreams (Sansal 2017, 15).

The religious factor, through the proliferation of sacrifices of sheep and calves, shapes the only existing economy, just as the pilgrimage and the sacred places shape the only existing geography. Overall, the kind of religious ideas evoked in the novel do not refer to Islam explicitly, but form a more comprehensive conglomerate of the three monotheistic religions. The battle of the end of the world, which in the novel takes the shape of a nuclear Armageddon, is a vision common to these religions. Also, Judaism is present in the apocalyptic palimpsest created by Sansal. The ever-present temptation of searching for a precise, political meaning behind the text is a lasting legacy of the apocalyptic thought that historically speaking developed in the context of Judaism. Just to give an example, the Iberian Jewish sixteenth-century tradition created by such writers as Isaak Abravanel or Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi

used to identify the apocalyptic war of Gog and Magog with such secular events as the rivalry between France and the Ottoman Empire. An interpretation of Sansal's novel as a premonition of a nuclear attack of Russia (one of the possible intuitions that may cross the mind of a present-day reader) would be inscribed in a long tradition of developing similar conjectures based on a variety of texts. What is more, the great Expectation described by Sansal can be connected to Judaic legacies also in other ways. It evokes the waiting for the Messiah that resumes, to a large degree, the positive, hopeful resonance of the apocalypse in Judaism. On the other hand, the great pilgrimage, realized just once in a lifetime, or even just once in several generations, evokes the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca considered the utter fulfilment of the life of the faithful. Overall, the palimpsest of religions in *2084* seems designed to trigger an endless proliferation of readings, hints, interpretations both private and scholarly.

The missing notion of border: toward the essence of the totalitarian world-view

The major achievement in Sansal's exploration of totalitarianism as a product of the longing of the human mind for clarity and order may be resumed in the literary representation of space. Its most interesting element is the curious process of erosion and reconstruction of the concept of border. Although it has already appeared in the existing criticism of *2084* (mainly Deleger 2019 and Ulus 2022), I believe that the matter still requires a deeper analytical treatment beyond Ulus' conclusion that in Sansal's perspective, a border is "a place of transition that encounters diversity" (Deleger 2019, 1) and that "borders bring people and ideas together, as much as they separate them" (Ulus 2022, 417).

The questioning of the protagonist, provoked by the mysterious disappearance of some of the caravans that should bring the supplies to the sanatorium, fosters the mind-boggling hypothesis of the existence of a border:

> *La route interdite!... la frontière!... Quelle frontière, quelle route interdite? Notre monde n'est-il pas la totalité du monde?* […]
>
> La nouvelle jetait le sanatorium dans la stupeur et l'abattement, des hommes se flagellaient […], on se cognait la tête contre le mur, on se lacérait la poitrine […]. Quel monde pouvait-il exister au-delà de cette prétendue frontière? Y trouverait-on seulement de la lumière et un morceau de terre sur lequel une créature de Dieu pourrait se tenir? Quel esprit pouvait concevoir le dessein de fuir le royaume de la foi pour le néant? (Sansal 2015, 35-36).
>
> *The forbidden road!... the border!... What border, what forbidden road? Isn't our world the entire world?* […]
>
> The news would plunge the sanatorium into stupor and despondency, men flogged themselves […], or banged their heads against the wall, or clawed at their chests […]. What world could exist beyond that so-called border? Was there even light there, or a patch of earth where one of God's creatures could stand? What sort of mind could conceive of the intention to flee the kingdom of faith for nothingness? (Sansal 2017, 32; italics in the text).

The fragment quoted is perhaps one of the crucial moments when Sansal's novelistic diagnosis comes to define in the most pertinent way the main traits of the totalitarian worlding: the process of mendacious symbolic construction in which the territory of the totalitarian state becomes equal to the totality of the (inhabitable) world. The totalitarian state presents itself as the *oecumene*. Abistan is conceived as the only country, without any exterior, any neighbouring territories, any frontier, and therefore any conceivable alternative to its reality. This is a circumstance that makes any act of insurgency pointless: "Il n'y a pas de révolte possible dans un monde clos, où n'existe aucune issue" (Sansal 2015, 81) – "Rebellion is impossible in a closed world where there is no way out" (Sansal 2017, 82). The advent of post-apocalyptic religion leads thus to the establishment of an unshakable regime, eradicating all forms of dissent, that is utterly translated into a country so vast that it can impose the complete forgetfulness of the existence of its borders.

Of course, to conceive a territory without a border seems logically impossible. Nonetheless, such a symbolic construct may shape the mental reality of the denizens of a totalitarian state. Based on my personal experience (as I was born and educated under the regime of the Warsaw Pact), I would quote a joke evoking the totalitarian era. It illustrates very well the process of border erasure. The anecdote is as follows. In a Soviet military school, an instructor indoctrinates his alumni in the basics of the war doctrine: 'When is the border of the Soviet Union considered safe?' The correct answer to recite is: 'The border of the Soviet Union is safe when Soviet soldiers are deployed on both sides of it.' This old joke shows how any existing border is incorporated in the expanding system, illustrating the process of worlding of totalitarianism. As this orally transmitted anecdote illustrates, totalitarianism tends to constantly encroach upon the surrounding territory, either physically or symbolically.

Ideally, the totalitarian state produces and maintains the fiction of its own borderlessness as an organism constantly expanding beyond the current limits of its own expansion. It ceases to be a country among other countries to become the only existing, all-encompassing world, coextensive with the imagined *oecumene*. A consistent propagandistic discourse promoted today in Russia and in East-European countries drifting away from liberal democracy presents the Western world as a rotten reality, an area of the so-called "civilization of death", a space where no true life is possible. Those exposed to the propaganda that strives, even today, to rebuild the totalitarian apprehension of outer regions could actually ask the question Sansal includes in his novel: is there even light there? The novelistic wisdom runs parallel to the real world: "Pour les gens qui ne sont jamais sortis de leur peur, l'ailleurs est un abîme" (Sansal 2015, 93) – "For people who have never transcended their fear, elsewhere is an abyss" (Sansal 2017, 92). The resemblance between the allegory and the mechanisms observed in the real world is problematic. Not only it provokes a constant scholarly debate on the limits of the fictitious but also maintains the attractiveness of dystopian novels in the eyes of non-scholarly interpreters, treating them not as post-modern simulacra, but rather as premonitions and hints of the future events that may be deciphered through the return to pre-modern, apocalyptic modalities of reading.

Be that as it may, if there is no rebellion in the closed world, the sheer possibility of conceiving the existence of a border appears as a tremendous, illuminating, and liberating idea. The overheard gossip

about the caravans disappearing beyond some sort of "our-world" horizon marks the beginning of a process of a profound transformation in the mind of Ati. One question provokes another: "L'existence d'une frontière était bouleversante. Le monde serait donc divisé, divisible, l'humanité multiple?" (Sansal 2015, 45) – "The notion that a border might exist was shattering. The world might be divided, divisible, and humankind might be multiple?" (Sansal 2017, 45). Finally, the doubt leads to the liberating decision: Ati decides to ask Ram to take him to the Sîn mountains (the location of Ouâ, Abistan`s Magic Mountain) where, as he calculates, the hypothetical existence of the border has the greatest probability to come true. If he discovers that it does exist, he is ready for the crucial transgression.

The long way home from the sanatorium becomes Ati's first initiation in the quest that in the end will lead him to the border, and utterly, out of the closed world of Abistan. Ati progressively discovers deeper and deeper wisdom concerning the consequences of the denied existence of the border. Later on, together with Koa, he develops almost a philosophical system built around this notion: firstly, the world cannot exist without any limits; they prevent the dissolution of reality into nothingness. Secondly, the existence of the limit enables a transgression: if the border exists, it may be crossed. As conclusion, the existence of the border creates a must, almost an obligation of transgression in order to reconnect with a missing part of existence on the opposite side. The final reason that forces the two friends to take on the road is the fact that Koa, much against his will, has been appointed the Destroyer whose duty consists of condemning to death a young woman, mother of five, accused of blasphemy. He choses to run away rather than become a murderer.

During their errand, Koa and Ati discover, to their great surprise, the forgotten delicacies from the pre-nuclear past: white bread, cheese, fruits, chocolate, even coffee and cigarettes. Just like in the good old Soviet empire and its satellite countries, those articles were reserved for the narrow elite of Abistan's apparatchiks. Also, a black market survives and thrives in the Qodsabad's most secretive districts. The world on the other side of the border may thus be conceived as a territory of abundance contrasting with the indigence of Abistan.

Defying the rules of the dystopian genre, Sansal's novel has a happy ending. Ati reinstates the questioning, philosophical attitude and recovers mental and physical health. Discovering such simple realities as the sea and the sand of a beach during his quest, he experiences freedom almost as a physiological state that kicks him out of his usual sickly bodily balance into the domain of plenitude. He lives a moment of profound harmony with the world that ceased to be coextensive with the territory of the oppressive regime. On the other hand, in the community that Ati has left behind a strange new cult seems to take root, as if the authenticity of human religious instinct – just as Sansal may understand it – were about to be reborn from its ashes:

> Pour la première fois, on parlait d'un être mythique sorti d'on ne sait quel monde, qui ne serait ni un dieu comme Yöllah ni un contre-dieu comme Balis, mais un être solaire déroutant, tout de lumière et de raison, d'intelligence et de sagesse, qui enseignerait une chose inconnue au pays de la Sainte Soumission : la révolution dans l'harmonie et la liberté. Elle réfutait la brutalité hégémoniste de Yöllah et la

> sournoiserie délétère de Balis […]. Un nom avait circulé de foule en foule mais il avait été mal entendu : Démoc... Dimouc... Dmoc. (Sansal 2015, 225).
>
> For the first time, there was talk of a mythical creature who'd appeared out of who knows what world, who was neither a god like Yöllah nor a counter-god like Balis, but a disturbing, solar being, made all of light and reason, intelligence and wisdom, who could teach something totally unknown in the land of Holy Submission: revolution, in harmony and freedom. This teaching refuted Yölah's hegemonizing brutality, and Bali's deleterious guile […]. A name went around, from crowd to crowd, but no one had caught it properly: Democ... Dimuc... Dmoc (Sansal 2017, 253).

The return of a bygone era of the long-forgotten goddess Democracy? Some humble people already start to call it the Return – as if it were the fulfilment, a counterbalance to the suspended temporality of Expectation. In the final part of the novel, Ati disappears. Some villagers believe that he must have found the border, crossing a distant mountain pass; others laugh at such a nonsensical idea. The falling snow obliterates all traces. No matter if he succeeded or not, his quest had already set him free. It motivated him to depart in search of outer space, where life is not only possible but also acquires quite a different quality; he achieved his plenitude on the road. Also, the religious monolith of Abistan suffers an internal fragmentation. Even if the re-emerging wars of clans spell little promise, at least the world is falling from the post-apocalyptic eternal present, the suspended time of Yölah's millennium, back into the flux of secular history.

Conclusion

At every moment I dare to abandon the track of scholarly analysis to assume an intuitive reading of Sansal's novel, the text triggers my recollections of having grown up in a communist country. The personal reading in the margins of analysis multiplies the emotional impact of the allegory created by the Algerian writer. I can recognize the structure of the borderless reality of my childhood in the fictional world of Sansal's novel. Seen in the mirror of the official propaganda of the communist regime, all the external territories barely had some vague kind of existence, as if emptied of meaning, true reality, solidity; they were little more than mere fantasy. The relentless propagandistic discourse presented the external world as a non-place, lacking existential fullness, a space of falseness and death. It is curious to observe that *2084* has gained a considerable critical reception not only in the Maghreb and the Middle East but also in the post-totalitarian Eastern Europe (e.g. Drab 2018, Vurm 2018, Rejchwald 2018, 2019, Pâcleanu 2023). Both scholarly interpretations of Sansal's novel and the affective responses of unprofessional readers testify of the text's potential in generating local, place- and time-bound meanings. In Alger, Paris, Warsaw, or Bucharest, we are but potential citizens of Abistan.

Although it ostentatiously denies any connection between fiction and the world, Sansal's novel in dialogue with Orwell drags the reader into the captivating game of provoked anxiety – precisely by the denied, yet eternally present, haunting resemblance between the allegory and the reality. This literary

exploitation of anxiety is one of the major characteristics of dystopian writing, making it so popular and widespread in contemporary culture. Readings of Sansal's allegory in various political and cultural contexts may change kaleidoscopically, just as it used to happen with Orwell. What makes the dialogue from 1984 to 2084 possible is the daring decision of placing the religious, almost absent in Orwell, in the very center of the debate on totalitarianism. Addressing the crucial problem of the present-day erosion of secularism and marking the shift that has occurred between Orwell's time and our own, Sansal's allegory gains a status beyond that of a mere derived text; it stands the comparison with the relevance of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* at the beginning of the Cold War.

The atomic bomb as such was absent in Orwell's novel, while the uncharted territories of Abistan are devastated by the Great Holy War of Char, waged precisely with nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, the nuclear in *2084* can be read as yet another sign of the sustained dialogue between Orwell and his time, in which the newly invented atomic bomb was at the center of attention. On the other hand, beyond the Cold War, the nuclear menace is a hyperbole: the scale of the atomic explosion is an element of the worlding of the problem of religious totalitarianism in Sansal's novel and its counter-factual valency. One of the characteristics of the apocalyptic genre is precisely the constant invitation to reinterpret the text in the changing light of historical becoming. The premonition of a new war of Char seems to reappear on the horizon, as a new global conflict may be born from current military campaigns. The novel conceived as a warning against the menace of Islamic fundamentalism appears in a new configuration of meaning in the context of current anxiety of nuclear destruction. Yet once again the engaged criticism should accentuate the conjunction of elements presented in Sansal's novel: self-justifying obsession with expansion, mendacity, and post- (or pseudo-)religious modality of thinking.

The latter is not exclusive to Islam and its fundamentalisms; just to give a counter-example, it might be associated with the Eastern Orthodox Church and its specific apocalyptic ideas, such as the vision of Russia as the Third Rome. This idea, originally proposed by the Metropolitan Zosimus in 1492 in his *Presentation of Paschalion* and presented by the monk Philoteus in the early sixteenth century, claims that Moscow is to become the ultimate imperial capital as the fulfilment of the prophecy stating that "two Romes have fallen, the third stands, and there will be no fourth" (Revelation 17,10). In the contemporary world, the fundamentalist Algerian imams are thus no longer the only ones to preach the holy war; also the members of the Orthodox clergy have engaged in public interpretations of the biblical prophecy of Isaiah. If the reward of war is the fulfilment of the prophecy, the Third Rome of the end of time, what remains is the great expectation of the end, be it a nuclear holocaust similar to the Sansal's great war of Char.

Apocalyptic thinking is a form of textual nomadism in search of the fulfilment of prophecies in changing historical and political contexts. As an open-ended palimpsest, the allegory of Abistan is essentially a loose constellation of apocalyptic meanings, while the repeated acts of interpretation are conditioned by the current anxieties and apprehensions projected on the screen of dialoguing works of literary fiction. During the Cold War, the balance of power could be maintained by the rational argument of mutual deterrence, just as in the Orwell world of shifting alliances. The drift of the religious brings

about far greater dangers, because it activates the irrational longing for the apocalypse as a closure of human history and the final settling of the accounts between good and evil, just as it is depicted in Sansal's world of total annihilation. Those who brandish the religious arms consider themselves as the chosen one, God's side in the conflict. No argument of mutual deterrence plays any role in such a situation. The fulfilment of an eschatological promise that is not from this world, a promise that exceeds the earthly reality, may justify the destruction of the worldly life, that, from the religious perspective, loses any value or importance.

Religious modalities of thinking ultimately escape from the dominion of modernity and its engagement in solving secular, worldly problems. Associated with the human longing for totalizing order and unicity, they create a corrosive alloy. The shift in the direction that Sansal tried to prognosticate in his allegory of Abistan, where the religious totalitarianism gains the terrain and the modern promise of material abundance loses its validity, risks to precipitate man into indigence and stagnation receiving an outer-worldly sanction. At the bottom line, the global paroxysm of which the novel speaks is associated with the generalized collapse of secular modernity.

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أقاليم بلا حدود:
تَعالُمُ الشموليَّة الدينيَّة في الكتابة الديستوبيَّة لدى *Boualem Sansal*

إيفا لوكاشيك
قسم اللغة الإنجليزيَّة، جامعة أوسترافا، جمهورية التشيك

الملخص

تتناول هذه المقالة رواية 2084: La fin du للكاتب Boualem Sansal في علاقتها برواية Nineteen Eighty-Four للكاتب George Orwell، وبنوع الأدب الديستوبي، وبمجمل أعمال سانسال. وتجادل بأن رواية سانسال، بوصفها استعارة تركيبيَّة، توسّع مفهوم أورويل للشموليَّة من خلال استكشاف اندماجها المحتمل مع الديانات التوحيديَّة، مما يفضي إلى شكل ما بعد علماني من الشموليَّة الدينيَّة، ونظرًا لانخراطها في التفكير الديني، تُقرأ رواية سانسال وفق الخط التقليدي لإعادة تأويل النصوص الرؤيويَّة، منتجةً طيفًا متغيرًا باستمرار من القراءات تمليه أحداث وزمن قلق القرّاء، والموضوع المركزي الذي يُحلَّل هو ميل الأنظمة الشموليَّة إلى مساواة دولتها مع مجمل العالم القابل للسكن، مما يمحو إمكانيَّة وجود فضاءات بديلة. ولهذا السبب، يصبح مفهوم الحدود، المُستبعَد في الدعاية الرسميَّة، عنصرًا حاسمًا في السعي الشخصي لبطل الرواية. وفي منظور سانسال، تُعدّ الحدود عنصرًا إيجابيًا: ضمانة للتعدديَّة ووعدًا بسبل حياة بديلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: Boualem Sansal، Nineteen Eighty-Four، الشموليَّة، الأصوليَّة، الحدود.

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