

Final Solutions?

by Louis Allen

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The German occupation brought to French Jews a fresh realization of the profound anguish of the Jewish condition – and also to those Jews in North Africa who had been emancipated by the presence of France, and who had adopted French as their literary language. Albert Memmi is the most articulate of these writing today, and his new book, *La Libération du Juif* (Paris, Gallimard, 1966, 15 Fs, the second volume of his *Portrait du Juif*) proposes what is for him the only possible solution to that condition. M. Memmi himself is a very interesting phenomenon, a Tunisian Jew who has described the life of the North African ghetto in *Statue de Sel* and has since analysed the psychology of colonialism in *Portrait du Colonisateur*. The fact that he was a member of an oppressed minority within an oppressed majority under French colonial rule made his situation rather special. The French language liberated him from the ghetto, but separated him from the Arab majority who, at the same time, were trying to free themselves from the French. The young Memmi obviously sympathized with their aspirations, whilst realizing that once they were achieved his own people would be far worse off than they had been under the French. And this in fact is precisely what has happened: the life of the North African Jewish communities has been made intolerable by the new independent Arab governments, whether monarchical or democratic-socialist, and another exodus has begun from what were once flourishing communities. Tunis is a slight exception to this, and Memmi has been able, to some extent, to act as an interpreter between the French metropolis (and so the world) and the new Arab literature, in French and Arabic, which has sprung up in North Africa in the past two decades. His *Anthologie des littératures maghrébines*, published by the left-wing African publishing house of *Présence Africaine*, is an attempt to show that where politics and war have failed to preserve the bridge between Europe and North Africa, literature and culture in general may yet maintain links of some value, though they have no economic cards to play.

But Memmi does not see his own personal future in either France or Tunis, deeply and passionately indebted though he is to both; and his book is a long analysis, in three stages, of the reasons why the diasporal Jews, like himself, who are by definition in a minority everywhere, can only be relieved of the suffering that inevitably

goes with this condition if they leave the lands of exile behind and constitute themselves as a nation. It is the solution of Israel, of course, but accepted with regret and some qualification. The first part of his book discusses the various abdications of the full self to which the Jews in the diaspora have been constrained, usually in the interests of assimilation to the surrounding majority; or the disguises used to conceal their real condition from themselves: changes of name, Jewish jokes, mixed marriages, conversion – all deriving from a basic self-hatred, imposed from without, a refusal of the self (which can yet be accompanied by a tenacious, if secret, retention of it). Just as the situation of the colonialist is based on privilege, so the relation between Jews and non-Jews is based on the latter's notion of their own privileges – they are never the lowest in the social (or any other) scale, there are always the Jews on the rung beneath; and sometimes this relation is emphasised with oppression and killing.

The other side of the mirror is the acceptance of self, and that has meant acceptance in the conditions of the diaspora, with its fatal effects on language, literature and the arts. (Memmi sees Jews like Kafka living at one remove from the language they use, their speech as marginal to their own being). So acceptance is not always the solution it appears to be, however honest it may appear when set beside self-refusal. 'I myself have not found,' writes Memmi, 'the solution to the problem of being a Jew, in a consent to my condition . . . to surmount fresh difficulties, created this time by an affirmed Jewishness, I had to be dishonest with myself, I had to give up the finest conquests I had made as a free man. To be a Jew I had by and large to do damage to my dignity as man in general'. The 'encystment' which is the result of turning in upon one's religion and communal traditions is the equivalent of the snail drawing itself up into its shell – the slightest kick, of cruelty or indifference, will shatter it. And, in practice, asks M. Memmi, was it the religious Jews who inspired the revolt of the Warsaw Ghetto? No, it was the young men of Hashomer Hatzair, revolutionaries and atheists. A people cannot be saved by putting itself into a trance.

Jewish history is a history of tragedy, cataclysm and exile – even from those places where they believed themselves safest, because longer established, often longer in fact than the present inhabitants: from Tunis, where Memmi's own North African community is linked with settlements going back to the days of the Phoenicians, from Frankfurt, where they existed in Roman times, from Baghdad, where they have lived not for centuries but for millennia. With this fate is linked the idea of election and messianism, both of which, for M. Memmi, are 'refuge-values' which console and re-assure, though they never lift the burden.

Some of his remarks on literature and the arts may seem odd, particularly when we realize the immense contribution of Jews to them, which is a commonplace of history. Precisely, answers M.

Memmi, 'a contribution of Jews' but not 'of Jewry', the achievements belong to individuals, working in a mould borrowed from other communities and peoples; working brilliantly and profoundly, and yet without being able to use literature as a blossoming of their own affectivity, which aims to touch other affectivities by speaking of itself. But the voice of Jewish affectivity cannot be 'other-addressed', so when a period of relative emancipation occurs, literary expression avoids the specifically Jewish condition, since it will then have (momentarily) lost its tragedy and so its artistic interest. As Kafka declared, 'I am the guest of the German language'. Likewise the exuberant participation of Jewish painters – Soutine, Zadkine, Modigliani, Chagall – in the glory of the Ecole de Paris, is not a Jewish phenomenon *as such*. 'I am not a Jewish painter' protests Chagall, 'I'm a painter, that's all'.

If neither refusal nor acceptance of oneself works, then other solutions must be looked for. If the condition is *objective*, and not simply within the psychological capacity of each and every Jew to accept or reject, then the objective world of the condition must be altered. There are several classical ways of doing this. Left-wing socialism, one of the most tempting for Jewish intellectuals of the past half-century or more, has been one answer for M. Memmi. But then the continued existence of anti-semitism in the USSR has shown him that the success of the Revolution does not necessarily imply the removal of the scourge. And it indicates something else: 'if you are oppressed, you must never expect your liberation from others'. Sooner or later, left-wing Jews discover the equally disastrous alternatives: 'accept finally the complete disappearance of the Jews, or stop being a communist'.

The answer provided by the revolution is a dusty answer. So also is the hypothetical 'acceptance' by Christians. The pages in which M. Memmi deals with the role of the Catholic Church are, as might be expected, among the most bitter in the book. They are also, on the whole, difficult to dispute. M. Memmi's case against the Catholic Church is roughly the following. The Jew is, in the words of Manes Sperber, the Achilles heel of Christianity. Even though we may *historically* attenuate the responsibility of the Jewish people in the passion of Christ, and increase that of the Roman occupying forces, it still remains true that *theologically* it was not possible for it to happen any other way. The Jews are needed by Christian myth. If we speak of purging Christian teaching of what flows from this role, it would be the whole of Christian doctrine, the whole perspective of Christian life, that would have to be altered. The Vatican Council, in spite of the hopes it raised, can do nothing about this. The mere fact that this is a *volte-face* carried out on command (however hesitant) of a General Council, makes it all the more suspect. Could not men capable of such submission attack again tomorrow what they accept today, on the basis of another order? Even those who

pass, among Catholics, for the greatest friends of Israel – Jacques Madaule, Jacques Maritain — speak in terms which necessarily link the sufferings of the Jews with the existence of a Jewish people. No, adds M. Memmi, the muted violence of the Council, the discussions, the hesitations, the withdrawals, the mediocrity of the final resolution, all show the depth of the Christian refusal. So, if the Jewish condition depended on believers, whether Christian or Jewish, it would be without any remedy. The whole business of renewed contact as a result of the Council distracts from the essential: the *real conduct* of Christian peoples towards the Jews.

Anti-semitism, of course, is pre-Christian; and it often increases as Christianity recedes. The later form is not the same as Christian anti-semitism, certainly, but it is as real. The Church's slackening of the traditional hatred of the Jews is simply a means of holding on to the possibility of an alliance with theists in Europe – the Church's cause being lost in Africa and Asia – where it has, in Communism, a greater enemy than Judaism or Protestantism. On the other hand, the Church knows the majority of believers are anti-semitic, and has to compromise between two contending interests. So Christianity and Communism both hope for the disappearance of the Jews, who are to be absorbed either in the Church or by the Revolution.

The Jewish condition is then an impossible one, insoluble in its present structures. Oppressed *as a people*, the Jews must re-discover their autonomy and their free originality as a people. And the acceptance of Israel as the solution in these terms does not mean the further suffering of the Jews of the diaspora. On the contrary, as with other minorities which have a *nation* external to that of the oppressive majority, they will have a reference to a pride and security of their own. The state of Israel *is* the national liberation of the Jews. It is the only specific solution. The old forms of the question were: Diaspora or Israel? Assimilation or Israel? Socialism or Israel? These are no longer alternatives. The meaning of the presence of Jews *outside* the Jewish nation will be changed. History – on at least two occasions – has convinced M. Memmi that *the nation* was the only adequate response to the misfortune of an entire people, and this continues to be true even though, *on another level*, Memmi says the Jewish state in Palestine was perhaps a catastrophic mistake. Its existence, within and without, is precarious, but it must be defended: its destruction would be the greatest disaster since the fall of the Temple, greater even than the Nazi massacres – because this is the ultimate effort of a people to survive. Only Israel will give Jews their dignity as human beings; and this will be completed by the liberation of Jewish culture from religion.

The latter half of M. Memmi's case is familiar. What should interest Catholic readers is his bitter refusal to believe that the Catholic Church holds, in actuality or promise, any good for Jews at all. The close coincidence in France (and Poland, and Hungary,

and Lithuania, and Austria, and the Ukraine, and . . .) between persistent, virulent anti-semitism and a large Catholic population is, of course, enough to make him sceptical. And a recent survey in the French magazine *Adam* has shown that in a third of the French population this deeply rooted prejudice has survived the horrors of Nazi persecution and the change in the Church's official attitude. One per cent of those questioned even approved the Nazi exterminations; and the prejudice rose not merely, as one might expect, with the age group but increased in north-western France and amongst those who declared themselves to be practising Catholics.

Of the two great historical crimes Europe has committed, the persecution and massacre of the Jews is one, the decimation and degradation of the African negro is the other. That the slow ascension to a normal life for the negro on either side of the Atlantic is at present going through a stage possibly even more traumatic than the original slave-trading has been evident for some time. It, too, will make the expression of selfhood in literature, seen in terms other than that of struggle, supremely difficult. This is one of the reasons why some Africans refuse to accept the work of the Guinean novelist Camara Laye as an expression of their condition. Laye's work has already been discussed in *New Blackfriars* by Roland Hindmarsh (No. 559, pp. 117-118) and his latest book, *Dramouss*, has recently been published by Plon (Paris, 1966, 12 Frs). It deals with a theme that may dominate the ex-colonial literatures for some time: the contrast between the emancipated African's and European culture, and the impact on him of his return home after an immersion in that culture. Laye's hero, Fatoman, tries to study in Paris but has to give up for lack of funds. He is forced to work as a labourer in the Halles and the Simca factory to make a living. He returns home to Guinea to find his country about to fall into the grip of a revolutionary tyranny which promises to be little better than that of colonialism, save that it is exercised by Africans themselves. And the quality of life has deteriorated. As with the hero of *L'Enfant noir*, Fatoman's father is a craftsman, a wood carver, and he and the leather-workers have found out that their own people and visitors to Guinea have begun to prefer the cut-price junk of Lebanese traders (the 'Syrians' of Graham Green's *The Heart of the Matter*) instead of the true native art.

There are places where this *does* linger, for instance in the legends told by the *cara*, or village story-teller, one of which is inserted into the book like a narrative within a narrative. This gift is of course supremely Camara Laye's own, as he shows deftly in the dream narrative of the 'Dramouss' chapter from which the book takes its name, and which is an evocation, in allegorical terms, of the fate of his country. Fatoman, like his author, has in fact two countries, Africa and beauty. It is the love of beauty which enables him to see what is of value in the mixture of animism and Islam which rules

his father's life. Camara Laye was very strongly criticised in the magazine *Présence Africaine* when *L'Enfant noir* appeared, for seeming to indulge the colonial power (France in his case) and its vision of an essentially child-like people who would continue to need the tutelage of the coloniser for a long time to come. For *Présence Africaine*, Laye was thought to be damaging to the sophistication of the new African, whatever his gifts; and so a hindrance, socially, in development and emancipation.

It is not difficult to foresee similar criticisms being made of *Dramouss*. 'It's a strange thing,' Fatoman reflects, on his return from a political meeting, 'I'd never felt, before this evening, how divided a man I was. I knew that my being was the sum of two interior 'selves': the first, closer to my sense of life, fashioned by my traditional existence – animism lightly flavoured with Islam – enriched by French civilization, fought against the second, a person who, through love for his native earth, was going to betray his thought, by coming back to live under this régime. A régime which would also, no doubt, betray socialism, capitalism and African tradition at one and the same time?' Laye is singularly dry-eyed about the revolution in West Africa, and his hero Fatoman specifically refuses to join in any facile diatribe against the evils of the colonial presence without underlining the benefits it brought; just as he will not be taken in by the political dream of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Africain*, and significantly brings his book to a close in terms of the vision of Fatoman's father, not his own.