

WRITING MARGINALITY IN
MODERN FRENCH
LITERATURE

from Loti to Genet

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Introduction

Writing in a state of shock following the killing of the US Black activist George Jackson in San Quentin prison in 1971, Jean Genet, who actively collaborated with the Black Panthers in the 1960s and early 70s, called on Western radicals to contest the mythologies on which White dominance was based. A colossal effort was needed, he insisted, to counter this hegemonic control: ‘we must learn to betray the Whites that we are’ [‘il faut apprendre à trahir les blancs que nous sommes’].¹ Genet’s outspokenness is unsurprising when we remember his well-established reputation as cultural dissident in France. The legacy of domination, he argues, disfigures those who perpetuate it. More noted for his use of the accusatory *vous* when addressing and castigating his Western bourgeois addressees, he employs the *nous* to underline and help shoulder, however momentarily, the burden of collective guilt surrounding racial injustice. This incitement to cultural self-betrayal regularly finds overdetermined expression in Genet, even if the extreme circumstances in which he is here writing help explain his forthrightness.

The call to collective self-scrutiny echoes a more general preoccupation with cultural self-image and value in modern French literature. The denigration of Europe by Camus’s colonial-missionary protagonist in *Le Renégat* – ‘down with Europe, reason, honour, and the cross’ (*EK*, 44) [‘À bas l’Europe, la raison et l’honneur et la croix’] (*TRN*, 1590) – anticipates Genet’s promotion of self-betrayal and pinpoints the strains inherent in Western supremacism. Often the most virulent expressions of such Europhobia occur along ethnic interfaces, geographical margins, interstitial spaces in which cultural self-definition is simultaneously forged and contested. In the movement towards decolonization, a lexicon of insecurity marks the waning of influence. As Sartre writes in his preface to Fanon’s indictment of colonization, *Les Damnés de la Terre*, the European, hitherto the imperious subject of history, is to become its object.²

In his preface to Fanon, Sartre eagerly trumpets the demise of the West, likening Europe to a vessel taking in water, or to a sick continent. But if his mocking invitation to cure Europe helps convey the atmosphere of cultural uncertainty in the post-war period, it may indirectly sanction a narcissistic return to beleaguered self-obsession. More generally, his exhortation, like Genet's call to self-betrayal, may be as much an invitation to European self-contemplation, however embedded in self-hatred, as to any consideration of otherness.

Sartre sponsored perceived marginal authors and causes of the period, often acting as cultural mediator between a metropolitan literary public and new radical voices. In a domestic context, his promotion of Genet, whom he assiduously touted as thief and social deviant in his *Saint-Genet: comédien et martyr*, is an example of the kudos that accrued to him through this exploitation of the celebrated social outcast. In fact, the work, seen by Sartre as 'the history of a liberation', was to have a paralyzing effect on a resentful Genet.³ *Saint-Genet* thus marks a potentially opportunistic espousal of *causes célèbres*, a scouring of shadowy fringes designed to secure for Sartre a vicarious *succès de scandale*.

Sartre also promoted a generation of emergent Francophone writers. He provided prefaces not just for *Les Damnés de la Terre*, but also for Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé*, précédé de *Portrait du colonisateur* and Senghor's *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie nègre et malgache* of 1948. The Senghor preface takes the form of an essay, *Orphée Noir*, in which Sartre writes melodramatically of the new order that converts the European into the object of the African subject's gaze. We were used to seeing our greatness reflected, he insists, in the eyes of our African servants. But now, in a reversal of colonial paradigms, a would-be spectral black African imagination haunts a foregrounded colonial centre and France becomes exoticized and peripheral:

France is no more than a memory, a malaise, a white mist . . . a tormented hinterland. . . . Having drifted north, she is anchored near Kamtchatka. . . . Being is black. . . . We are mere accidents, remote and obliged to justify our customs and ways of doing things. . . . Under these tranquil and corrosive gazes, we are eaten through to the bone.⁴

The language of *Orphée Noir* suggests a form of cultural *Schadenfreude*, with Europe cast as a place of pathology and denied the cultural essentialism that historically it saw as its birthright. By the same token, the images of Africa that he proposes are wholly caricatural, as he flirts with racist stereotyping (dark eyes, dark skin, and a veiled cannibalism) and

solar myth-making. Quoting from Césaire, ‘Listen to the white world . . . Pity for our omniscient and naive conquerors’, Sartre unsettles a philanthropic European complacency functioning in a colonial context.⁵ Crucially, the ignorance that Césaire identifies at the heart of Western knowledge, while dismantling hegemonic cultural values, does not prevent Europe from being fascinated as much by its demise as by its former claims to glory.

A domestically generated Europhobia is central to the present study, which addresses contexts in which modern French writers, through contact with what a metropolitan consensus deems to be marginal, reflect on how cultural value and ethical authority are constructed, defended, and called into question. While Genet provides me with a chronological end-point, his energetic interrogation of the ways in which marginal cultures are perceived as deviant, foreign, dark, impenetrable, and Other implicitly sheds light on his predecessors. His campaigning embraced very openly issues of sexual politics, which he increasingly conjoins with the politics of race and social class. His last major work, *Un captif amoureux*, published in 1986, reflects on the West’s policing of its borders. Having championed homosexuality and the victims of social marginalization in a national context in his earlier career, he now wrestles with the ethical dilemmas facing the sympathetic European eager to promote, but not expropriate, a cause and people (the Palestinians), whose dispossession is a direct consequence of Western *realpolitik*. *Un captif amoureux* is, then, a writing born out of recrimination, its author becoming Europe’s apologist for what lies beyond its borders. In the words of Arnaud Malgorn, ‘Genet the thief, the homosexual, the FLN militant, the West’s witness at Sabra and Shatila, allows the Other to speak and his work . . . enables his reader to discover other legitimacies and so to discover himself as different’.⁶

Genet reflects keenly on his controversial engagement with not only the Palestinians but also the Black Panthers and the Baader Meinhof. He describes the Panthers as a dream-like presence adrift from the world of the dominant; they pursue a ‘révolte poétique’ (*CA*, 248) skirting round the edges of a hegemonic, stubbornly prosaic white culture. For Genet, seeing cultural dissidence as a poetry of unreality is not to hold it in check. Yet in the hands of his predecessors, the metaphors of dream and shadow regularly serve to contain and collapse radical difference. Chapter 1 explores Pierre Loti’s exoticist evocation of the East. Significantly, the central protagonist in *Aziyadé*, to take just one of his novels, is the perplexed, wandering European, a British naval officer

who literally polices Turkey at the time of the demise of the Ottoman Empire in 1878. Yet in donning the uniform of the Sultan's army and assuming the exotic identity of Arif-effendi, his intention is to relieve the sense of vacuity that mars his existence. Thus behind the Turkish dress lurks the desolate young boy back in rural England (Az, 89). The cure, then, for existential isolation is a phantasmagoric Istanbul.

The same compensatory logic is at work in Gauguin's autobiographical text *Noa Noa*, in which the painter-turned-writer offers a heady promotion of Oceania as a place that surpasses and reinvigorates a lethargic European *fin de siècle*. His enthusiasm for cultural exoticism is on the one hand a flagrant rebuttal of Parisian cultural norms; yet in another sense, with the commodification of his Polynesian work, a seemingly peripheral subject matter enjoys prestige in the late nineteenth-century Parisian art market. In this flirtation with other cultures, the evocation of a geographically remote otherness becomes imbricated with a promotion of Self and fluctuations in metropolitan taste.

In Proust's work, which I consider in Chapter 2, the debate on inside and outside, conformity and deviation, familiar and foreign, is highly developed. In his attempts to legitimize and make space for homosexuality, he reflects on what he sees as the constricting cultural geography of a heterosexual Europe. Getting beyond such orthodoxy entails the construction of an imaginary beyond the borders, claimed sexual deviance thus being accommodated symbolically in the colonial margins. The recourse to exoticism in the adjudication on sexual mores overlaps with Proust's analysis of the energies of xenophobia to form a psychosocial geometry, in which a hub of heterosexual conformity is set against a peripheral homosexuality.

Proust also insists provocatively on the analogous situation of Jew and homosexual, both figures being the butt of punitively normative cultures. He describes these inveterate marginals as 'shunning one another, seeking out those who are most directly their opposite, who do not want their company . . .; but also brought into the company of their own kind by the ostracism to which they are subjected, the opprobrium into which they have fallen' (*RMP*, II, 639) [*'se fuyant les uns les autres, recherchant ceux qui sont le plus opposés, qui ne veulent pas d'eux . . .; mais aussi rassemblés à leurs pareils par l'ostracisme qui les frappe, l'opprobre où ils sont tombés'*] (*RTP*, III, 18).⁷ Proust thus describes the deep-seated ambivalence whereby the outcast shuttles between social acceptance and the accommodation afforded by exclusion and the flight from the centre.

In Chapter 3, I explore the exotic in Montherlant. In biographical terms, his travels to North Africa and sexual tastes recall those of Gide. But I include him not on account of his homosexuality or his revisitation of classical myth, but rather to analyse his reflections on colonization and cultural blindness. Issues of gender and sexuality are nevertheless inseparable from colonial discourse, as his novel of the early 1930s, *La Rose de sable*, demonstrates. Montherlant makes ambitious claims, describing his work as straddling anticolonialism and colonialist myth-making. He investigates, often melodramatically and with the mindset of his day, the French military legacy in colonial Morocco. With its conjunction of Arabophobic instincts and incipient xenophilia, *La Rose de sable* provides a reliable cultural barometer of the inter-war years. While often culturally authoritarian, the novel works to lay bare the violence underpinning such hierarchy. Brutalization impacts not only on the indigenous population but also on the novel's French-soldier hero. At its height, the drama precipitates a crisis in metropolitan values and destabilizes a hitherto sustaining discourse of patriotism.

The idea of the colonial fringes as the laboratory in which the colonizer's self-image is shaped finds an especially potent expression in the work of Camus. As a French Algerian, he occupied a peripheral position in relation to metropolitan tradition. Indeed, he protested his very particular kind of Europeanness, lived out on the limb that was French colonial culture in North Africa. When insurrection in Algeria forced France to reassess its position, Camus pleaded with characteristic stubbornness for the rights of the *petits colons*, the interstitial grouping to which he belonged. The strains between mother country and French Algerian border territory are central to Camus's work. In his analysis of the margins, tribal identity becomes fraught. Faced with French intolerance of the *petits colons*, who serve as an uncomfortable reminder of the colonial legacy, Camus appeals to history and confronts head-on the charge of abusive exploitation:

There must be . . . an end to this blanket condemnation of the French Algerians. Those in the metropolis who do not tire of hating them need to be reminded of the requirements of decency. When a French supporter of the FLN has the audacity to write that French Algerians have always seen France as a prostitute to be exploited, he needs to be aware that he is speaking irresponsibly about men whose grandparents, for example, opted for France in 1871 and left their native Alsace for Algeria, whose fathers died in large numbers in eastern France in 1914, and who themselves, twice mobilized in the last war, served on every front for this prostitute alongside hundreds of thousands of Muslims.

[Il faut cesser . . . de porter condamnation en bloc sur les Français d'Algérie. Une certaine opinion métropolitaine, qui ne se lasse pas de les haïr, doit être rappelée à la décence. Quand un partisan français du FLN ose écrire que les Français d'Algérie ont toujours considéré la France comme une prostituée à exploiter, il faut rappeler à cet irresponsable qu'il parle d'hommes dont les grands-parents, par exemple, ont opté pour la France en 1871 et quitté leur terre d'Alsace pour l'Algérie, dont les pères sont morts en masse dans l'Est de la France en 1914 et qui, eux-mêmes, deux fois mobilisés dans la dernière guerre, n'ont cessé, avec des centaines de milliers de musulmans, de se battre sur tous les fronts pour cette prostituée.]⁸

In the embroiled debate about belonging and cultural affiliation, key elements in the power relation between centre and periphery emerge. Firstly, the essentially antagonistic nature of relations between French and French Algerians is revealed via a degraded sexuality, which captures the invective and anxiety that the North African fringes generate. Secondly, we have the feminizing of France, which sees itself as benign and munificent, Camus resenting the inference that the colonial margins act in an aggressively predatorial way. And thirdly, via the brothers-in-arms motif, the majority Muslim viewpoint is erased to the extent that it is conflated with that of the *petit colon*.

Camus's counter-discourse appeals to Frenchness and a legacy of heroic service to the nation. He rebuts the accusation of lurid exploitation, laying claim to a deeper, historically rooted Francophilia. Thus metropolitan disgust at the spectacle of *pied-noir* loyalism is the emotion generated by what, for the Parisian intelligentsia that Camus so chided, is the unwelcome reminder of a colonial past.

In attempting to define the margins, we are therefore necessarily involved in a simultaneous reflection on the status of the centre. Geoffrey Bennington reminds us how tempting it is to 'approach the question of nation directly by aiming for its centre or its origin'.⁹ The satisfaction lies in identifying stories of national origins and founding mythologies, an example of which is Camus's tenacious will to position those on the edge at the centre of a national patrimony. But as Bennington adds, as soon as we look to the borders, the mythic origins are compromised because we are forced into an awareness of what lies beyond them. Thus the frontier 'closes the nation in on itself but also, immediately, opens it to an outside'. Bennington goes on to quote Edgar Morin:

All frontiers, including the membrane of living beings, including the frontier[s] of nations, are, at the same time as they are barriers, places of communication and exchange. *They are places of dissociation and association, of separation and articulation.*¹⁰

While Morin outlines the potential for communication along the border, the authors considered in the present study respond in different ways to the invitation to association posed by the Other. In each of the cases considered, definition of Self is provoked by the preoccupation with what is marginal and with the idea of the frontier. The polarities are typically North and South, the West and the rest, moribund and youthful, believer and infidel, health and pathology, the normal and the deviant, the familiar and the exotic. Such binarism itself fosters a politics of exclusion.

Genet headlines the violence spawned by borders and the insidious desire to recast relativities as imperious absolutes. Hence his insistence on a cultural geography that is always provisional:

Exoticism, the wonder you feel at what you see when at last you've crossed the ever-receding horizon. Beyond – but there's never any beyond except another changing horizon, necessarily a strange one, a foreign one. My long journeys became so familiar they concealed that crossing of the line, but in the end I thought that as I wrote this book I could make out, if only through a mist, not only France but also the West in general. . . . They had become utterly exotic to me, so that I went to France as a Frenchman might go to Burma. (*PL*, 338)

[exotisme, cet étonnement de voir enfin, quand on a franchi la ligne d'horizon qui sans cesse recule. Derrière elle, c'est qu'il n'y a jamais de derrière elle sauf la ligne d'horizon qui change et bien sûr c'est l'étranger. Ces longs voyages avec la familiarité entretenue justement là que me cachait cette ligne toujours française, c'est par l'effet d'une longue familiarité des voyages, presque d'une urgence, que, non la France seule mais l'Occident, je crus les distinguer en écrivant ce livre, mais les distinguer dans des brumes. Ils me parurent . . . l'exotisme suprême au point que j'allais en France comme un Français va en Birmanie.] (*CA*, 553)

While this decentring and the challenge to Western authority do not guarantee liberation from cultural hegemony, Genet delights in a distortion of the familiar and a conceptual relocation of France, thereby sealing his self-image as elusive migrant.

Readers may find my choice of authors eccentric. Unlike Proust, Camus, and Genet, Loti, Gauguin, and Montherlant are not canonical writers. Yet the works of each of these authors, major and minor alike, express a cultural malaise in which the insufficiency of Self regularly awakens a desire to explore as well as to police the exotic horizon. Were we to be guided solely by the canon, we might forget that Loti was a dominant figure in the *fin de siècle*, satisfying its appetite for the exotic, that Gauguin's fantastic paradise in *Noa Noa* connects with a tradition of

exoticist curiosity in French literature, that Montherlant's Moroccan novel provides an exemplary depiction of the colonial mindset while trying to transcend it. The canon may exclude novels such as *Le Roman d'un spahi* and *La Rose de sable*, metaphorically removing from view reminders of the racist supremacism on which colonization was predicated. Yet if we readmit these texts and unpick sufficiently others such as *À la recherche du temps perdu*, we discover the common threads at the heart of Eurocentric fantasy. My chosen authors explore, anecdotally or theoretically, an often anxious exoticism, drawing out the social, ethical, and sexual tensions that this anxiety entails. Such tensions form provocative nexus-points, where the Western sexual dissident, to take just one recurring example, encounters the ethnic Other. These connections are in one sense wholly arbitrary. After all, why should the transsexual be likened to a Palestinian bomber, or the homosexual to a black African or a Jew? Why cast the North African Muslim or the Japanese bride as a child? Why see medieval France as pure, Algeria as having no history, or Polynesians as being androgynous. Yet we find these random projections, evaluations, and alliances in writers working ambiguously against and with a metropolitan bourgeoisie. Like Loti, Gauguin rails against a repressive West; like Camus's Cormery, the protagonist in Montherlant's *La Rose de sable* is obliquely positioned in relation to a cultural centre; like Genet, who attacks metropolitan values, Proust dismantles social consensus although in a radically different, much more veiled manner. But gesturing towards cultural difference in no way guarantees dialectical engagement with it. Indeed, it is often an ambivalent move, entailing the pursuit of private goals – sexual, political, aesthetic – and the collateral exclusion of the Other.