

Arezki's Bookburning in Mouloud Mammeri's *Le Sommeil du Juste*

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Mouloud Mammeri, born in 1917 in Taourirt-Mimoun (Upper Kabylia), Algeria, is professor of ethnology at the University of Algiers and director of a research center at the Bardo Museum. He is the author of four novels, several plays and short stories, a Berber grammar, two collections of traditional oral Kabyle poems, and two volumes of Kabyle folktales translated into French.

Exposed to French culture and the French language in school, Mammeri adopted them as his own, as did other Kabyle writers whose own oral tradition provided little literary patrimony other than tales and poems fortunately recalled by elders or transcribed in Arabic or Roman script.

French culture meant, of course, the traditional academic curriculum taught in France in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Given the usual delays entailed by geographical remove and the isolation inherent in the role of the colonized people, the program in French overseas schools provided the principal cultural training and the materials naturally tended to have weathered the test of time.

Mammeri's four novels—all published by Plon in Paris—constitute a loose tetralogy: *La Colline oubliée* (1952), *Le Sommeil du juste* (1955), *L'Opium et le bâton* (1965), and *La Traversée* (1982); the action of the first two taking place in Kabylia, that of the latter two in Algiers, the hinterland, and Morocco and in Algiers and the southern Sahara. The first three are, if not autobiographical, at least relatively faithful reflections of Mammeri's own life.

In some ways, Mammeri's best work is his second novel, *Le Sommeil du juste*, a tale of the disintegration of values in the rural culture of Ighzer, a Kabyle village. The elders hold to such traditional customs as the male code of honor, filial piety, and the vendetta. The youths, exposed to the culture shock of *Aroumi* education,¹ have become alienated, have become "strangers" (*Iroumien*), and have, to the bewilderment of the elders, embraced atheism, socialism, syndicalism, and the like.

Arezki, the main character of *Le Sommeil du juste*, goes through an identity crisis in which he questions and then rejects many of the values he had acquired during his French schooling. The evolution is traced in a long letter which Arezki addresses to his old schoolteacher, M. Poiré, an epistolary evolution which parallels the emotional one through which Arezki has journeyed. At the outset, M. Poiré was, apparently, nothing short of a god to Arezki who wrote to his master: ". . . quelle que soit désormais la destinée qui m'attende, je vous devrai, mon cher maître, d'être né à la vie."²

¹*Aroumi* or *Roumi* (pl. *Iroumien*), from "Roman," an interesting vestigial colonial word meaning a foreigner or, by extension, a native son who has assumed foreign ways.

²Mouloud Mammeri, *Le Sommeil du juste*, (Paris: Plon, 1955), p. 119. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

Through a number of disillusioning experiences Arezki discovers that, in the world beyond the confines of his remote village, the rationality learned in his French schoolbooks did not necessarily entail reasonable justice in Frenchmen's dealings with the native population, the invisible but omnipresent *Imann* which Arezki finds he is consigned to on a military document. He is unable to find out what an *Imann* is, although he searches for an explanation in many reference books. If he remains unaware that the initials stand for "indigène musulman algérien non-naturalisé,"³ Arezki understands that it is a label which carries with it such humiliations as being served at the mess table after the Europeans and as being viewed with condescension. It is obvious to Arezki that there is no place for him in Algeria if he is not interested in becoming a schoolteacher, the one nonmenial function to which an educated *Imann* had ready access (pp. 173-74).

Arezki's rejection of his cultural assimilation takes the form of destruction of both the oral and the written word, as though, indeed, the pen were mightier than the sword and to destroy the French word would constitute a formidable revolt. The destruction of the teacher's hollow rhetoric is cynically and persuasively achieved when Arezki, having been wounded several times while fighting with the RTA (Algerian Rifles) in the Allied campaigns in Italy, France, and Germany, writes to Poiré from his hospital bed: "Mais d'abord que je vous dise que je suis à Paris, à Paris, la ville lumière, la ville . . . etc . . . (vous complétez vous-même); depuis que je suis guerrier c'est fou ce que j'économise les mots; du reste j'ai par bonheur oublié tous ceux qui ne servent à rien: la moitié des vôtres y ont sombré" (p. 171).

But the crucial passage is one in which Arezki, while on a drunken spree with his fellow soldiers on the eve of their departure for Mers-el-Kébir where they are to embark for Europe, gathers up all of his books and publicly burns them and urinates on their ashes.⁴ Even as he is about to see the hallowed Metropole (albeit under somewhat trying circumstances), Arezki destroys the books which have once freed him and alienated him from the culture of his village. The mere fact that Arezki burns his French and other foreign books is, in itself, interesting, but it is especially interesting if we consider the titles of the works burned. They constitute portions of a typical lycée program, but the ones which Arezki selects for special vilification in his drunken frenzy may be thought somehow to sum up European cultural values, for the pyre obviously contains more books than those mentioned by title or author.

Arezki dances to the strains of a phonograph in orgiastic, overexcited glee around the fire, weaving a literary litany over the demise of the symbols of his acquired intellectual patrimony. Conspicuous in this ritualistic cultural exorcism are writers actually named or designated by a famous title or verse: Montaigne, Pascal, Racine, Musset, Molière, Shakespeare, Homer, Montesquieu, Jaurès, Rousseau, Auguste Comte, Hugo, and Baudelaire. The works mentioned or implied are not the only ones destroyed, for there is a reference to "others": "Lentement la flamme caressait les feuilles et doucement gagnait de proche en proche Molière, Shakespeare, Homère, Montesquieu, les autres" (p. 146). Those mentioned may, however, be judged to be the salient ones in the narrator's vision. Furthermore, the incident is no doubt to some degree autobiographical and the book list less than random.⁵ Furthermore, the manner in which the books are referred to by authors'

³Jean Déjeux, *Littérature maghrébine de langue française* (Sherbrooke, Qué.: Naaman, 1973), p. 191.

⁴This key passage is found in *Le Sommeil du juste*, pp. 142-47.

⁵In an interview I conducted with Mammeri in Algiers in May 1982, he said that the titles, though not arbitrary, were meant in a general sense and that they reflected the French cultural instruction one got at the time: "Quand j'ai écrit cette liste . . . Ces oeuvres ne sont pas choisies tout à fait au hasard . . . Je pense que le sens que je voulais donner est un sens assez général en ce sens qu'Arezki a reçu une certaine culture classique à laquelle il a cru."

names more frequently than by title suggests that Arezki is, in fact, committing some form of subliminal terrorism. He is virtually burning Racine and Montesquieu at the stake, not just ridding himself of their books.⁶

The destroyed authors provide us with a quite adequate minimal “short shelf” of French and Western culture. Presented chronologically as they might be in an academic program, the authors and—if given or suggested—the works, provide the following syllabus:

Homer
Shakespeare
Montaigne
Pascal
Racine (*Phèdre*)
Molière
Montesquieu
Rousseau (*Contrat social*, *Discours sur l'inégalité*)
Comte
Hugo (*Les Châtiments*)
Musset (*On ne badine pas avec l'amour*)
Baudelaire (“*Harmonie du soir*”)
Jaurès.

This is, in fact, not a bad syllabus for a survey of French literature, with Homer and Shakespeare thrown in as giant background figures in the Greco-Roman tradition. It would also appear that we are, indeed, dealing with textbooks, for one of the boxes of books still bears the inscription: “Ecole Normale de Bouzaréah.” The syllabus is one in which, despite the presence of Racine and Musset, ideas predominate over psychology and such aesthetic preoccupations as symbolism, lyricism, and the like. Mammeri, himself, whether as a result of his schooling or by simple predilection, has betrayed an aversion for nonempirical and semi-empirical movements like surrealism and structuralism,⁷ but it is, in any case, consistent with the rebellion inherent in Arezki’s gesture to stress ideas over aesthetics, content over form. The French mentality—which Arezki is rejecting—is summed up by the logic, the rational ordering of thoughts, which symbolizes French intellectual history and pedagogy. During the trial at the end of the book, does not the judge, who is exasperated by Arezki’s replies to his questions, exclaim that he should understand better: “Vous qui avez fréquenté nos universités, qui avez appris à conduire en ordre vos pensées, à rester lucide . . .”? (p. 249).

In the bookburning episode, there are three one-line quotations, two from Racine’s *Phèdre* and one whose author is not mentioned. If we turn to the unidentified source of the line recited by Arezki, “Voici venir l’instant où, vibrant sur sa tige,” we make some interesting discoveries. The line is, of course, the opening line of Baudelaire’s “*Harmonie du soir*,” but it is misquoted, perhaps deliberately. The line should read: “Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige . . .” Has Mammeri adapted the line to fit better the actual circumstances of Arezki’s dance around the flaming books whose consumed pages fly around like black butterflies? In any event, the poem itself is a suitable text to illustrate the nocturnal moment in which the books and, to a degree, their ideas are dissipated:

⁶It is perhaps not too farfetched to consider the placement of Lemarchand’s “stick”—a symbol of rank and authority—in the as yet unburned pile as symbolizing a pillory.

⁷See Mouloud Mammeri, *La Mort absurde des Aztèques et Le Banquet* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1973), p. 50.

Voici venir les temps où vibrant sur sa tige
Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;
Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir,
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!

Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir;
Le violon frémit comme un coeur qu'on afflige;
Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir.

Le violon frémit comme un coeur qu'on afflige,
Un coeur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir!
Le ciel est triste et beau comme un grand reposoir;
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige . . .

Un coeur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir,
Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige!
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige . . .
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensor!

The entire poem—and, especially, certain lines evoking darkness, flames, music, and dissipation—may be explicated, outside of original context, as quite appropriate to Arezki's burning of books; and, as the last line suggests, the influence of the burnt books remains and glows with a holy vengeance in Arezki: "Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensor!" Especially pertinent are images like: "Chaque fleur s'évapore ainsi qu'un encensoir; / Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir, / Valse mélancolique et langoureux vertige!" and "Un coeur tendre, qui hait le néant vaste et noir, / Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige!" And a comic parallel may perhaps be drawn between Arezki's urinating ("je pisse sur les idées") and the line: "Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige . . ." in which the sun may be construed as symbolizing variously the classical age, Louis XIV, imperialism, reason, and logic.

Considered in this light, the lines from Baudelaire and those from Racine's *Phèdre* ("La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé"; I, i; and "Si tes yeux un moment pouvaient me regarder"; II, v) are not totally unrelated. Furthermore, the appropriateness of "Harmonie du soir" makes us examine the second line from *Phèdre* which is not really related to the first although they do constitute a homophonic couplet. The context of the lines leading up to the line from II, v of *Phèdre* is almost as appropriate to the ambiance of the bookburning as is Baudelaire's poem:

Les Dieux m'en sont témoins, ces Dieux qui dans mon flanc
Ont allumé le feu fatal à tout mon sang;
Ces Dieux qui se sont fait une gloire cruelle
De séduire le coeur d'une faible mortelle.
Toi-même en ton esprit rappelle le passé.
C'est peu de t'avoir fui, cruel, je t'ai chassé.
J'ai voulu te paraître odieuse, inhumaine;
Pour mieux te résister, j'ai recherché ta haine.
De quoi m'ont profité mes inutiles soins?
Tu me haïssais plus, je ne t'aimais pas moins.
Tes malheurs te prêtaient encor de nouveaux charmes.
J'ai languï, j'ai séché, dans les feux, dans les larmes.
Il suffit de tes yeux pour t'en persuader,
Si tes yeux un moment pouvaient me regarder.

Understood in its new context, the tone of this passage from *Phèdre* rather faithfully expresses the love-hate relationship found in the colonial paradigm; it also suggests Arezki's frustration at being rebuffed as an *Imann* ("De quoi m'ont profité mes inutiles soins?").

These quotations from Baudelaire and Racine are interesting because they reinforce the notion that Arezki, who is ostensibly rejecting the French culture that fascinated him, is ineradicably marked by them, witness the lines in which it is inferred that the past has some special attraction:

Du passé lumineux recueille tout vestige!
Le soleil s'est noyé dans son sang qui se fige . . .
Ton souvenir en moi luit comme un ostensor!'

Baudelaire

Ces Dieux qui se sont fait une gloire cruelle
De séduire le coeur d'une faible mortelle.
Toi-même en ton esprit rappelle le passé.

Racine

As I mentioned above, Berber culture is oral; there is no tradition of a written literature; therefore Kabyle writers like Mammeri are more inclined to embrace the written patrimony of another literary tradition. Indeed, Mammeri, in a lecture and discussion held at the University of Algiers in 1969,⁸ defended his "classical" style and maintained that his own beliefs should not be second-guessed based on the actions of his characters. He was taken to task for his characteristic classical bent by some of the young militants who were, no doubt, continuing the controversy over *La Colline oubliée* although Mammeri's lecture was devoted to *L'Opium et le bâton*.⁹

Mammeri replied that his characters were not he, although he admitted to putting a lot of himself into his characters. Several students remained unsatisfied. A visiting professor remarked that the challengers were viewing things from the wrong vantage point: Flaubert had, after all, said "Madame Bovary, c'est moi," and not "Je suis Madame Bovary." Mammeri, in this discussion, would make no apology for having been influenced by Corneille, Racine, and other classical French authors whom he admired. Indeed, Mammeri's own devotion to the French classical tradition, despite his alter ego's bookburning, is—aside from the secondary testimony suggested in *Le Sommeil du juste*—reflected in a certain adherence to a number of classical aesthetic tenets in the execution of his prose works, in addition to which Mammeri readily admits to this allegiance. As he recently said in an interview: ". . . pour un texte comme *Phèdre*, c'est un texte que j'ai adoré tout le temps. Dans le temps je connaissais des scènes de *Phèdre* par coeur, comme ça. Je suis capable de les réciter. Bon. Oui, j'aimais ça. . . . Non, ce n'est pas un choix arbitraire."¹⁰

⁸Mammeri's *L'Opium et le bâton* was on the *programme* as part of the curriculum and he had been invited to address students in an amphitheatre at the Faculté des Lettres. He made a few general remarks and then invited questions. A lively discussion ensued.

⁹Mammeri's first novel, *La Colline oubliée* (1952), was at the center of a controversy. French critics praised it and it was awarded a prize. Algerian critics, on the other hand, saw in the critical attention and the prize a device to patronize the Algerians as well as to drive a wedge between the Kabyles and the Arab-Muslim intellectuals. See Déjeux, pp. 185-88 for an account of the controversy.

¹⁰Interview, May 1982. See note 5.