

DU SCORPION AU DÉSERT, ALBERT MEMMI REVISITED

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The thematic evolution of Albert Memmi's literary work in the 50's and 60's followed a clear itinerary that led him from the introspective search in the depths of his ego to the sociological study of the "oppressed groups." His first novel, *La Statue de Sel*,¹ is an autobiographical account of his childhood and adolescence in the Jewish ghetto of Tunis, in the midst of a French-colonized Arab society. His second novel, *Agar*,² deals with the problems of interfaith marriage, of the inherent antagonisms between different ethnic groups and "their explosion in the couple." Leaving the novel for the essay, Memmi publishes a series of "portraits" in which he analyzes his own subjective experience as a colonized and a Jew,³ later extrapolated to the dimensions of the whole human society.⁴

In the 70's a visible change occurs in Memmi's literary work: new themes appear, less egocentric and ethnocentric, more universal. The realism of his first novels gives way to symbolism; social phenomena are now observed from a philosophical viewpoint; the ardent militancy of his youth is supplanted by the wisdom of the aging philosopher who meditates with tranquility on the imperfections of the world, on the bloody instincts and the ferocious appetites of the human animal. Memmi's last two novels, *Le Scorpion*⁵ and *Le Désert*⁶ illustrate this new trend. His method of investigation is as rigorous as in his early works, but the ways and means have changed. Memmi uses new literary techniques; the subtle irony and the sharp wit of his narrative are reminiscent of Voltaire's *contes philosophiques*. In *La Statue de Sel* and *Agar*, the author-narrator, in his thirties, suffers, observes, analyzes, revolts against the injustices of the "others" whom he blames for his misfortune. In *Le Scorpion* and

Le Désert, a quarter of a century later, he seems to have made peace with himself. He has lost the battle to reform the world, and his unrelenting and obstinate quest for the absolute, for the good, the true, and the beautiful, has led him nowhere. Life has taught him that these objectives are impossible to attain. He is now resigned to an imperfect world, conscious of the limitations of reason and the relativity of human values. His revolt has subsided as a result of his disillusionment with human nature and a human society which is "a closed circle of victims and executioners, each one torturing someone else" (Le S., p. 216). This pessimistic attitude often leads the narrator to a fatalistic posture toward life and a progressive abandonment of all hope of a change for the better; all human pursuits are in vain if "we can do almost nothing against this collective machine" (Le S., p. 215).

Memmi's great innovation in *Le Scorpion* lies in the originality of its composition. In *La Statue de Sel* and *Agar*, the plot evolves in a linear series of events recounted in chronological order and the "I" of the narrator-author is predominant. But in *Le Scorpion*, time plays no part in the progression of the discourse, and the composition is *polyphonic*: the first person of the narrator is interwoven in an imbroglia of characters and voices that contradict him, correct his mistakes, his deliberate omissions and distortions of facts, and sometimes yield to his logic in an effort to achieve harmony. In this "imaginary confession" (subtitle of the novel), Albert Memmi reflects on life and the human condition, casts a retrospective glance at his past, confesses his shortcomings, his failures, and the inanity of his endeavors, as a writer, a teacher, and a philosopher. The author's multifaceted personality is split five ways in the guise of different characters, each representing an aspect of his life, of what he was, what he is, or what he would have wanted to be.

The plot of *Le Scorpion* is very simple. Imilio, a writer, disappears and leaves behind him an incoherent manuscript, a diary, newspaper clippings, and some famous quotations. It is the task of his brother, Marcel, a young ophthalmologist, to resolve the enigma and bring some clarity in this confusion. Marcel comments on his brother's relation of the events and his interpretation of them. In his rebuttals, he presents a completely different version of the same events. The dialogue Imilio-Marcel appears as a soliloquy of the author.⁷ Memmi's apparent purpose is to show the relativity of our views, of our attitudes and beliefs, of our *Weltanschauung* which is in a perpetual state of gestation, constantly changing under the

pressures of time, the vicissitudes of life, and the historical events over which man has no control. Marcel is Imilio at a different period, under different circumstances. He is the ophthalmologist that Imilio wanted to be and could not be because of the war; his clear-cut political attitudes and actions contrast with Imilio's ambiguities and indecisions in the first years of Tunisia's independence; Imilio's "imaginary" recollections on how his sister was driven to insanity by his tyrannical father are simply dismissed by Marcel who peremptorily declares, "we have no mad sister."

While the verbal confrontation in *Le Scorpion* is between the two principal protagonists, Imilio and Marcel, the author Memmi is always present. Like a moderator in contemporary debates, he almost invisibly guides the interlocutors in their heated argumentation, pulling at will the strings of this complex machine. This arduous task is made easier with the help of two secondary characters whose supporting roles contribute to the perfect harmony that Memmi achieves in this novel: J. H. and Uncle Makhlof. A disciple of Imilio, J. H. (Jeune Homme? = young man) reminds the reader of the young Memmi, the author of *La Statue de Sel* and *Agar*. He is a brilliant intellectual, impatient, radical, uncompromising in his views on politics and religion and in his quest for the absolute. Uncle Makhlof is the antithesis of J. H.: he is a wise old man, proud of his Jewish heritage, enlightened by the teachings of the *Talmud*,⁸ imbued with the moral precepts of the *Ethics of the Fathers*,⁹ and resigned to the imperfections of the world. Uncle Makhlof's ideas, and his subtle interventions in the narrative, are more representative of Memmi's present day attitudes and philosophical outlook. By confronting them with J. H.'s ardor, enthusiasm, and intransigence (which he has never repudiated), Memmi once more confirms what he often called his "inner contradictions, ambiguities and impossibilities."

The effects of this *polyphony* are enhanced by what we may call a *polygraphic* presentation, the use of different printing types and "modes of writing" for different protagonists. To the amazement of his editor, Memmi even suggested the use of different colors, a procedure both impractical and costly. Memmi devotes a whole chapter to this idea, entitled "Project on the colors, for Uncle Makhlof" (Le S., p. 160), in which he attempts to convince the old man of the importance of his innovation: "Wouldn't it be more convenient," he tells him, "to color differently a text from the *Haggada*, a text from the *Halakha*, a text from the *Chronicles*?¹⁰

The pink of the *Haggada* would be the equivalent of your dreaming smile. The black or gray of the *Chronicles* would be the sign of seriousness, the neutrality of your voice when you enounce facts. When you interpret, or suggest an idea, or discuss, isn't that clear that you need another color" (p. 162)? In his commentary, Marcel dismisses his brother's "funny" invention. "Emile,"¹¹ he says, "wins the battle against the Uncle [Makhlouf] only in imagination, that is in pink" (p. 164).

There is in *Le Scorpion* a close parallelism between *polyphony* and *polygraphy*. The simultaneous use of these technical devices conveys the idea of unity in diversity. Just as the various musical instruments in a symphonic orchestra and their players under the baton of the conductor fuse their tunes in a harmonic synthesis, the protagonists in *Le Scorpion*, under the guidance of the author, sharpen their wits in a contest of eloquence whose ultimate outcome is unity, unity of self despite the ambiguities, and symbolically, unity of mankind despite international conflicts, interracial and inter-religious hatred, and wars. With some stretch of his own imagination,¹² the reader of this "imaginary confession" can perceive some kind of optical mechanism, a sort of four-walled hall of mirrors reflecting *ad infinitum* the images of the author-narrator standing in the center. As if animated by a clockwork movement, the author, in successive quarter-circle rotations, faces the mirrors one after the other and sees himself successively as Imilio, Marcel, Uncle Makhlouf and J. H. Owing to the parallelism of the walls, the mirrors present a series of images that become smaller and smaller as they go deeper and deeper into the imaginary space, thus symbolically representing the multiple stations in the author's past life, attitudes and beliefs. Had he succeeded in his endeavor to use a different color for each protagonist, and maybe sub-colors, shades and nuances corresponding to various moods, feelings, tones of voice, seriousness of intention, socio-political and religious convictions, Memmi would have perfected the kaleidoscopic representation of the complexities of his inner self and, by extrapolation, the intricate mechanism of human nature and society. But even without colors, *Le Scorpion* elicits in the attentive reader—a second reading would certainly help—a simultaneous multi-sensual perception. To the *polyphonic* structure and the *polygraphic* presentation, corresponds a *polyvisual* imagination. Thus, reversing a modern technological trend, Memmi has adapted a multimedia show to a literary work of art. His use of this artifice is not explicit; it is implied in the context and abandoned

to the reader's imagination. This is done not only to embellish his literary creation and provide the reader with esthetic pleasure, but also to make him think about the grave question of human existence: "What are we? Who are we? Where are we going? What is true? Who is right?" As we see later in this article, *Le Désert* provides a partial answer to most of these questions. In *Le Scorpion*, the young disciple, J. H., is tormented by the same doubts on the meaning of life and death. He finds no solace in his master's attempt to evade the issues. Disappointed, he dissociates himself from his mentor whom he used to admire and respect: "There is a difference between us," he tells him: "I, having discovered that I couldn't bear certain things anymore, will refuse to chase them out of my mind or to disguise them" (p. 193). J. H. eventually commits suicide, and Imilio reports this sad event as if it had to be expected, certain that his disciple would go "jusqu'au bout," to the bitter end. He tacitly admits that he, his teacher, has, in a cowardly way, avoided the most terrifying questions by vainly attempting to find an escape in literature. But when summoned by J. H. to "admit his failure and clearly recognize that literature as exploration is impossible, that literature resolved nothing . . .," Imilio-Memmi concedes: "I had the impression that I had been trapped. [I confess] that my books were neither children, nor a life insurance, nor a tool for the transformation of societies, nor a means to master the world" (p. 228). The other "voices" do not dispute the content of this avowal; "writing," says an anonymous quotation inserted in the narrative, "is the reverse and the negation of all profession, and maybe of all life" (p. 44). As for Marcel, perplexed by the seemingly discordant components of his brother's literary legacy, literature is no more than a playful joke, a sterile occupation, a child game, an illusion.

Realism and symbolism are intertwined in the narrative, reflecting Memmi's skepticism and his views on the uncertainties of our perceptions, on the thin line that separates the actual from the imaginary, the reality from the dream. The same characters and places evoked in Memmi's early novels resurface in *Le Scorpion*: the father, the mother, the wife Marie, the saddler's shop and workers, the "Rue Zarkoune" and the "oukala des Oiseaux," (same name in real life in Tunis). But they are overshadowed by the symbolism that pervades the whole work. The most significant example is in the title of the first chapter which is also the title of the whole work, *The Scorpion*. In a brilliant opening of the novel, Memmi tells an imaginary story about a scorpion surrounded on all sides by a wall of

fire and desperately fighting for his life. After vain attempts to escape, and "certain not to find another solution, the scorpion killed himself" (p. 10). The vivid realism of the narrative, reminiscent of Flaubert's, does not mask the symbolism of the story and its metaphysical significance. At the outset of his "tale," Memmi poses the problem of life and death, their meaning, and man's freedom to put an end to his life by committing suicide. Marcel, his alter ego, rebukes his brother: "It is false," he says, "scorpions don't commit suicide. It is a legend, and old wives' tale. . . . [The animal died] of exhaustion, not because of a noble decision, or a metaphysical discovery" (p. 10). Later in the novel, Marcel comments on J. H.'s suicide which he seems to ridicule: "Because he does not accept the idea of death, he kills himself; because he discovers that we are condemned to an eventual defeat, he rushes headlong into it . . ." (p. 231). One would try in vain to find, in *Le Scorpion*, Memmi's explicit philosophical views on suicide. But by opposing the views of the main protagonists, it seems that Memmi has not departed from Camus' thinking, as embodied in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and *La Peste*, whose influence on his own writings he has never denied: in the constant struggle between lucid man and absurd world, man's answer is revolt, not suicide. On this subject, total harmony exists between Marcel's views and Imilio's; and pious Uncle Makhoul certainly concurs with them. Echoing Camus' famous philosophical answer to the absurdity of life, "faire son métier" (to do one's job), Memmi concludes the story of J. H.'s suicide with an unusual similarity of views of the main protagonists: "It is you," Marcel tells Imilio, "who were right against this J. H. . . . Wisdom means the handling of day-to-day existence" ("l'aménagement du quotidien," p. 231). This is, in essence, Memmi's message in *Le Scorpion*, and probably his credo today.

The last chapter of *Le Scorpion* is an incoherent collection of vignettes grouped under the bizarre title of "Chronique du Royaume-du-Dedans" (Chronicles of the Kingdom-of-the-Inside). This is the only link with *Le Désert*, a picaresque story of adventures of a Judeo-Berber prince exiled from a kingdom of the same name. None of the characters in *Le Scorpion* appears in *Le Désert*, except Uncle Makhoul whose name, and inevitable word of wisdom, is quoted in exergue, just once, as a carrier and transmitter of the heritage and a beacon of light to guide the narrator in his long search for his roots. In this fantastic relation of the hero's adventures one finds some allusion to the author's mysterious ancestry. The narrator whose name, El Mammi, is so transparent and revealing, is a prince who lived in

North-Africa in the 15th century. Exiled from his kingdom, he travels all over the world, suffers trials and tribulations but never abandons his attempt to recapture his throne. At the end of his peregrinations, he is taken prisoner by the great conqueror, Tamerlan who, himself conquered by El Mammi's wisdom, makes him his political adviser. El Mammi tells the story of his life to his master Tamerlan, a story of perilous travels, of love and war, of plots and insurrections, of treachery and assassinations, of his service or rather his servitude to kings and brigands. After each episode, he pauses for reflection and draws some wise conclusions on human nature, on fate and fortune, which he enunciates in a philosophical maxim of universal scope.

Like Machiavelli in *The Prince*, the narrator counsels the monarch how to best subjugate his enemies, to make efficient use of his subjects, and how "in order to conquer, one must count for nothing other people's lives" (p. 62). He warns him not to put his total trust in others if he wants to escape the fate of the princes who were betrayed and massacred by their own entourage to whom they had lavished honors and presents. For man's ingratitude and cruelty are inherent in the human condition. The triumph of might over right, the plots and assassinations to conquer power and retain it, the usurpation of authority by tyrannical despots, wars and genocides, are constant features of life, and the individual seems powerless to alter the ineluctable course of history. Therefore, woe to those who were born weak, vanquished, conquered. "I saw," says the narrator, "so many acts of torture that I could only bless my Providence for being born among the powerful" (p. 46). El Mammi's rich experience has taught him that man is the only animal that indulges in useless massacre, like those soldiers who "facing a defenseless, defeated enemy . . . plunge their weapons with a voluptuous ardor in that disarmed flesh" (p. 61). It is clear that the author Albert Memmi speaks through the mouth of the narrator, Jubair Ouali El Mammi, and that the object of his invectives is not an imaginary situation in the 15th century but the *hic et nunc*, the world in which we live today, where "in the same morning, some rebels were hanged, tongues of blasphemers were pulled off, hands of little thieves were cut off," a country in which "in order to ensure political stability, it was customary to gouge out the eyes of all potential rivals to the throne" (p. 182). The inevitable, sad conclusion is not far away: "History," says one of the characters, "is made of darkness and gloom; generosity and goodness are no more than rare flashes of lightning" (p. 85).

The theme of exile and solitude, only suggested in *Le Scorpion*, assumes in *Le Désert* much larger proportions. The story begins with the narrator's forced departure from his native kingdom, symbolically called "the Kingdom of the Inside,"—Isn't he exiled from his inner self?—and his sad complaint about his destiny, "as if Fate had decided once and for all that I would remain an eternal stranger" (p. 17). Thrown in the desert, having lost his sense of orientation, El Mammi contemplates the infinite stretches of sand that are "the only bridge, but impassable, with the rest of the universe" (p. 18). The desert taught him his first lesson, the first truth in life, that one "must make peace with oneself" and the second truth, that "he was afraid to be alone." The fear of solitude is not a temporary feeling inspired by the immensity of the desert; it is rather a permanent expression of an existential anguish. "Most people," El Mammi says, "although free by law, never leave, during their whole life, a shop or a room barely larger than a tomb: they would be sick of being alone" (p. 21).

Le Désert appears as Memmi's attempt to provide an answer to all the questions that have troubled him in his first novels, in his essays, and in *Le Scorpion*. Although it is clad in the transparent garb of an epic novel, with the hero's travels and adventures well situated in time and space, (the Maghreb of the 15th century), *Le Désert* is a philosophical essay and a thinly veiled satire against the powers that be. The reader who is familiar with political events and prominent figures of the recent past will necessarily find some resemblance between the characters and real life persons, places and events. Without speculating on the author's intentions, let us quote just a few: a certain Bologuine reminds us of Bourguiba, and his son D'houï of Bourguiba's son Jean-Habib. Another figure, Jiâne, the monarch who lost his throne through the efforts of Bologuine, fits the description of the last Bey of Tunis, dethroned by Bourguiba. The name of the leader of the rebellion is Al-Kahin, strangely similar to Al-Kahina, the famous Berber-Jewish queen who led the resistance against the Arab invaders of Berberia, today's Maghreb. But these similarities, or coincidences, are no more than allusions to real life. The novel itself is rather an imaginary "conte oriental" reminiscent of Voltaire's *Candide* and Montesquieu's *Les Lettres persanes*. Like *Candide*, El Mammi escapes all dangers, survives all perils, sometimes miraculously, due to a conjuncture of events "considerable and unforeseen," when chance, luck and providence intervene in his favor. But El Mammi doesn't have his Pangloss to marvel at the perfection of the universe, to claim that "all is for the best in the best of possible

worlds.” For him, luck is just a tiny compensation for the damage caused by a malevolent, cruel and blood-thirsty real enemy.

Even the hero’s amorous adventures are brief and fraught with danger; only once was he really in love, in the Castilian court, with a beautiful princess, and there, the obstacles to his passion were insurmountable, of a kind that reminds us of *Agar*’s impossible love; El Mammi is summoned to convert to Catholicism, the religion of the Spanish King, and to stay in his court, thus not only abjuring the faith of his ancestors—a clear allusion to the Spanish Inquisition and the forced conversion of the Jews, the Marranos, in the 15th century before their final expulsion in 1492—but also losing his liberty which he had learned to cherish. He narrowly escapes death when he decides to defy the king and surreptitiously leave the kingdom to regain his freedom.

For the narrator can only be free when he is alone; even the “solitude à deux,” the couple, is a heavy burden for him to bear. Hence the symbolism of the title, *Le Désert*, the desert (and its companion, the sea) which, every time it is reached, elicits in him an ecstatic jubilation and a wonderful feeling of liberation: “Ah, only the sea and the desert gave me this sensation of immense liberty” (p. 149), exclaims the narrator who never feels happier than when he is a nomad, in a desert that is “a feast of light.”

At the end of his apprenticeship of life, El Mammi begins to doubt if he still wants to reconquer his throne. He reviews in his mind all the monarchs and the tyrants he had served in his long life of wanderings in search of the truth, and he concludes that his only purpose in life was not to reconquer the kingdom of his father but “the kingdom of himself,” (le Royaume-du-Dedans) if only he could be sure of his origins. This provides an occasion for the author to profess his philosophy on the futility of racial, ethnic and religious conflicts, on the fanaticism of the belligerents who wage bloody wars against other people that might be their brothers. For, who is certain of his identity? History has mixed and confused races; religions of enemies have been imposed by the sword and then inherited by the new generations who fanatically embraced them and killed others in their name. “The Castilians,” writes Memmi, “believed themselves to be pure Castilians when they were descendants of the Moor invaders. The ancestors of Bologuine thought they were proud Tunisians when they were Bougiote conquerors, implacable enemies of Tunis . . .” (p. 141). When we see the world around us, we can’t help but share the author’s anguish when he exclaims: “But, good Lord, must people, in the name

of their nation and religion, slay each other when nobody is sure of his ancestors, and when, among the victims, there may be their brothers and sisters" (p. 141)?

This transcends the message of *Le Scorpion*. Managing daily life seems no longer sufficient in a world gone mad and close to self-destruction. *Le Désert* is a vibrant appeal to all nations of the world to show more understanding and tolerance, and rather than destroy each other, to combine their efforts and pool their resources to combat human suffering, poverty and disease that lead to the only certainty, death. In a strange mixture of hope and abandonment to fate, the narrator-author, after a last reflection on the vanity of life and the illusions of power and conquests, puts an end to his long story with this ultimate warning: "The peoples think they are flying from victory to victory when, in fact, they march toward nothingness. It is precisely when they reach the apex of glory that they begin their descent to the grave. So that, as in a show, one always wonders whose turn it is now to triumph, whose turn it is to begin to die. For the only definitive victory is that of death" (p. 188).

NOTES

1. Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1953; Gallimard, 1966.
2. Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1955.
3. *Portrait du Colonisé, précédé du Portrait du Colonisateur*, Paris: Pauvert, 1966. First excerpts published in 1957 in *Temps modernes* and *Esprit*, Paris. *Portrait d'un Juif*, Paris: Gallimard, 1962. *La Libération du Juif*, Paris: Gallimard, 1966.
4. *L'Homme dominé*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968. This work is a collection of essays on other "conditions of oppression." Memmi applies the same method of investigation to understand the condition of the blacks, the women, the proletarians, and the servants.
5. *Le Scorpion*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969. (In the text, referred to as *Le S.*").
6. *Le Désert*, Paris: Gallimard, 1977.
7. Diderot uses the same device in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Like Imilio and Marcel, MOI and LUI represent two opposite views which, while reflecting the inner contradictions of the author, contribute to the elaboration of his philosophy.
8. The Talmud is a monumental compendium of commentaries on the Bible. "The best way to think of the Talmud is as the minutes of a symposium on religion, law, philosophy, ethics, that lasted without interruption, but with constantly changing scholars and authorities, for 1,200 years, from the 5th century before, to the 8th

century after, the Christian era” (Leo Rosten, *Treasury of Jewish Quotations*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).

9. *The Ethics of the Fathers*, or *Sayings of the Fathers* (in Hebrew, *Pirkey Avot*) is a collection of precepts of wisdom and moralisms, very popular in rabbinical literature.

10. Both *Haggada* and *Halakha* are investigations of the Scripture in order to find its true meaning and implications. But while the *Haggada* deals with legends, folklore, and imaginary tales, the *Halakha* is the law, codified and authoritative. *The Chronicles* are chapters of history.

11. Memmi sometimes substitutes “Emile” for “Imilio.” While the latter suggests his Italian ancestry (on his father’s side), the former is symbolic of his French acculturation. Knowing Memmi’s admiration for Rousseau and his identification with his life and ideas, we might add that the choice of the name is significant: it is the name of the pupil in Rousseau’s famous treatise on education.

12. Memmi himself, in a note at the end of *Le Scorpion*, after deploring the publisher’s refusal to print it in color, calls for the participation of the reader and for his “complementary effort of imagination . . . which will be his part in this common work” (p. 295).