

From Ethnocentrism to Humanism: Albert Memmi's *Le Désert*

Isaac Yetiv, University of Akron

The thematic evolution of Albert Memmi's literary work in the '50s and the '60s followed a clear and rigorous itinerary that led him from the introspective search in the depths of his own ego to the sociological study of the oppressed groups. His first novel, *La Statue del Sel* (1953),¹ an autobiographical account of his childhood and adolescence in the Jewish ghetto of Tunis, was followed by *Agar* (1955)² in which the narrator, now a physician married to a Franco-Christian woman, debates the problems of interfaith marriage and their tragic repercussions on the individual in a violent diatribe against the archaic laws of his own community and the revolting prejudices of the "stranger."

Leaving the novel for a time, Memmi publishes a series of essays, called "Portraits" which, although anchored in his own life and personality, provide a better comprehension of what he called the "conditions of oppression:" the Colonized, the Jew, the Woman, the Servant.

In the '70s 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 appetite of the human animal. In *Le Scorpion*, published in 1969,³ Uncle Makhlof holds the keys to that wisdom, transmitted from generation to generation, and bequeaths it to the narrator. The same character, although absent from *Le Désert* (Gallimard, Paris, 1977) is quoted in *exergue*: "I don't know if my ancestor became a king, but I know that I owe him my wisdom. By telling you the story of his life, so that you will tell it to your children, I pay a very small price for a huge debt."

One can easily interpret *Le Désert* as another attempt of the author to search and understand his own 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 pursuit to recapture his throne. At the end of his peregrinations, he is taken prisoner by

¹ First published by Corr ea, Buchet-Chastel, Paris, 1953. The quotations in this article are from the Gallimard edition, Paris, 1966.

² Published by Corr ea, Buchet-Chastel, Paris.

³ Published by Gallimard, Paris.

the great conqueror, Tamerlan, who is in turn conquered by El Mammi's wisdom and 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 conclusion on human nature, on fate and fortune, which he enunciates in a philosophical maxim of universal scope. This literary technique, which is characteristic of Memmi's writing, gives him a pretext to formulate his own thoughts and to profess his philosophical ideas on life and man.

Man's ingratitude and cruelty is one recurrent theme in the narration. The triumph of might over right, the plots and assassinations in order to conquer and to retain power, the usurpation of authority by tyrannical despots, wars and genocides, have sealed the fate of man. The individual seems powerless to alter the ineluctable course of history. 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 of five centuries ago but the here and now, the world in which we live today, where "in the same morning, some rebels were hung, 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" (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" (85).

Memmi's pessimistic outlook on life and man's destiny is deeply rooted in his "personal equation." In his novels and essays, he gave a vivid account of his own alienation from the society in which he lived, exacerbated by his own condition as a "dominated" man, oppressed as a colonized, a Jew, a ghetto dweller, a sociocultural hybrid. No wonder if the theme of exile and solitude, subtly suggested in his early writings, assume in *Le Désert* much larger proportions. The story begins with the narrator's forced departure from his native kingdom symbolically called *Le Royaume-du-Dedans* (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" (17). Thrown in the desert, completely disoriented, El Mammi contemplates the infinite stretches of the sand that are "the only bridge, but impassable, with the rest of the universe" (18). His nostalgic reminiscences about his childhood as a young prince are of no help; nor are his lamentations and his desire to go back. 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 and a constant feature of the human condition. "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" (21).

Le Désert appears as Memmi's attempt to provide an answer to all the questions that have troubled him in his first novels and in his essays: Why the injustices? Why are men different and inherently hostile? Who is right in his religious claims? Why is mankind divided into oppressors and oppressed?

Although 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. 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 all possible worlds."

In the best written chapter of the novel, "A la Cour de Castille," Memmi brings his hero, El Mammi, apparently of Judeo-Berber extraction, to the very Christian Spanish court. Having never seen a Christian procession, El Mammi inquires about the gathering and is told that "this is the procession of the God of the Spanish." Stunned with incredulity, he cannot accept the idea of "taking God to a walk . . . a statue of plaster representing a man lying on a stretcher and carried by men who walked despondently, a dead man . . . pallid and covered with a thousand little wounds oozing with blood and pus" (101). Like "a Persian in Paris," the protagonist wonders at this strange custom, so at odds with his own, and inveighs against this "pagan and cruel people who represents its Creator in this manner."

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, but even 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 the religion of the Spanish King, Catholicism, 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 in the 15th century before their final expulsion in 1492—but also losing his liberty and freedom of movement which he had learned to cherish. He narrowly escapes death when he decides to defy the king and surreptitiously leave the kingdom. Other women appeared in his life, most of them "given" as a present by the potentates of the day, his masters. All, except Dolores, the Spanish princess, were no more than "a brief desire of a moment, dissipated with the pleasure" (169).

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," 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. This seems to be the real message of this novel. It contains an

implied appeal to all nations of the world, of all religions and ethnicities, to show more understanding and tolerance, and rather than destroy each other, conjugate their efforts and pool their resources to combat human suffering, poverty, and disease that lead to the only certainty, death.