

CRITICISM IN TRANSLATION

French Myths and French Realities: Some Bitter Home Truths

JEAN AMROUCHE

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION
BY NICHOLAS HARRISON

Introduction

In November 1962 the acclaimed Algerian writer Kateb Yacine published “C’est vivre” (“To Live”), a eulogy for three writers who had not survived to see Algerian independence. The poem begins with their names—“Fanon, Amrouche et Feraoun”—and ends, “Mourir ainsi c’est vivre” (“to die in that way is to live”). What mattered to Kateb was that they should live on through their writing. Frantz Fanon’s work needs no introduction here, and Mouloud Feraoun’s too is still widely read, notably his novel *Le fils du pauvre* (1950/1954; *The Poor Man’s Son*)¹ and his remarkable *Journal* (1962). Jean Amrouche, by contrast, is largely neglected today, despite all he achieved as a poet, broadcaster, and intellectual. The essay from 1958 translated here is probably his most important.

Amrouche published his first poetry collection, *Cendres* (*Ashes*), in 1934, and from 1944 was the editor of the weighty literary magazine *L’arche* (*The Arch* or *The Ark*), in Algiers then in Paris. He got to know Charles de Gaulle, eventually serving as a clandestine intermediary between de Gaulle and the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), and over a number of years nudged him toward a more critical understanding of colonialism.² Meanwhile, he built a highly successful career as a pioneer of radio interviews (Dugas, “Genèse”). Eminent writers on his radio shows included his friend André Gide (his leading collaborator on *L’arche*), Kateb, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and, in 1956, Roland Barthes—whose own dissections of French “myths,” published as *Mythologies* in 1957, had been appearing in the press since 1954.

It sometimes seemed that Amrouche, especially as a young man, had imbibed those myths as deeply as anyone. In his private journal he occasionally offered spontaneous homilies to French civilization, and as late as September 1943 wrote:

Le sens de la qualité, le sens des valeurs. Sentiments aristocratiques. Ma France ne fut jamais celle de l’égalité en fait, mais celle de l’égalité dans les chances. Mais j’ai toujours cru à la race, aux valeurs innées. Me suis toujours assimilé aux Seigneurs. (*Journal* 1928–62 116)

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A sense of quality, a sense of values. Aristocratic sentiments. My France was never about equality, actually, but rather equality of opportunity. But I've always believed in breeding [*la race*], and innate values. I have always thought of myself as one of the *Seigneurs* [*Me suis toujours assimilé aux Seigneurs*]. (my trans.)

That perturbing, self-assertive rhetoric is buckled by internal tensions. It is hard to believe Amrouche ever truly thought France offered “equality of opportunity” to colonized peoples. Moreover, in the aristocratic worldview, you do not need to liken or “assimilate” yourself to the *Seigneurs* if you have the breeding; and you cannot acquire the breeding if you do not have it. As Amrouche knew, he was from the wrong class, and the wrong race. Yet he was also proud of his origins, and there was always another side to his work: he remained unwaveringly committed to Berber/Amazigh culture, which as a poet and anthologist he, like his sister Taos and their mother Fadhma, cherished, recorded, and sustained.³ When his 1958 essay denounces colonialism’s destruction of “things of irreplaceable value,” the impulse comes from his love of his first culture.

The force of Amrouche’s intervention, midway through the war of Algerian independence, was inseparable from his reputation as an urbane figure close to the heart of the French literary establishment. He had already published trenchant essays on colonial politics (and was consequently disowned by his French in-laws and former friends and colleagues including Albert Camus), but to people who knew him from the radio, he must still have appeared the epitome of successful colonial “assimilation.” The essay, as remarkable for its voice as for its arguments, marked a radical break from the poised persona of the airwaves.

Like other important anticolonial texts of the era, including Albert Memmi’s *Portrait du colonisé* (1957; translated as *The Colonizer and the Colonized*)⁴ and Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952; *Black Skin, White Masks*) and *Les damnés de la terre* (1961; *The Wretched of the Earth*), Amrouche’s analysis was bold and innovative not

least in exploring the psychological damage wrought by colonialism. Amrouche evokes colonialism’s capacity to engender a split and conflicted self, making it clear that he is a prime example. There are moments when he seems to contradict himself, admitting his lingering attachment to certain “illusions” just after affirming that those illusions have dissipated entirely; but such tensions in the essay also bear out its arguments about the power of ideology and myth, and the impossible demands placed on the colonized.⁵

French complacency about colonialism remained possible in the late 1950s partly, Amrouche suggests, because of ignorance about its atrocious realities. (Henri Alleg’s *La question*, about torture in Algeria, appeared the following month, in February 1958, and was quickly seized by the police.) One of his aims was to capture—and catalyze—a momentous shift in anticolonial consciousness in the postwar period; as he indicates in referring to repression in Algeria “just when victory had been won in the Second World War,” the Sétif massacres were a major turning point for him, as for many Algerians.⁶

Yet he also identifies more fundamental problems, many of them unresolved today. One concerns European double standards, a point driven home when he compares French colonialism with Nazism—a comparison not wholly new (already seen in Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme*, for example), but still shocking. Another concerns issues around cultural “ownership”; in declaring his love of the French language and its literature (and through allusions to figures including Michel de Montaigne, Jean de La Fontaine, and Arthur Rimbaud), he asserts that French culture belongs to him too, or perhaps more accurately that it has value for all those who choose to immerse themselves in it. At the same time, his most profound criticisms concern the French tendency to mistake the (French) particular for the universal, even in so crucial an area as human rights. The French, he argues, imagine themselves to be “pure subjects” and cannot recognize alterity as such. That mindset underpins the myth of the “civilizing mission,” the doctrine of “assimilation,” and ultimately

colonialism itself, with its fundamental racism. His essay, written from deep within those experiences, returns us forcefully and repeatedly to the radical difficulty—though not, in Amrouche’s view, the impossibility—of extracting would-be universal values from their compromised histories.

NOTES

1. The English edition of *The Poor Man’s Son* is a translation of the first, self-published edition of 1950. In French that edition is rare and the text is known mainly in the significantly revised Seuil edition of 1954.

2. For biographical information on this period, see Faure, esp. 132–33; Le Baut.

3. Jean’s groundbreaking anthology, *Chants berbères de Kabylie* (*Berber Songs of Kabylia*), appeared in 1939, and his celebrated essay “L’éternel Jugurtha: Propositions sur le génie africain” (“The Eternal Jugurtha: On African Genius”) in 1946. Taos recorded songs and edited another anthology, *Le grain magique: Contes, poèmes et proverbes berbères de Kabylie* (*The Magic Grain: Berber Tales, Poems and Proverbs from Kabylia*). Jean encouraged Fadhma to write her life story, published posthumously as *Histoire de ma vie* (*My Life Story*).

4. See Dugas, “Albert Memmi.”

5. On his apparent hesitation over how to evaluate colonial education, see Harrison, ch. 3.

6. Amrouche’s perspective changed drastically in the days following these events. See “Les massacres de Sétif,” a radio program that includes a recording of Amrouche and commentary from the historian Malika Rahal.

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French Myths and French Realities: Some Bitter Home Truths

Jean Amrouche was born in 1906 in the Soummam valley, into a Christian Kabyle family, and today occupies a privileged position in French literary culture. His French is impeccable, he has enjoyed considerable success, and he is much respected; but none of this means he has been “assimilated” or that he has “integrated.” One may question how legitimate are his claims to testify on behalf of those whose voices are “unheard,” intellectuals and the young who support the FLN, and whether he is truly oblivious to the excessively one-sided and polemical nature of the accusations he makes here. Yet behind the violence of his allegations lie a deep affection and disenchantment; this is a cry of pain from someone who feels torn, and we did not think it our place to silence him or to dismiss his analysis out of hand, just because it appears inordinately cruel. Many of our readers, whether or not they agree with him, will be persuaded that what he has to say here needed to be heard. He touches on profound truths, and forces us all to think.

Much has been written about the measures recently taken in Morocco and Tunisia with regard to individuals found guilty of collaboration with the French authorities when those countries were still French protectorates. It is worth pausing over a short article on the topic published by Monsieur Philippe Barrès in one of the morning papers,¹ under the title “The Secret War.” It is a serious matter—indeed, a more serious matter than Monsieur Barrès realizes. It raises questions not only about the behavior of the French and of those formerly under their “protection,” but also about French people’s conception of themselves and of France. When the peoples of Morocco and Tunisia became independent, their relationship with the French altered radically at the political level. That sudden transformation should have led to corresponding transformations at the psychological and social levels, and things are indeed starting to change in those

respects. But mentalities and worldviews have not caught up with the new reality, and the French are finding it extremely hard to accept that their role now is that of partner rather than protector.

French behavior toward foreigners has barely changed since the time of Montesquieu. Of course, the French now eat less bread, are less ignorant of geography, and are beginning to accept that a Persian may wish to remain Persian even if he admires France and the French art of living, the way the French think and their particular sensibility. But a Frenchman still conceives of the universal as an extension of French characteristics, and reduces any foreign reality to those selfsame characteristics. He remains under the spell of a mythology that makes it difficult for him to recognize the other, whoever that may be, as other. In the Frenchman’s mind, France is, in all respects, the very model of consummate civilization: it is often imitated but ultimately inimitable, and others can only gaze on in envy.

No doubt the idea that the Frenchman has of his country, instilled in him from early childhood through his history lessons, took shape in an era when France held a dominant position in Europe. That idea has hardened into stereotype and myth. Other countries have grown in stature, and their dominance is felt across the world. France’s power has diminished in real terms, but somehow lives on in an airy, mythical realm spun from the powers of the imagination and an appeal to the emotions. France in reality is smaller and much less attractive than that poetic, legendary France.

Nonetheless, the French, and France, have always dreamed—and still dream—of being loved for who they are. Their desire for adoration is so great that they refuse to acknowledge certain historical acts that have been carried out by the nation, or its rulers. They can accept others’ views of France only when those coincide with the image they choose to reflect back to themselves. It comes down to this: the French naively think of themselves

as *pure subjects*, and cannot tolerate being the object of others' perceptions, especially when they do not consider those others their equals. Inevitably they sometimes have that experience, but it is painful and is greeted with indignation: it is an injustice, it is improper and insulting, a mark of ingratitude, an attack on their sacrosanct image of their country and its role among the nations of the world. For anyone who is French and proud of it, it may be that "every man carries within him the entire form of the human condition,"^a but that form is wholly fulfilled only in the French conception of what it is to be a man and how to live one's life. Men in all other forms, outside France, are barbaric and primitive: they are like rough drafts and must aspire to the sort of perfection represented by, and embodied in, the Frenchman. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which enshrines Enlightenment philosophy, rests on the assumption that universal man and the Frenchman are identical.

France sees itself as a nation charged with a particular mission whose significance is universal. The civilization it has developed is not one among many, but *civilization as such*; it has developed not values, or its own values, but Values—which, merely by being articulated in French, have undergone a fundamental transmutation and have been raised to the level of the universal. It is in terms of this process, within this unchallengeable metaphysical framework, that the French understand, and experience, France's historic ventures in its outposts, whose ultimate role is to burnish its reputation: it is schoolmarm to all peoples, eldest daughter of the church, and Christ to all nations.

* * *

The French are conditioned by this mystical vision; indeed, if one views things from such a lofty angle (and my aim here is not to criticize but simply to describe), then it appears self-evident that assessing France's historical conduct from any other perspective can lead only to judgments that are so flawed as to be worthless. French thought is to be understood not as one of the elements of universal thought but as its apogee, the pinnacle upon which all the forces constitutive of universal thought

have converged. It is universal thought itself. Consequently, in the eyes of the French, France's interests become indistinguishable from the interests of all humanity. French diplomacy is built on that principle, which runs through every official proclamation.

Here one can see the implicit foundation of the doctrine of assimilation, which France has still not fundamentally relinquished. Shaped by good intentions, and attracted by the very impossibility of its task, the assimilationist view had a certain splendor and was, in its way, quite generous. Essentially, France aspired to give of itself in a gracious act of love.

It is quite wondrous to see the fascination that this legendary France exerts over men whose lot has been to suffer colonization. But the fascination lasts only for a time; emerging from a state of adolescent elation, as if from a forest of dreams and illusions, they arrive at adulthood and a dramatic moment of realization. The first stirrings of demystification soon lead to an abrupt upsurge of consciousness and a violent rift: all at once, in their minds, the reality of France sheers away from the myth. The France of words and ideas is one thing, France in actuality another. They realize that there is a gulf between what they are and what they thought they had become; they discover that part of them, inborn and deep-rooted, balks at assimilation. They may be French as far as their language is concerned, or their set of mental tools, or even their lifestyle and behavior, yet behind all this their soul persists untouched. And within them, suddenly, a storm rages. They no longer know who they are. The Black man, unless he is willing to betray his lineage and his people, is obliged to cast aside his former shame and proudly embrace his *negritude*; and the *bicots*—the colonizers' disparaging term for the "natives" in North Africa—must embrace their *bicoterie*. If they manage to resist the temptations of complete reconversion, which would imply seeing the French language itself and also French culture as an intolerable disguise, and rejecting all of it, they surely have all the more reason to denounce certain historical acts that France has carried out in the name of universal values—values that France

does not embody but that define a mythical France and its self-bestowed mission. Their former fervor inflames their revolt, and the violence of their rebellion is fueled by the clash between two “realities” locked in so stark a conflict that they end up in a state of absolute contradiction: on the one hand, a France characterized by colonialism, racism, greed, oppression, inhumanity, and the perhaps unwitting destruction of things of irreplaceable value; and on the other, a universalist France offering emancipation and salvation. The ferocity of their disappointment matches the depth of their revolt.

Some people, as I know from experience, will smile with a mixture of pride (he’s learned his lesson!), commiseration (he thought he was quite something!) and irony (his sort always get carried away!). Well, let them smile. So much the worse for them. So much the worse for France! And so much the worse for us, those who believed in France, and who perceived it to be more beautiful than it really was, or wished to be. We will never be cured of our illusions. That France is the *only* France we can love: that is the France we have served, and that we will continue to serve, despite the other France, even in opposition to it. Enough of that! This tragedy concerns us alone. Let us proceed.

For a long time the French have been kept ignorant of the horrific means by which colonialism has been pursued, and its real ends, and they remain benumbed, confusing the two contradictory versions of their country. I won’t say anything about the hardheaded realists who have dropped any pretense that their project is humanitarian and who rely on force alone, or on financial enticements, to ensure the loyalty of their subjects. I will focus on other people, those who feel there is an emotional and rational case to be made, and still believe that friendly links can be preserved, or created, around shared interests. They may even emphasize that the “rebels”² have always appealed to metropolitan France—European France—against regimes that have been installed and maintained by force. That was true at one time, but now only to a degree, and it is worth working out how far it still holds. There is a risk of grave misunderstanding if metropolitan France is taken to be the ultimate court of

appeal, and if it is assumed that only metropolitan France can be turned to for help. And if that misunderstanding is allowed to persist unchallenged, it has the capacity to plunge France into irreversible decline.

* * *

Until the end of the Second World War, almost all anticolonialists built their arguments on French thought, which offered them *their only way of accessing the contemporary world*. Only a small number demanded independence. The majority hoped that the French people would awaken from their slumber, and called for French republicanism—*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*—in place of colonial strictures whose existence was unknown to, or denied by, metropolitan France, and that the European French claimed to condemn.

The sequence of troubling events and terrible repression in Madagascar and Algeria, just when victory had been won in the Second World War, ended many people’s hopes, shattering the illusions of those who still dreamed of reform. There was a major shift of consciousness, and two crucial issues became clear: first, emancipation movements across the world felt a sense of unity, of shared momentum as part of the same global historical process; second, the France of human rights and freedom had *chosen* to support oppressive colonial regimes wherever they were found. After the war in Indochina, the Algerian war demonstrated definitively that this was indeed the appalling choice that France had made.

The policy of so-called pacification was indistinguishable from the policies pursued by military men like Bugeaud and Saint-Arnaud during the conquest of Algeria; and the fact that the policy was thought up and applied by a socialist prime minister and a socialist governor general who had been granted absolute power, and decided to use all of France’s force and moral authority to back merciless repression, compromised France itself and implicated the people as a whole. How exactly the French government and the rest of us reached this point is of little importance. My aim is merely to cast light on what happens in the minds of the colonized as they revolt,

especially those formed by French culture. For them, any lingering uncertainty about the gap between liberal, humanist words and racist, colonialist deeds has vanished. The Algerian war has been the moment of truth. They understand better than anyone how crucial this ordeal is, what a test for France itself. Their destiny was one of emotional turmoil, as the two opposite versions of France battled it out, with the promise of universalism on one side and history on the other. They are pleased to think they really know France, because they have made it their own through their own ardent, tireless, and frequently painful efforts to do so. Addressing their peoples of origin, they bear witness for France; and they bear witness for their peoples of origin when they address France.

And that is why, when a warning is needed, they have a duty to speak out.

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The Algerian war marks the end of an era when France's word was its bond. Broken promises, and acts of piracy dressed up as something to be proud of, have frittered away the immense moral credit that France had built up. No long-term commitments and no promissory notes will now be accepted by the insurgents. What people describe as the intransigence of the FLN, for example, bespeaks an utter loss of confidence. There has been a complete moral and psychological break. The French have failed to recognize how serious it is; indeed, most of them do not even believe that it has occurred. And the French parliament is flailing about. There is a proliferation of speeches, novels, and "round" tables where the only voice that is never heard is that of the Algerians themselves.

Many people, who think it appropriate to live with and embrace ambiguity, think that if they bear witness from a position of lucid and courageous—or even heroic—opposition, then trust will inevitably return one day. I would be the first to welcome that. For I am among those bearing witness, part of that community, searching alongside others, and feeling torn, as others do. I will never agree to be separated from that group. I continue to think and to believe that when all is said and done, the

mythological France that I have served, to whose glory I have dedicated thirty years of my life, is the real France, to which any man hungry for justice and truth may turn in the final resort. But here I am not speaking on my own behalf. I am speaking in the name of those of my people, much younger than I am, whose hopes for a better future have not had anything French about them for a long time now, and perhaps never will again.

Those people reached a realization about themselves during the ordeals that have followed one after another since May 1945. The colonial regime has implanted hatred in their minds, and there is the dreadful prospect that it may turn into hostility toward France, or even a hatred of France. To them the French Left does not appear to represent the nation, but to be nothing more than an alibi or mask for the jingoistic majority of the Right, which has resolved to maintain colonial domination under the cover of liberal ideology. For now, at least, for the young people of Algeria who are in revolt, the France of liberty and the France of imperialism are indistinguishable.

If French public opinion went to the trouble of opening up a dialogue with France's opponents and the insurgents, and if the authorities took the "democratic" risk of giving them the right and the opportunity to express their views freely, it would be possible to arrive at a clear definition of certain terms and notions that remain ambiguous. Yet their voices only ever reach a tiny proportion of the French public, and are nearly always filtered through some spokesperson who offers a third-person account of their views, and who may not be best qualified to represent them.

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It is deemed unacceptable to compare the national movements in Africa to the French resistance during the Nazi occupation. A general principle explains why: the French accept comparisons between their country and other countries only if they show France in an advantageous light. Failing that, France is declared to be incomparable by its very nature; the usual rules do not apply. France is, by definition, the very model of humanity. That must not be

forgotten. When any other major power—Germany, Great Britain, or Russia—establishes itself beyond its own borders by force, it is an “occupier.” France, in identical circumstances, is apparently pursuing a sacred mission: emancipating, civilizing, and humanizing. It only *looks* as if it is occupying another country, enslaving and oppressing its people; it is a temporary arrangement, and its goals are of the highest order. Accordingly, it is a mistake to scrutinize or evaluate its historical record as such; every act must be understood as the means necessary to achieve its ends—namely, progress leading to true freedom.

In that way, as every official pronouncement makes abundantly clear, the very principle of the colonial project can be denied. To justify the entire system, it is enough to present the enslavement of conquered peoples as a step on the path to liberty.

That is the standard fare of political rhetoric (though other themes may be added); and any comparison of French torturers to Nazi torturers triggers an impassioned response. On that topic, simply stating the facts is seen as intolerably offensive.

There is another thought mechanism in play, however, whose logic must also be understood. If French colonialism stands apart from all other instances of colonialism, in that it is supposed to be the royal road to progress, freedom, and the realm of the universal, it follows that anything opposed to French colonialism, starting with the national movements, stands for social and economic regression, and risks propelling “minor” peoples into slavery.

According to that logic, it is impossible to accept that the national independence of colonized peoples is a historical necessity, the end point of a process of education whose culmination lies in the application of a universally recognized principle: peoples’ right to self-determination. Instead, distinctions must be made between an imaginary independence, existing only in name or in the mind, and real, tangible independence, which can be achieved and guaranteed only under the tutelary powers of the French.

The only enlightened and legitimate form of patriotism, the only *modern* form, according to the French, is French. In all other cases, you are dealing with archaic prejudices and blind nationalist fervor.

Speaking of Tunisian or Moroccan patriotism seemed like nonsense in the past, and still does, in the eyes of many French people. And speaking of Algerian patriotism is absurd and criminal, not to say an act of actual treason, since France has declared Algerians to be French, without ever asking the Algerians their opinion or granting them the rights enjoyed by the French.

So when the Tunisian and Moroccan governments, formed by patriots who wrenched independence from France for their country through political and armed struggle, prosecute former collaborators, without undue harshness, and cite as a precedent the purges that followed the liberation of France, it creates a scandal. Applying the shameful notion of *collaboration* to France’s loyal servants and faithful friends overseas is unthinkable.

That brings us to a very delicate issue. For a Frenchman, to serve France is his highest duty and greatest honor. Giving the natives the chance to serve was apparently a way of allowing them to share in that honor. Quite how they were persuaded to offer loyal service was not something that anyone worried about too much: it did not really matter if they needed to be coerced, if you had to appeal to their self-interest, or if you seduced, corrupted, or compromised them, directly or indirectly. The golden rule? Efficiency. With one proviso: the natives were always subordinate. Real power and responsibility eluded them. They served as instruments, or a kind of mask. Occasionally one of them was held up as an example to others; in very rare cases a really glittering example, however illusory.

The value of the native’s collaboration was judged in terms of loyalty, in other words complete servility and absolute submission to the civil and military authorities. The relationship was not that of a lord to his vassal, secured by oath; it took the form of a relationship between masters and servants, or winners and losers.

When anyone dared question whether the authorities’ actions on a given occasion were appropriate, legitimate, or lawful, it was assumed that it betrayed a subversive mentality, and it was described as an attack on France. Anyone—anyone from a native background, that is—who acted freely

appeared suspect, and was considered *anti-French*. Criticizing those in power was a privilege that could certainly not be extended to those who were not “really” French. Neither the authorities nor the dominant colonial community ever had any confidence in the peoples they had subjected by force. Any sign of freedom was taken to indicate latent revolt and a challenge to the very principle of a colonial order founded on conquest.

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It has to be understood that the indigenous population could view colonialism only as a system of oppression. For them, to work for the administration in Morocco or Tunisia before independence, or in Algeria today, especially in positions of authority, was and is tantamount to accepting the legitimacy of the colonial regime, endorsing it unequivocally even when it has evidently gone too far, and contributing actively to the oppression suffered by the people.

The colonial authorities were not too concerned about winning real approval from their local collaborators, or establishing honorable partnerships in support of their work. In deciding what sort of relationships they wanted they followed the lead of the Roman Empire. They looked for supernumeraries, people who could do some donkeywork. And it is all too true that the recruits were even more unbending than their masters in exploiting and humiliating their brothers, often avenging themselves for their own humiliation and for the undisguised contempt with which they were viewed by their masters.

Nonetheless, some of those who worked for the colonial authorities were honorable men, seduced by the myth of chivalry. They acted like feudal lords, and in their minds had escaped servility. They believed themselves to be free, and imagined that the true value of their commitment to a noble ideal, set up as a universal ideal, was duly recognized. In reality they were cultivated as tools of indirect domination and were held up as emblems of the system’s success. They were cited as illustrations of the genius of France, which had managed to create something out of contemptibly unpromising human material. But they were made to pay the

price for their loyalty, which came with conditions. As a matter of honor, they deemed certain base tasks to be beneath them. Try as people might to grant them approbation, the basic suspicion with which they were viewed would frequently become apparent. Unless their complicity with their masters was complete, none of them—irrespective of their merits, of services rendered, and of the recognition with which they had been rewarded—could ever break through the wall of distrust separating the colonizer from the colonized.

Even the slightest protest, a glimmer of pride in your eyes or a hint of self-respect in your bearing, was enough to mark you out as *anti-French*. Even if you did not embrace revolt, you could find yourself thrust in that direction. To qualify as a *friend of France* it was not enough to love France, or to accept, as one of its adopted sons, the same rights and responsibilities as those who were born French; what was needed was unconditional submission to the representatives of France, who were to be treated as the very incarnation of France, whoever they might be. Invoking the mindset and laws of metropolitan France to criticize inequality, injustice, destitution, and disdain was to commit sacrilege. Just look at those natives who owe us everything, daring to lecture us and thinking themselves more French than we are!

That is exactly what your present correspondent is doing, in full awareness that to do so is impudent. If you are a native you must never forget: you are nothing but mud kneaded with blood—inferior blood—and your colonial master has breathed life into you; the language you use to express yourself is not your own; and there is nothing you can do to close the infinite gap between the creator and his impersonator, or between man and ape. Even if, by some extraordinary stroke of luck, you managed to get people to forget all that, you would still have to weigh yourself down with an enormous burden of gratitude. Gratitude to whom, then? To those French masters, those prophets of freedom, experts in thought and in life itself, who have opened your eyes to mankind’s glory and given you a secret sense of direction, of where your destiny lies? Absolutely not! Those masters, about whom the

sergeant majors and the henchmen know precisely nothing, remain colonial property—*private* property. If you are a native, you are never more than a schoolchild: order must be maintained, and when you pay homage to those masters, it must be indirect; your tributes must follow the appropriate channels, with the colonizers as intermediaries. Your culture and your language are *borrowed*. They are not given to you to use freely, but lent to you to pay homage to your superiors. You will never be more than a pale imitation.

If you cannot draw on your own resources, and your role is forever that of a jay disguised as a peacock, perhaps, you may think, you should consider casting off your dazzling borrowed plumage and allowing your own dull feathers to show through. But that avenue is closed to you. It is not only as an individual that you amount to nothing; it is as the progeny of a people and a race that possesses nothing of its own that might be a source of pride and the basis for a sense of self.

Monsieur Barrès suggests in his article that the whole of Africa “depends” on France. Does he think that can go on forever and that Africans will always be willing to be insulted in this way? If so, he is making a dangerous mistake. Africans have not decided once and for all that their notion of mankind should follow the French example. What they are searching for, inwardly and in the outside world, is freedom, underpinned by a sense of their place in a spiritual tradition that they recognize and a society that accords them due recognition. And however humble their starting point, they want to make their way toward the sort of universal human condition that I was discussing earlier in this article.

The vagaries of history—a bloody history—have set them on a French path. Other paths have opened up, which for now they do not necessarily believe preferable. What they want to absorb from France and its arts, technical expertise, science, and ethics, and its admirable language, which they devour with an almost compulsive hunger, is definitely not France itself, as an individual nation; what they want is access to the open seas of human culture. It was never the intention, but French colonization allowed them to glimpse, however faintly, “splendid

cities” that appeared like a chink of brilliant light on a dark horizon; and this was a priceless good, a royal gift, the “dividend” that can be weighed against the limitless harm done by colonialism. Any claim that French culture can be used to justify colonization, however, is mendacious and despicable. It is widely recognized that our colonial masters disseminated French culture only cautiously and parsimoniously, erecting obstacles along the way. It is less widely recognized that those of us who have had the chance to immerse ourselves in the great works of French culture are not the pampered heirs to French culture but have *stolen fire*.

Cultural chauvinism and the bourgeois nationalist conception of knowledge are idiotic and contemptible. A single man creates a work of art but it is addressed to all those who find in it, and through it, the shared experiences of joy and sorrow, and a reflection of the destitution and the glory of mankind. As for science and technology, those are communal enterprises, their benefits owned by all. Only those entirely lacking in dignity and generosity can think they should be reduced to consumer goods or magical secrets that must be paid for with willing servitude, or in raw materials and gold. Such people can be found in France, as in other places. But if that is their attitude, they are unfaithful not only to their country’s traditions but to its very essence.

Nations can be afflicted by forms of vanity and self-regard that are absurd and obnoxious, but there are forms of pride that are fundamentally noble in nature. It is because they are bereft of pride and not wholly convinced of their nation’s true greatness—the qualities making it *dangerously* great—that so many Frenchmen, brooding over every humiliation, fall into rigid patterns of behavior that serve only their self-importance, inflexibly committed to a kind of mental, emotional, and practical miserliness that ends up costing them more than would true generosity. What the champions of hardheaded imperialism lack, above all, is faith in the genius of their country. Their acrimonious love is petty-minded and sterile. It finds expression, for the most part, in bean counting, and in impotent fits of rage that are half-juvenile, half-senile.

Some of us, who believe in the greatness and nobility of the French people more than they themselves do, cannot recognize France in that sort of language. I believe with all my heart that it is unfair to blame France for every mistake and every crime in its colonial history, and that those who committed such acts in the name of France have played on its ignorance, and have been unfaithful to France.

The people of France are starting to realize, however, as do we, that its leaders have lied to them, and have done so with a firmness of purpose that should have served other ends. We hope that the people will not hesitate much longer before holding those leaders to account, asking what they have done to France and what has become of the France whose word was its bond. The French have been lulled into a state of lethargy; our hope is that they will now bestir themselves, embrace their destiny and march into the future—not alone, or with liveried servants tagging along, but accompanied by a whole procession of free peoples proud to count France among their friends.

What must change for that dream to become a plan, and for the plan to take a concrete historical form? Everything, and almost nothing. France must come to its senses; it must fill its language with renewed meaning and do everything in its power to ensure that in reality France, now embodying its own myths, measures up to the France of legend.

And then those other peoples—including the Algerian people, whose heroism is unsurpassed, and who have suffered so greatly and spilled so much blood because of France and on behalf of France—will show the world what they are made

of, and what the sacred duty of hospitality means in reality: generous to the point of self-sacrifice, loyal, and devoted, for all time, to a friendship chosen freely.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

1. *Le Figaro* [12 Dec. 1957].
2. I use this word in a general sense, believing its meaning in context to be clear enough.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

The essay, originally titled “La France comme mythe et comme réalité: De quelques vérités amères,” was published in *Le monde* on 11 Jan. 1958, after having been refused by *L'express*. It was mentioned on the front page and occupied the whole of page 4, introduced by an unattributed editorial note, presented in italics here. This translation includes the two original endnotes, adding a date to the first. The essay is reproduced, with some minor differences, in Amrouche 54–64. That volume also reproduces a series of responses to the essay published in *Le monde* on 17 Jan. (351–59) and a follow-up letter from Amrouche published on 23 Jan. (358–59).

- a. The allusion is to Montaigne's “Du repentir”: “Chaque homme porte la forme entière, de l'humaine condition” (845).

TRANSLATOR'S WORKS CITED

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