

Covenant

“YOUNOUS” AN EXTRACT FROM THE HISTORICAL NOVEL THE DESERT: OR, THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF JUBAIR OUALI EL-MAMMI

Albert Memmi*

Abstract:

Memmi’s novel is the fictional autobiography of the medieval prince of a small Jewish kingdom in southern Morocco, destroyed by Tamerlane’s armies in the late fourteenth century. The novel tells us that in the Gurara, in the far north of the Touat region between Tamentit and Sba—Gerara, there is said to have existed a small independent kingdom, the Kingdom of Within. Memmi’s fictional alter ego never regains his kingdom, but does acquire much valuable wisdom over the course of his adventures. The author’s preface and first chapter are translated here.

“The first certain indication of our presence here...is found in the Arabian historian El—Milli. In his Arabian—Berber Chronicles, he

lists one El-Mammi among the companions of the famous Judeo—Berber Queen Cahena.”

Albert Memmi, *The Scorpion* [tr. Eleanor Levieux (New York: Grossman, 1971), p. 18].



From the collection of Albert Memmi

What Historians Have to Say

I promised--some years ago now--to bring out *The Chronicle of the Kingdom of Within* fairly quickly. Life has not let me.

So as not to keep waiting any more my few readers, those who still have faith in me, I have decided to bring out this portion devoted to the Life and Adventures of Jubair Quali El-Mammi separately. My readers may recall that this is my oldest known ancestor, with the exception, of course, of the Numidian prince who appears on horseback on Mr. Rousset's Punic medal, the one I reproduced in *The Scorpion*.

You can see that *The Desert* is in the same vein as my previous novels. The subject is still the history of our family, or tribe, or whatever you like to call it. As always, I have tried to be as truthful as possible, and respectful of tradition.

Anyway, here is what historians have to say:

In the Gurara, in the extreme north of the Touat region between Tamentit and Sba-Gerara, there existed a small independent kingdom, the Kingdom of Within, which survived until the fifteenth century. We know about its language, customs and institutions; we even have details about the disaster that brought about its end.

The credit for passing down this knowledge is mainly due to my ancestor, Jubair Ouali El-Mammi, who did his best to write the chronicle of his native land, under circumstances that he himself describes.

It was in 1392, after a decisive assault by Tamerlane, followed by an almost total massacre of the population, that the Kingdom of Within ceased to exist. Eight years later, in 1400 to be exact, in the city of Damascus which had been sacked in turn by the same conqueror, El-Mammi was paying obeisance to the victor.

My ancestor was by then a handsome old man almost in his sixties, they say; he was wearing "a turban of raw silk and a burnoose as finely-woven as his wit, in its color resembling the first shades of night." This garment attracted the attention of the great Conqueror, who said, "That man there is not one of ours." El-Mammi thereupon introduced himself.

Tamerlane, his interest aroused by his captive, invited him to his table and asked him to explain why the collapse of the Kingdom of Within had been so rapid. Since Tamerlane had just now conquered the illustrious city of Balkh, and was considering making it his capital, he asked for Jubair's advice: what should he do to prevent this city, of which he had such high hopes, from succumbing to the same ill fate?

El-Mammi was evasive at first: "Sire, one does not counsel a king." Then, as his questioner insisted, he asked permission to retell his own life and adventures across the world. Perhaps the Conqueror would find his answer in El-Mammi's own story.

Here is what my ancestor, Jubair Ouali El-Mammi, told Timur Lang, called the Lame Conqueror.

Younous

Though I was born in the capital, I have scarcely lived there. Because of the misfortune that has fallen on our family, I have spent most of my life in the provinces and exposed to the vagaries of foreign courts. Even when my cousin the king let me come back, it was only to witness the death agonies of my unhappy land, as if the fates had decided, once and for all, I should remain the eternal outsider.

This is not to deny the fact that I have found in exile both honor and profit. The day following my return I paid the king a visit.

Since there was no seat for me close enough to him, I squatted down on my heels. The monarch gave me a stern, amazed stare, then suddenly burst out laughing. This laugh of his was familiar to me; it welled up from our shared childhood, before the laugh had become set in that royal frown. Touched, he fired at me:

“You Bedouin, you!”

I also sensed a certain disdain in his tone. If only he knew how much I felt I owed to my spell of exile, despite all the misery and loneliness! The wandering life, from Tunis to Tlemcen, from Fez to Castile, from Cairo to Damascus, by not letting me make attachments to anything or anyone, has kept me for myself, which is really the only true freedom.

I will pass over in silence that first part of my life, spent in the old palace, which was at the bottom of the Royal Park and backed against the wall of the old cemetery. Nor will I describe the circumstances of my father’s death and the usurpation of the throne. Nothing can be known for sure about these events. Am I really my father’s son, as my mother has always affirmed? Or perhaps I am a belated arid illegitimate fruit, with no right to the throne at all, as my uncle and his son, each in turn the recognized sovereign of the kingdom, have held? My mother and uncle have both now been dead for some while. No one can ever be sure of the circumstances of his birth; a man’s childhood is hardly his own; who can ever claim that he has shaped his own destiny?

My own destiny was launched in an extraordinary manner. That delicate colorless down, the harbinger of manhood, had hardly begun to sprout on my chin and cheeks, when the usurper dispatched me to the middle of the desert. At first I thought I was going to die. An enclosure of prickly pears through which perplexed lizards and cruel snakes slid silently; a single, doorless, low-ceilinged room with lime-washed walls; a gummy-eyed old

mule resigned to the stings of the mosquitoes swarming over it; a few stupid chickens quarreling over occasional bits of grain in the mule’s dung; an unruly goat scattering the yard with shiny black droppings.. .and finally Younous, the only slave permitted me by my royal kin. I did not know whether the servant was completely lethargic by nature or whether he had received instructions to be so. Around the enclosure, as far as the unbroken horizon, there was nothing, nothing but sand and the terrible desert light, that light: you couldn’t tell whether it came down from the sky or radiated up out of the ground. The desert was my only bridge, albeit an impassable one, to the rest of the universe. How could I ever cross that infinity of dust and stones? Where could I turn, without exposing myself to the sun, and condemning myself to death? It was then that I learned, Sire, what it means to love the land of one’s childhood! The memory of each face, each flower, affected me so much that tears came to my eyes at the idea that I might never see them again!

It was in the desert, though, that I learned this amazing truth, the foremost of all truths: it is absolutely necessary to make peace with yourself. It’s because I discovered this truth there, that I have loved the desert with a passion; it’s in order to remind myself of this truth that I have often returned to the desert. The thought of the desert has become a talisman I have been able to invoke at will: “Remember, when you yourself had nothing and no one to depend on.” Then, it seems to me, nothing can touch me, at least in the kernel of my being.

One morning, by I know not what enchantment, on waking I saw the sunshine glimmering on the ceiling of my hut as if it were reflected from the sea. I hurried outside on trembling legs: there was nothing but the usual sand and light. I discovered what was responsible for my agitation: a pan in which Younous had put a few dried peppers to soak in a little water. It made me laugh; to think that my happiness and all my surging

memories could be boiled down to a handful of red peppers!

Much later, when I had more confidence, I risked walking a few hundred paces without constantly looking for bearings and glancing back at my footprints. One day when I had been distracted for a brief moment I suddenly felt I had lost the invisible thread that, by means of a few pebbles differing almost imperceptibly from the others, a few tufts of thorn, linked me to the enclosure. I had got lost. I was seized by a violent desire to retrace my steps immediately; but--amid that uniformity of stone--which way was forward and which way backward? Where was north and where was south? I began running and shouting like a lost child, knowing even while I did so it was futile...when, oh bliss, that big puppet's head popped up: Younous himself! I don't know whether he just happened there or whether he had followed me since the beginning of my walk; he did not reveal anything. My fear dissolved instantly, to be replaced by embarrassment. I pretended not to have noticed Younous and continued shouting as if it were a game, as if I were trying to raise an echo or testing the effects of my voice in that solitude.

That moment of searing contempt for myself, experienced in front of a slave as well, did more for me than many months of effort. Why had I felt such panic? What imaginary peril had threatened me? Because I had strayed by a few yards! Even if I had been a whole league away, it would have been undignified to abandon myself thus to my body's panic. The truth was I had been afraid of being alone.

I had learned my lesson; although I still gave in to weakness occasionally, it was because I was putting myself through tests that were still too hard for me. Until then, when a caravan appeared in the distance, I would jump on the mule, urging the poor beast into a trot that had long been beyond its strength, and give the caravaners such a festive welcome that those poor fellows, who had probably

been told what kind of a prisoner I was, and that they should not come too near the enclosure, could not hide their emotion. Soon I recovered entirely the slowness and dignity proper in greeting the people of the desert. On more than one occasion, I even refrained from putting myself out for them.

“Do you prefer,” I said to myself, “the company of the most ignorant and malodorous camel driver, to your own company?”

I not only undertook longer and longer walks, but even sometimes played at getting lost. I still sometimes panicked, and I was demanding too much of my strength; but one's strength should, from time to time, be pushed to its limits; it is only then that one tests oneself and one has possession of oneself. Stretching further and further the links that held me fixed to the minute enclosure in which my royal tormentor had wished to confine my existence, I was patiently conquering the desert, and above all I was taming myself. Thenceforth free of any impatience, no longer attempting to flee, I no longer felt enchained. Ultimately, when I realized that, rather than the enclosure, it was space itself in which I had felt imprisoned, then space became my own realm. The majority of men, though free according to the law, likewise during their whole lives hardly leave little shops or stores hardly wider than tombs: it is because they would feel ill if they had to be alone.

It was as if I were waking from a mirage that had troubled my eyes and sapped my spirit. I explained to Younous that I no longer wanted to be entirely dependent on him, and I put myself to work: milking the goat, exercising the mule, and caring for the chickens. The days slipped past, framed as always by the morning and evening prayers, but this frame now had something to fill it.

I also discovered how rich, varied and populous the desert is, and how no unjust threat exists, for no animal in it, except sometimes man, attacks without reason. Even

the snake does not attack unless its body is stepped on, and the scorpion unless it believes itself in danger. One night I awoke with the unpleasant sensation that there was a creature crawling on my bare arm; in the moonlight, I saw a tawny scorpion. If I had moved, if I had panicked, I would have been sting to death. The small creature hesitated, went forward an inch, and then ran off over the bed and disappeared. The scorpion is like the hyena--it only attacks the weak. The cry of the jackal grew familiar to me and I learned to sleep more soundly, in that doorless hovel in the heart of the awesome desert, than in the middle of a palace surrounded by a thousand guards one of whom, perhaps, is an assassin.

On the nights when sleep eluded me, instead of tossing fruitlessly from side to side on my bed, I stayed until dawn crouching at the entrance to the enclosure. From the black night, I watched the slow birth of all shades and degrees of pinks, yellows and greens, which soon fused again in the dazzling white of the day. The desert is none other than that festival of light.

A year went by, then a miracle happened: Younous began to speak, and I saw he was neither feeble-minded nor mute. The evening before, an emissary from the king had informed me I could leave the desert and go anywhere except the Court. No doubt it was thought I had undergone punishment enough, or that death would obviously have none of me. I expressed merely moderate satisfaction: for too long now, I had ceased to be unhappy. To be sure, I did not know whether I was happy; but if the condition, in which no desire exists without suffering, can be called happiness, then surely that *was* what I felt. I replied that I would remain in the desert until the end of the spring.

It was then, after the messenger's departure, that Younous kissed my hand and said:

“Now you can leave, and I will come with you.”

Thus he was considering me worthy of himself and putting himself on my side; I had won my first companion.

Younous was giving me too much credit, though; my courage was not as great as all that: I simply did not want to return to the Court. Even if the king had given me the choice, it was not there I wanted to go. I had decided first to see the world and only go back to my native country with my head held high, when I could occupy my rightful position. It was too early to hope to return as anything but a man defeated. I knew I had to prove myself by living with people and this challenge, after proving myself by living with solitude, still gave me cause for fear.

So we let the spring, the most beautiful season of the desert, pass by; and then the summer, when it is not good to travel. Younous used the time well by teaching me how to fight and hunt, bend the bow more skillfully, and wield the lance and sword firmly; he corrected the imperfections in my horsemanship. All this he did without becoming any more talkative than he was before the miracle. He made me a gift of a horse, a magnificent gray spotted with russet. That horse must have cost him a good deal and I wondered how he could have come by such an amount. Younous's gift gave me my first responsibility, one I fulfilled joyfully. In my enthusiasm, I spent considerable time grooming my horse, making it a point of honor to have everything about him perfect. This new task, added to the others, did not leave me time for taking care of myself, and often the day ended without my being absolutely clean. For a long time Younous said nothing, but one evening when I had particularly neglected myself, he went and scooped up a handful of dirt and rubbed my horse's rump and chest with it, nullifying all my efforts.

“The horse must be meet for his rider,” he said simply.

Another day, after watering our animals at a water hole, as we ourselves were drinking

we saw a man spring up and rush toward us, shouting and shaking his lance. It was the owner of the well; we had unwittingly trespassed on his property. As fast as my trembling hands allowed me, I snatched an arrow from my quiver, put it in the bow and let fly. I was in full vigor and beginning to aim quite well, but I had shot too early: the arrow fell a good way before him. I thought we were lost: I did not have any time for a second shot—I gave a shout of frustration. It was only then that Younous, who had prepared his bow without haste, aimed his weapon and let fly his arrow. We watched it sail slowly through space until it reached the horseman, who fell off his mount. The horse galloped on a little way, and silence fell again.

Still, trembling, I approached the man lying there; I saw he was not yet dead. I tried to apologize for having taken his water and for having been obliged to defend ourselves. But he did not answer and did me the favor of dying, for which I was grateful to him. Younous drew the arrow from the corpse and, still without a word, handed me it. I've kept it by me ever since; it's still in my quiver, to make me always remember that getting excited is the worst course, and that one should shoot neither too early nor too late.

Younous's lessons were like that: he preferred giving them with a gesture, but they struck through to the meaning of life and the threshold of death. Just as briefly, and always with precision, he discussed with me the arts of manipulating men and seducing women, of bearing pain and facing death, of giving pleasure its due without losing oneself in it. In short, everything that as a deprived child I had not been able to learn in the Court, Younous taught me.

At the beginning of autumn, Younous finally told me:

"I have nothing more to teach you, at least as long as we stay in the desert."

He was right: the time to leave had come. It was imperative, and soon. If a migratory bird does not leave at the end of the season, it will never leave. If I did not get out of the desert now, I would never get out. I had a task and I ought to remember that. I had spent enough time persuading myself I was no longer a child; now I had to find out whether I had really become a man.

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About the Author

Albert Memmi was born in the French protectorate of Tunisia. Though he was active in the postwar Tunisian independence movement, he later moved to Paris. He is the author of a large number of philosophical/sociological essays, and is particularly known for his groundbreaking studies of the predicament of the colonized (in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 1973), of antisemitism and of racism, evolving a theory of domination. He was the first postwar North African novelist to write in French, with his *Pillar of Salt* (1953), followed by *Strangers* (1955), and *The Scorpion* (1969), all set in Tunisia. *The Desert*, published in French in 1977, is his fourth novel. In 1984 President Bourguiba personally bestowed on him membership in the Order of the Tunisian Republic and in 2004 the Académie Française awarded him the "Grand prix de la Francophonie" for his work as a whole.