ISMAEL AIT DJAFAER AND MATOUB LOUNES: ICONOCLASTS

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BOTH∗

I would like to open my talk by recalling a statement by Kateb Yacine:

Les martyrs ne sont pas seulement ceux qui sont morts pendant la guerre sous les coups de l’ennemi. Il y a aussi les martyrs de l’Art, les artistes créateurs, toujours martyrisés, d’un pays qui se cherche depuis des millénaires, perdu dans son histoire. (1)

Two of such martyrs are undoubtedly Ismael Ait Djafer and Matoub Lounés. Both were at the receiving end of oppression, be it colonial or post-colonial. Both attempted, each in his own way, to overturn the monolithic, unitary discourse of officialdom through a resolutely iconoclastic stance. But while Matoub has become a popular cult figure, Ait Djafer for his part has sunk into oblivion. Writing in French and born and bred in Algiers, Ait Djafer is an exemplar of the French-educated Algerian intelligentsia that denounced the colonial dispensation in the name of the ideals of the French Revolution. Singing in Tamazight, born and bred in the rugged mountains of Kabylia, Matoub is the spearhead of the protest movement which has constantly fought the Arab-Islamic orthodoxy over the past two decades. The shockwaves which his Word has provoked questions the commonly held assumptions about the subservience of the speakerly over the writerly, of orature to literature, of popular culture to elite culture, particularly in view of the significant role which the new information and communication technologies can play in this arena.

Poet and cartoonist Ismael Ait Djafer certainly deserves to be ranked with poets usually associated with the first stirrings of the Algerian Revolution, e.g. Kateb Yacine, Malek Haddad, Jean Sénac, Mohammed Dib… . His Complainte des mendians arabes de la

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Casbah et de la petite Yasmina tuée par son père was first published in 1951, out of the proceeds of what he called “une mendicité publique”. A second publication was to be followed soon, this time in a special issue of the prestigious Les Temps Modernes, under the patronage of Jean-Paul Sartre. Ait Djafer’s verse lampooning of colonial rule - illustrated by drawings by his own hand - and his “stylizing”, to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s phraseology, of French school ditties illustrate and reflect the protest mood that prevailed in colonised Algeria before the outbreak of the Liberation War, i.e. in 1954. That protest mood was of two kinds: the popular one, represented by meddhahine’s ballads, political prisoners’ laments, boy scouts’ marching songs or football supporters’ catch-cries and refrains. Mostly anonymous, voiced by restless youth - in Arabic or in Tamazight - these songs contributed to stirring and keeping alive nationalist resentment. This period also witnessed the dissemination of a fairly recent musical genre the Cha’bi (or popular music) which gradually superseded the Andalussi (classical music). This move was initiated by Hadj M’hamed El Anka and Fadila Dziria of Algiers and has, since then, appealed to a widely popular audience, notably in Algiers and in Kabylia. One of the fervent admirers of this music was Matoub Lounès. The other register which expressed that protest mood was rather elitist. It was represented by newspapers and journals launched by political parties and associations such as El Bassair (in Arabic) of Alger Republicain (in French). But given the widespread illiteracy that obtained in the early fifties (70%), it had little effect on the masses and was in fact confined to the educated elite. In spite of his attempt to establish some kind of connection with popular culture, notably through a weekly broadsheet called Ech Chabab while still a teenager, Ait Djafer could not free himself from the smothering embrace of “La France Mère des Lettres, des Arts, et des Armes”. For all his Calibanesque stridency, he remained an Ariel-like figure as we shall see presently through a broad analysis of his Complainte.

But before we come to that, let me just say a few words about his life. This may help us account for his literacy and artistic kinship. He was born to citified Kabyle parents in the Casbah of Algiers in 1929 - the same year as Kateb Yacine with whom he was to strike a lifelong friendship; and also with painter M’hamed Issiakhem. With their intense artistic sensibility, their innate rebelliousness, the three boon companions were to be known as “Oeil-de-Lynx”, “Le Manchot” and “Kablouti”, a colourful triad that was to haunt many a “bistrot” in Algiers’s La Pêcherie and Paris’s Le Quartier Latin. As a matter of fact, Ait Djafer’s first incursion to the Latin Quarter was at the age of seventeen when he managed to meet Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, and rubbed shoulders with poets and singers Marcel
Mouloudji and Georges Brassens. After this Existentialist initiation, he went back to Algiers to complete his Secondary Education at Lycée Bugeaut (now renamed Emir Abdelkader). He worked his way through the University of Algiers – as cartoonist and sports writer for the daily Alger-Soir – while reading for a law degree. Following the 1956 students’ strike – initiated by F.L.N and U.G.M.A – he dropped out and took to … the maquis…of Saint-Germain des Prés; but this time for a much longer period. When Independence came, in 1962, he returned to Algiers where he was appointed …airport manager! In 1964 he was arrested on a trumped-up charge of F.F.S membership and jailed for eight months in the sinister Barberousse prison of Algiers (now renamed Serkadji) where he was subjected to dehumanising torture; the trauma of which he was to bear throughout the rest of his life. On his release, he was forced to sign a statement whereby he accepted to leave Algeria for good. Back to Paris again, where he spent his exile’s life as an insurance broker and freelance journalist until his death in 1996.

His literary production includes:
- **Complainte des mendiants arabes de la Casbah et de la petite Yasmina tuée par son père** (1951);
- **Cri** (1990), a heart-rending account of the suffering he endured in prison and a vehement indictment of torture;
- **Poèmes écrits en prison non méritée** (1991), of the same vein;
- **La Casbah assasinée** (1992);
- **Poèmes pour une salope** (as yet unpublished), written in London in 1995; this was, surprisingly enough, a collection of courtly love poems…and Ait Djafer’s swan song.

The poet was twenty when he wrote his *Complainte*. This thirty thousand word-long poem was triggered off, by the trial, in Algiers, of a beggar, who, in a fit of madness, killed his daughter by pushing her under the wheels of a passing lorry:

… Avec ce geste paternel
Et pas du tout méchant
Du paysan laborieux,
Consciencieux, qui sème la petite graine de
Neuf ans.

Ait Djafer was revolted by the press reports’- and the jurymen’s - crass ignorance of the circumstances that drove a father to put an end to his daughter’s life.

The very site of the poet’s utterance – AU BAR DU MATIN, RUE DUFOUR, PARIS 6me- shows quite clearly that the exposition of the colonial system is spelt out from the very heart
of French culture. This poet is no Arab meddah or Kabyle Amedyaz; he seems to have more affinities with Arthur Rimbaud. Addressing Charlemagne, the mythical father of the French school system - “VIENS CHARELEMAGNE, JE VAIS TE DIRE UN POEME” - he takes him, and us, aboard his own ‘bateau ivre’ across the Mediterranean, and on the Casbah where it all started:

A travers les cavernes, les asiles, les rues pourries, les
Misères, les bidonvilles accrochés entre deux cimetières
Les rues de la Lyre, les Pêcheries
Les crève-la-faim, les crève-le-froid, les mères de famille
Nombreuse… (6)

There follows, then, a two-voiced discourse: that of the poet, jeering and drunken, describing in harrowing detail, the plight of the Casbah’s inmates; and that, sedate and well-bred, of “the children of Charlemagne” who turn a blind eye to the prevailing system of social injustice and keep singing callously, such school songs as:

AU CLAIR DE LA LUNE
IL ETAIT UN PETIT NAVIRE
FRERE JACQUES, FRERE JACQUES
IL COURT, IL COURT, LE FURET
SUR LE PONT D’AVIGNON
SAVEZ-VOUS PLANTER LES CHOUX.

Played against the background of this “peuple de mendiants” and the circumstances of little Yasmina’s death - Rue Franklin Roosevelt, in front of the Governor-General’s Palais d’Été, this “music from the spheres” spells out the imposture of Prospero’s humanitarian pretence and civilising posturings. It is in fact the hypocrisy of French literature which is pilloried:

Allez vous faire pendre
A la poutre
De la Vanitas-Vanitatis
Avec votre littérature de bonshommes
Rassasiés
Avec votre éloquence au cou
Tordu… (7)

Thus are scathingly parodied Pascal (“Il faut être un Roseau pensant”), Corneille (A moi, Comte, deux mots), Victor Hugo (Lorsque l’enfant paraît), Molière and many other canonical figures.
Ait Djafer keeps the “unkindest cut of all” for Albert Camus, the icon of French literature in the late forties; and also his fellow Algérois.

To Camus’s de-historizing of colonial Algeria and his escape into an ethereal Absurd (in *L’Étranger* in particular), Ait Djafer opposes the historicity of the infanticide. His poem aims at:

Forcer l’horreur
Forcer le crime
Forcer l’Absurde
Contraindre l’Absurde
Soumettre l’Absurde jusqu’à l’urine de la peur…

In the end, the Absurd is laid at the door of the judge, jurymen and lawyers who washed their hands off the colonial institution’s responsibility by simply declaring the murder-father insane:

…au matin du
30 Octobre 1951
Où des juges en robe
Se sont frotté les mains
Où des jurés se sont tapés
Sur les cuisses
Où des avocats
Bedonnants
En se trémoussant
Ont crié aux circonstances atténuantes…

This carnivalizing of the judiciary, coupled with the debunking of the educational system contribute to showing in their true light, the two pillars of the colonial hegemony.

But once the verbal pyrotechnics are extinct, all there remains is a sad admission of powerlessness:

Dors, fragile Yasmina ...
Dors,
On ne peut rien pour toi, rien
D’autre
Qu’écrire un poème triste et long…
This rhetoric of victimization is also to be found in Ait Djafer’s fellow iconoclast, Matoub Lounés. But for the latter, the denunciation of the powers that be is but the starting block of a dynamique of struggle. It is soon superseded by a militant call for organized action, a collective cultural project aiming at dismantling the self-legitimating doxa of the post-independence era. The recent admission, by the Algerian Government (April 2002), of the status of national language for Tamazight, is no doubt, the obvious outcome of Matoub’s lifelong struggle for cultural recognition and political democracy.

Using a telling portmanteau word to portray Matoub’s, one of his biographers, Alioui Liassine, calls him an anartist. and when one hears “The Rebel”, as he likes to dub himself, quoting Bakunin while addressing the Head of State, right in the middle of a concert, one can only acknowledge his anarchist leanings. But as with Serge Gainsbourg, his provocative posturings are but the epiphenomena of a deep-running artistry.

Poet, composer, musician, singer, Matoub Lounés is “a man for all seasons”. He masterfully makes full use of powerfully dynamic combination of song, dance and music which characterizes Berber poetry. His texts appropriately blend the various modes of traditional orature: tamacahut (the tale), taqsit (the legend), acwiq (the dirge), amtul (the prverb), and tayri (the romance). He does this however in a language that excludes all rigid formulae, all clichés, all forms of archaisms; which enables him to internalize and magnify the day’s koine. His search for modernity has also led him to appropriate and improve upon the melody, the rhythm and sounds of cha’bi music; thus ensuring the receptivity of his message amongst the Berber youth. His world vision, for its part, stems directly from that of the nineteenth century bard, Si Moh Ou M’hand. It is put in a nutshell in this famous verse (now become proverbial):

\[ A\text{ n-errez w alla n-eknu } \]

(We shall rather break than bend)

Not for him La Fontaine’s read that plie mais ne rompt pas! It is indeed this uncompromising stance which resulted in his being ostracised - worse, excommunicated by the zealots of linguistic Jacobinism and religious fundamentalism.

Matoub Lounés was born in 1956, in Taourirt-Moussa, a village facing Mount Djurdjura, within a ten kilometre-radius from Ath Yenni, Mouloud Mammeri’s birthplace and Agouni-Gueghrane, Slimane Azem’s birthplace, another poète maudit who like Ait Djafer , died in exile (in 1987) and who, like Matoub, contributed to making “plus purs les mots de la tribu” (Malarmé).
Matoub was, like François Villon, “pauvre et de basse extrance”. At the age of twenty-three he crossed the seas, over to France, where his career, as singer, started in the North African cafés of Paris’s 18me arrondissement. He was lucky enough to meet there Idir (Hamid Cheriet), another poet and singer who encouraged him. Thus began his fabulous rise to celebrity …and the threat to his life.

In 1985 he escaped an assassination attempt at Saint-Lazare train station, in Paris. In October 1988, he was riddled with bullets by gendarmes near Larbaa Nath Irathen. In September 1994 he was kidnapped and released within two weeks. On June 25\textsuperscript{th} 1998 he was killed in an ambush between Tizi-Ouzou and Taourirt Moussa. His murder was one of a long series of assassinations that targeted countless Algerian scientists, artists and intellectuals such as sociologist Djilali Liabés, psychiatrist Mahfoud Boucebci, dramatist Abdelkader Alloula, Rai poet and singer Cheb Hasni, poets Youcef Sebti, Laadi Flici and Tahar Djaout. In “Kenza”, written in memory of Tahar Djaout and other intellectuals, he sings thus:

“Those addicted to quenching stars
Shall never veil the Milky Way”

in defiance of they who impose their Death-infested Decalogue (La Yadjuz, “Thou Shalt Not”) to the forces of Life.

The young demonstrators who turned Kabylia into dissident land within hours of Matoub’s death clearly sensed that they had lost not only their idol (as poet and singer), but also their-in wretchedness, their standard bearer.

These Algerian refusenicks call themselves hitistes (from the Arabic hit, meaning wall), i.e., those who, hopeless and jobless, stay with their backs the walls of every Place des Chômeurs, while, drugged with the fumes of Zetla and Zombretto, they dream of harraga, embarking on some Flying Dutchman bound for Australia Felix…\textsuperscript{(12)} SYDNEY, MONTREAL, PARIS, AMESTERDAM…and SHEPERDSBUSH(!) are some of the never-never lands which are inscribed in bold or furtive graffitis on the grimy walls of cités. After every football match, they are to be seen pouring out of stadiums, chanting to the tune of some emblematic of Officialdom, words unambiguously expressive of their desire to flee the land:

A visa!
Just a visa,
Give us a visa,
All we want is…
A visa! (13)

This re-inscription, re-appropriation of the discourse of Hegemony is the hallmark of Matoub’s verse. Against what Mostefa Lacheraf calls “l’épopée patriotarde”, the jingoist epic of the Liberation War, Matoub sets up the frail figure of the young maquisard’s laughtered on the altar of Algeria’s - confiscated - independence. The school system, characterized by indoctrination and regression is to be seen at worst, as a terrorist factory, at best as a reservoir of mercenary technocrats. One of such “organic intellectuals”, is, for Matoub, the former Prime–Minister. Matoub turns him into the laughing-stock of his fellow Kabyles. Pointing to Ouyahia’s “borrowed robe”, he derisively advises him to beg the silversmiths of Ath Yenni to “forge” him some trinket that would definitely brand him a courtesan. The feminization of the yes-men is the worst insult that can be hurled against a man in a country still profoundly male-dominated.

What is consistently undermined is the monologic, monololithic discourse of Arab-islamism. Like Slimane Azem the fabulist-poet, Matoub resorts to animal imagery to expose latter-day Inquisitors: owls, buzzards, jackals are as many recognizable politico-religious figures that scream and howl in his allegorical pieces. To this malevolent bestiary he opposes an imagery drawn from the land: wind-swayed cornfields, freshwater springs, olive and ash trees; all made to bring solace and serenity. Mountain ranges, and notably Mount Djurdjura, are evoked and invoked, as symbol of perenniality and resistance.

Following the tradition of azenzu l henni, an occasion – on wedding festivities - for itinerant poets to display their verbal virtuosity and their wit, by “corrupting” their opponents’ verse, he turns the “pillars of society” into pitiful clowns and disarticulated scarecrows. The process of carnivalization climaxes with his parodying of the national anthem, Qassaman. While keeping the same melodic line, Matoub re-inscribes every stanza, recalling the reality of the situation, as the verse gathers speed, and abruptly ends it (instead of the Arabic word Achhadou, “Bear Witness”) with the Berber word Agheru in its various denotations: deception, disillusion, imposture, betrayal, perfidy. The revised – or rather the, re-visionary - anthem calls for a new liberation of Algeria, an Algeria at long last reconciled with its history, with its diversity - of which Tamazight, as language and culture, is the cornerstone. The use of Tamazight for that purpose is not so much an ontological recession into Berberness as a forward looking, progressive and modernist projet de société.
This cultural thrust is exemplified in Matoub’s poetical and musical chronicling of every battle fought for the recovery of full citizenship. He has thus devoted dozens of songs to the Berber Spring of 1980, the October 1988 Rising, the introduction of Tamazight in the Algerian educational system (after a one-year long school boycott). He records and celebrates every popular move that challenges political ascendancy and persistent hegemony.

Each celebration is a life-enhancing occasion. His concerts were held in open–air “liberated territories”: in university campuses, in factory yards, in public squares, in stadiums. The symbiosis he achieves with his audience results, no doubt, from his resorting to song and music. As Tassadit Yacine writes:

Il faut rappeler […] que la chanson est la mode d’expression des minorités dominées culturellement. Mode d’expression mais aussi, et peut-être plus fréquemment encore, instrument de revendication identitaire. La chanson touche directement son publique […]. Elle lui parle sa langue, lui redit sa vraie vie, ses préoccupations, ses douleurs et ses joies et pas seulement le plaisir aliéné, frustré, frustrant qu’imposent les langues dominantes et légitimes. (14)

In this struggle for legitimacy, Matoub and his peers - or rather cronies, cartoonist Dilem and impersonator Fellag, have found an excellent ally: the new information and communication technologies. In spite of banning orders, public harassment and religious anathema, their songs, cartoons and pantalonnades have always found their way to their public thanks to satellite TV, the Internet, the Fax machine and video-cassettes. Aren’t we witnessing, in this connection, the revenge of popular culture over elite culture? As Mouloud Mammeri reminds us:

La culture populaire n’est pas une pré-culture, ou bien une forme résiduelle et déficiente […]. Il existe, d’autres réalisations, plus positives, où la culture populaire ne mène pas seulement une existence–reflet […] mais présente aussi la même vocation intégrative et globalisante qu’une culture savante. (15)

The emergence of modern Berber song-poetry, as represented by Matoub, but also by Idir, Ait Menguellet, Ferhat and countless others owes much to the coming together of two forms of culture. Wasn’t the Berber Spring triggered off by the banning of a lecture by Mammeri on the ancient Berber Poetry?

It is that cultural symbiosis which has brought back the new flowering of Asefru. This Berber word means poem, versifying; but it also means disentangling, unbinding freeing from
bondage; the bondage of *monologuisme de l’autre*, to borrow a phrase from another native of Algeria, Jacques Derrida.

With candour and bluntness, both Ait Djafer and Matoub “de-constructed” this bondage; the former by *writing back* to “nos ancêtres les Gaulois”, and the latter by *singing back* to “nos ancêtres les Arabes”.

Whatever their respective achievements, they have both appropriated - in the words of Soyinka, “the voice of the people and the full burden of their memory.”(16)

**NOTES**
1-Kateb Yacine, Preface to Ismael Ait Djafer’s *Complaine des mendiant arabs de la Casbah et de la petite Yasmina tuée par son père*, Alger: Bouchène, 1987, p.8
2-M’hamed Ait Djafer, *Mon, frère, ce génial poète*, in *Escales*, No. 1, Jan 1998, pff.15
3-Ibid, p.21
4-Ibid, p.16
5-Ismael Ait Djafer, *Complaine..., op cit*, p.25
6-Ibid, pp.29-30
7-Ibid, pp.36-37
8-Ibid, p.51
9-Ibid, pp.47-48
10-Ibid, p.53
12-Cf. Mohammed Fellag’s one-man show, *Babor Australia*, “A boat to Australia”.
13-The reception given by the youth of Bab-El-Oued - asking for visas - President Chirac during his recent State visit to Algeria (March 2003) confirms the trend.