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Memmi's Novels, in Practice and in Theory

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Throughout the course of his long life, Albert Memmi was best known as an essayist. From the celebrated, path-breaking diptych *Portrait du colonisé précédé du Portrait du colonisateur* (1957), to the controversial *Juifs et Arabes* (1974), to the hotly critiqued *Portrait du décolonisé (arabo-musulman et de quelques autres)* (2004), it was Memmi's engaged non-fiction that built his reputation, both in French and in translation. Indeed, within the vast territory of Memmi's textual production, it is fair to say that his fiction represents a zone that has not often been explored in depth, not even by scholars who have devoted significant energy to studying the man and his thought. Memmi's first novel, *La Statue de sel* (1953), is the lone exception to this statement. The recent insistence on his diffident postcolonial politics and his complicated relationship with Zionism has done little to reframe this important Franco-Tunisian author in terms of the variety and complexity of his literary output. Memmi was, after all, the author of six novels and several volumes of poetry, and deeply committed to thinking about literature and the writing process.

This intervention, then, seeks to draw attention to Memmi's lifelong engagement with the novel, not just as a *practitioner*, but as an unsung (and undoubtedly unwitting) *theorist* of the genre. In so doing, I hope to underscore the ways in which Memmi--a poor Tunisian Jew born a subject of the French empire in the early part of the twentieth century--intervened in and influenced the production of literature.

Placing Memmi's novels within a single literary tradition is not an easy task, and this challenge in categorizing his work may explain, in part, its lack of visibility within both general and specialized readerships. The corpus is probably best understood as belonging to a Venn diagram of overlapping literary traditions comprised of French literature, Francophone studies, Jewish literature, North African literature, and postcolonial studies. And yet, the status of his novels within any one of those subfields is decidedly marginal.

His first two novels, *La Statue de sel* and *Agar*, appeared in rapid succession (1953 and 1955, respectively), with English-language translations following not long thereafter (1955 and 1960, respectively). Their publication earned Memmi the distinction of being one of the first French-language Tunisian novelists, and *the* first Jewish novelist of Tunisia. While this distinction is sometimes reserved for the *école de Tunis* writers--a group of published authors who taught in Tunisia's *Alliance israélite universelle* schools--it is worth noting that those writers (Vitalis Danon, Jacques Vêhel, and RYVEL) tended to prefer short-form fiction and parables, with only Danon's novella *Ninette de la rue du Péché* (1937) resembling the scope and ambition of the genre of the novel.

There are few, if any, traces of a direct connection between Memmi and these literary forebears, yet we find in their works a leitmotif of what might be called “Jewish orientalism,” reprised and reworked in certain passages of Memmi’s first two novels, most notably *La Statue de sel*’s most oft-analyzed scene where his protagonist, Alexandre Mordekhaï Benillouche, fails to recognize his mother who has fallen into a kind of trance. This moment of non- (or dis-) identification gives way to a reflection more often attributed to Memmi himself than to his character: “After fifteen whole years of exposure to Western culture, of which ten were filled with conscious rejection of Africa, must I now accept this self-evident truth? [...] I am an incurable barbarian!”¹

After *Agar* (a story about a mixed marriage between a poor Tunisian man and a French Catholic woman), which Memmi describes as “celui de mes livres qui a été le moins bien compris”², or the least understood of his books, he would continue to publish novels at a rate of nearly one per decade: *Le Scorpion, ou la Confession imaginaire* (1969), *Le Désert ou La vie et les aventures de Jubair el Mammi* (1977), *Le Pharaon* (1988), and *Térésa et autres femmes* (2004). The long stretches of time between novels were nonetheless anything but fallow in terms of writing; it was in these intervals that Memmi produced his defining essays on Jews (*Portrait d’un Juif*, 1962, *La libération du Juif*, 1966, *Juifs et Arabes*, 1974); on dependence and domination (*L’Homme dominé*, 1968, *La dépendance*, 1979), and on racism (*Le racisme: description, définition, traitement*, 1982).

There is certainly a thematic coherence to Memmi’s corpus of fiction. All of his novels are written from the first-person perspective of Jewish men born in Tunisia. The action is nearly always set in Tunisia, with the only exceptions being *Le Désert*, which ranges widely across North and sub-Saharan Africa and takes place at a moment in time before the boundaries of contemporary Tunisia had been drawn, and *Térésa et autres femmes*, set in contemporary Paris. *La Statue de sel*, *Agar*, *Le Scorpion* and *Le Pharaon* all take place in colonial Tunisia, with the latter two depicting tensions on the eve of decolonization and featuring protagonists who are faced with the decision to stay or go. *Le Pharaon* is particularly interesting to read against Memmi’s recently published *Tunisie An I*—a year’s worth of his journal entries documenting the swan song of the French protectorate and a Tunisia on the verge of independence.

All of Memmi’s narrators ponder the crossroads of what might be called intersectionality *avant la lettre*, where the experiences of being born into a colonial situation, of being a Jew in an Arab land, and of being a poor, indigenous Jew in a multicultural Jewish community whose elite were wealthy, educated, and cosmopolitan, come together in a complicated knot. Moreover, nearly all of Memmi’s protagonists wrestle with the implications of being *transfuges de classe*—men who have been “raised up” out of poverty and granted access to education, and who thus must reckon with their change in station. In certain of his novels, namely *Statue* and *Agar*, the main character’s Jewish identity is foregrounded, and is a source of alterity and defensiveness; in the

¹ Albert Memmi, *The Pillar of Salt*, trans. Edouard Roditi (New York: Beacon Press, 1955 [orig. 1953]), 165.

² Memmi, *Agar* (Paris: Corrèa/Buchet-Chastel, 1955). Citation is from the untranslated preface to Buchet-Chastel’s 1963 edition of the novel, p. 13.

later novels, the main characters' Judaism, and the Jewish content of the story, are slightly obscured. Marcel, one of the narrators of *Le Scorpion*, refers to his origins only obliquely. Armand Gozlan of *Le Pharaon* will ultimately leave Tunisia on the eve of independence because he is a Jew, and because he fears there will be no place for Jews in the newly independent nation. He is, however, more distant and more phlegmatic about both his Judaism and the anti-Semitism he experiences than, for example, Benillouche of *Statue*, or the unnamed narrator of *Agar*.

Finally, a thread of auto-referentiality (if to not say autobiography) runs through all the works. But in discussing the task of life writing, Memmi has taken a consistently ambivalent tack, declaring autobiography at once impossible ("Clearly you see that autobiography is a false genre: a life cannot be recounted") and inevitable ("I will have devoted my entire work to writing my life, that is to say, I will have spent my life describing my life").³ His corpus is marked by an essential tension between declarations about "telling the whole truth" and an avowed desire to obfuscate, to blur, even to hide actual facts. Moreover, Memmi seems to have used fiction as an exercise in self-inventory, but also as a form of protection. The latter is deeply cultural: in his musings on writing, he highlights a resistance—shared by both Jews and Muslims of the region alike—to using the first-person pronoun, and to all attendant forms of individuation. The Jewish community of Tunis, for example, avoided recording birthdates as a way of warding off the evil eye; a ubiquitous Maghrebi aphorism warns: "Only the devil says I..." In creating narrators who resemble him but never bear his name, whose experiences are plausibly but not always demonstrably his own, Memmi continually navigated a liminal space between reality and the imagination.

The two novels from Memmi's middle period, *Le Scorpion* (1969) and *Le Désert* (1977), are unusually inventive, and thus merit sustained literary attention. It bears mentioning that these were the last of Memmi's novels to appear in English translation; Eleanor Levieux's *The Scorpion* was published in 1971, and Judith Roumani published *The Desert* in 2015. While these novels evince many of the same thematic elements articulated above, their narration, formal structure, and style nonetheless represent something of a departure for the author. Moreover, the fact that he would return to more conventional modes of storytelling in his later fiction positions the middle novels as something of an anomaly, and also suggests that Memmi may have been more curious about the postmodern turn and experimental fiction than is typically imagined. Although Memmi never made programmatic statements against particular "schools," or literary trends, his occasional reflections on certain novels or authors are revelatory. For example, without ever naming Perec or *La Disparition* explicitly, Memmi offered this derisive commentary on the novel famously written without the letter E: "The systematic elimination of the letter E, in a text with no other redeeming features, can still be called literature; but is it really art?"⁴ Irrespective of authorial intention, contextualized close reading of *Le Scorpion* and *Le*

³ Memmi, *La Terre intérieure. Entretiens avec Victor Malka* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 11 and 277.

⁴ Memmi, *Le Nomade immobile* (Paris: Arléa, 2000), 152. Translation mine. Original reads: "On a le droit de nommer littérature... l'éradication systématique de la lettre "e" dans un texte sans autre intérêt par ailleurs; mais s'agit-il encore de l'art?"

Désert reveal, at the very least, that Memmi was at once more belle-lettristic *and* more interested in form and experimentation than he preferred to admit.

Its setting and style alone make *Le Désert* somewhat unique in Memmi's corpus, and indeed in the broader field of North African literature in French. While most of his other novels take place in mid-twentieth century Tunisia and feature Jewish-Tunisian protagonists obsessed with inventorying self and society at moments of intense historical pressure (such as WWII or decolonization), *Le Désert* is Memmi's only novel whose action predates the arrival of the French colonizer. Set in a *grand Maghreb* that is part geo-political reality and part imaginary construct, the novel codifies this blend of fiction and nonfiction by including a map of North Africa that marries real toponyms with fictional sites and bears the inscriptions of the journeys taken by the novel's fictional hero. The tale begins in 1400 and unfolds retrospectively to chart the peregrinations of dethroned prince Jubaïr Ouali el-Mammi—identified, in Memmi's preface, as a distant relative. Captured in Damascus by Tamerlane, el-Mammi offers up his life story as a moral tale. Like the map featured at the beginning of the text, the story's frame also serves to scramble notions of "real," "fiction," "reality," "fantasy." In an introduction, the author links *Le Désert* to *Le Scorpion* and discusses his debts to his readers before announcing that he is simply providing the "transcript" of the story told by his ancestor (el-Mammi) to Tamerlane.

This particular framing device bears more than a passing resemblance to the trope of the found manuscript (popular in eighteenth-century French novels), and is only one of the ways in which *Le Désert* appears to be channeling Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721). Montesquieu and Montaigne are obvious sources of inspiration, but so are the life and works of the great Maghrebi historian and autobiographer Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406). Indeed, while Memmi purports to be telling the story of his own ancestor, it is impossible not to notice that el-Mammi's back story is reminiscent of Ibn Khaldun's life story, and that his various movements across the Mediterranean parallel the historian's chronicles of his own political missions that include a diplomatic stint in Granada at the court of Pedro the Cruel, as well as stays at the courts of Fez, Tlemcen, and Tunis.

The interest in reading *Le Désert* today is not simply historical but also literary, aesthetic, and perhaps even political. A novel such as this one is not only a lynchpin for any broader interpretation of Memmi's literary work and how it relates to an ongoing project of fraught self-representation and of representing the "scene of writing," it is also an object lesson in navigating some of the essentialisms that are by-products of both national literature departments and postcolonial studies. *Le Désert* is decidedly (and I would venture to state: deliberately) promiscuous in its sources, references, and allusions, which makes it difficult to study the novel as wholly "Maghrebi," wholly "French," or even fully "Francophone postcolonial." In this novel, Memmi is not "writing back" to the French empire, nor is he slavishly reproducing colonial models, even if he is borrowing tropes from Enlightenment literature.

Rather, *Le Désert* does the paradoxical work of attempting to establish origins and mythologies, while at the same time working quite hard to scramble them. The myriad allegorical interpretations that can be spun out from *Le Désert* already compelling in the late 1970s when the novel was first published, take on an even greater urgency today in light of the Arab Spring. Can we read *Le Désert* as a moral tale about revolution and power? Does it figure a greater Maghreb as a kind of utopia? How does it understand, assess, and represent the push and pull of

political alliances and strategies in a fictionalized (yet verisimilar) North Africa? What does it mean for “Jews and Arabs” that Memmi has put forward in this novel an imagined family tree that would make him the descendent of a major Arabo-Muslim thinker?

Published nearly a decade prior to *Le Désert*, *Le Scorpion* is undoubtedly Memmi’s most experimental novel.⁵ Non-linear, it eschews logical character development and avoids explicit historical and geographical referents. The story is made up of five intersecting storylines, with each story represented in a different typeface—an effect that makes for a visually peculiar reading experience. It is also an intense mediation on reading and interpretation. The main character, Marcel, an ophthalmologist, attempts to make sense of the fragments of a journal his brother, Emile, has left behind. In Marcel’s narrative strand, he complains of the difficulty of understanding his brother’s journal, which represents the second narrative strand. A third layer of text is made up of Marcel’s glosses on his brother’s journal. And the fourth and fifth layers represent two different “archives” of fables, anecdotes, and parables, all bearing some vague thematic similarity to the other three strands. The historical backdrop of *Le Scorpion* is sketched in only a few faint lines. The reader is at pains to situate the story in time, and only through careful attention to detail does she understand that Marcel and his family are on the verge of leaving their native Tunisia as the colonial era draws to a close.

Le Scorpion, then, is somewhat less about history than it is about writing, less about Tunisia than it is a metacommentary on literature, the act of reading, and Memmi’s own textual strategies. At one point, frustrated with his incapacity to make sense of his brother’s journal, Marcel derides “this childish mania for giving the least little thing an echo, a significance which is less clear than the thing itself! But maybe that’s what lit-er-a-ture is all about?” (p. 4) And later, he offers this gloss: “Enough. I don’t want to get caught up in Emile’s game. What’s the point of it all? Is it a reconstruction using real elements, or merely day dreaming? Anyhow, he certainly doesn’t mean to use our name, just as it is, in a novel! Not that that shocks me (well, it does a little), but it would make the book less fictional, and that would be a mistake, wouldn’t it?” (p. 26) Over the course of the novel, however, Marcel becomes a savvier reader, one able to identify and make sense of a text’s tactics; indeed, he comes to find not only pleasure but also meaning in the textual games that once frustrated him.

Even within the small subset of readers who are aware of Memmi’s novels, few may be accustomed to imagining Memmi writing in anything but a realist mode. *Le Scorpion*, then, emerges as a kind of revelation of Memmi’s literary alter-ego, of an author willing and able to write in an experimental, even postmodern vein, playing with the stuff of narration and literature, relishing in its fragmentariness, and even inventing, perhaps, a kind of autobiographical metafiction. It is in these middle works that we can see Memmi as a self-conscious interrogator of literary form, as a creator and questioner of categories, and as a lucid critic of critique.

However modest the corpus, then, Memmi’s novels can be understood as implicitly producing theories of literature. It is also true, however, that Memmi explicitly speculated about writers,

⁵ Memmi, *Le Scorpion; ou, La confession imaginaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969; “Folio” 1986). Translated by Eleanor Levieux, *The Scorpion; or, The Imaginary Confession* (New York: Grossman, 1971).

writing, literature, and the novel. Despite his purported indifference to, or rejection of, labels and categories of all stripes, Memmi was deeply aware of the shifting landscape of literary categories and criticism in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet his best known statement about literature came in the form of a prediction that turned out to be wrong. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, he held up the situation of the colonized writer as an impossible one: “[His] linguistic ambiguity is the symbol and one of the major causes of his cultural ambiguity. [...] The fact is that the role of a colonized writer is too difficult to sustain. He incarnates a magnified vision of all the ambiguity and impossibilities of the colonized” (p. 110).

Writing in 1957--understandably unable to foresee the postcolonial turn that was just around the corner--Memmi sounded the death knell for a generation of writers: “The problem can be concluded in only two ways: by the natural death of colonized literature; the following generations, born in liberty, will write spontaneously in their newly found language. Without waiting that long, a second possibility can tempt the writer: to decide to join the literature of the mother country. Let us leave aside the ethical problems raised by such an attitude. It is the suicide of colonized literature; in either prospect (the only difference being in the date) *colonized literature in European language appears condemned to die young*” (p. 111, emphasis mine).

With two novels in French to his credit at the moment of this fatal diagnosis, it isn't totally clear how Memmi positioned himself within the conundrum he articulated. After all, ceasing to write would have been intolerable; learning to write in Arabic, impossible. Could it be that he saw himself as “joining the literature of the mother country” and thus producing something other than “colonized literature”? In an interview in 2009, when I asked Memmi what had changed for him since leaving Tunisia, he responded unequivocally: “I became a French writer.” What he meant by “a French writer” was somewhat unclear; his naturalization in the late 1970s did not prompt universities, libraries, or bookstores to move his novels to the “French” section (they remained on shelves labeled “Maghreb,” “Afrique,” or “Roman francophone”). What is clear is that Memmi would spend the decades that followed his ill-fated 1957 prediction wrestling with questions of literature, language, and belonging. Indeed, he proposed several different approaches to categorizing literature written in French but belonging (in strict or loose terms) to a broadly North African cultural matrix.

As director and prefacer of three literary anthologies, Memmi worked through the stakes of naming a literary corpus.⁶ Whereas in his 1964 collection, *Anthologie des écrivains maghrébins d'expression française*, the titular writers are native to North Africa, in the 1969 *Anthologie des écrivains français du Maghreb* Memmi presents writers who are not “of the Maghreb” in an ethnic or national sense but rather are “the former colonies’ European inhabitants or inhabitants of European extraction” (p. 12). The 1985 publication of *Les écrivains francophones du Maghreb, une anthologie*, in which autochthonous and European writers “of the Maghreb” are brought together under a single title, was nothing if not a sign of the times. In his prefatory comments, we find Memmi now willing (and able)—thanks to the advent of la Francophonie, a

⁶ Memmi, ed, *Anthologie des écrivains français du Maghreb* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1969), *Anthologie des écrivains maghrébins d'expression française* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1964), *Écrivains francophones du Maghreb: une anthologie* (Paris: Seghers, 1985). In-text citations refer to French editions; translations are mine.

tool which, in his words, “miraculously unites a group of writers from around the globe”—to consider Camus and Roblès within the same discursive space as Djébar and Chraïbi (p. 14). In other words, Memmi was sensitive to the changes in the literary field.

Above and beyond the specificity of what we would now consider francophone postcolonial literary matters, Memmi also took up more general literary and discursive questions. In a brief (and untranslated) essay titled *L'Écriture colorée ou je vous aime en rouge* and published in 1986, Memmi imagines the possibility of compelling writers to make their motives transparent by insisting that all propositions be color-coded: black would be used for true statements, yellow for analogy, green for expressions of desire, blue for the language of imagination, and red for emotion. According to this schema, a novel would be written in blue, the language of fantasy or the imaginary, but a political speech could be written in any combination of colors, with various hues exercising a regulatory effect on the text by forcing the author to categorize his propositions. According to Memmi, such a system would prevent politicians from treachery and publicists from error by obliging them to reveal the true nature of their texts (p. 99). The guileless tone of the text lends it to being read as either wholly earnest, or as a performance of irony. By Memmi's own admission, it was an attempt to theorize the formal experimentation he had attempted in *Le Scorpion* and to challenge his limits as a writer.⁷

Memmi's urge to systematize what was, essentially, a ludic literary act, says much about his overarching--if always only implied--theory of the novel. If we can find, throughout his fiction, a certain impulse to play with form, with the truth, with his own biography, that impulse is consistently re-harnessed by an imperative to control potential excesses. This is perhaps best summed up by his own riff on Michel Leiris's comparison of writing and bullfighting: “I would gladly say,” wrote Memmi, “that for me, writing is like a bullfight where I am both bullfighter and bull.”⁸ In this artful description, one can hear echoes of the other dialectical pairs--colonizer and colonized, dominator and dominated, purveyor and dependent--the dyads that constituted the nodal points of his thought. In this way, Memmi's theorization of the novel is strikingly reminiscent of his thought more generally, marked as it was by a tension between a desire, on the one hand, to understand and to be understood (and so, to name, to inventory, to catalog), and, on the other, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of that task.

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⁷ Memmi, *La Terre intérieure*, 164.

⁸ Memmi, *Le Nomade immobile*, 150. Translation mine.

