

38 Albert Memmi: *La Statue de Sel* (1953) [*The Pillar of Salt*]

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The writer and sociologist of Jewish-Tunisian origin Albert Memmi, born in 1920, is one of the most internationally renowned Francophone authors. His works have become classics in two distinct ways: as a writer, Memmi is one of the fathers of Maghrebian literature in French, and as such is considered a French writer, and he is a pioneer of critical postcolonial thinking as he revealed the underlying structures of racism questioning at an early date the very idea of Francophone literature. In this light, his path-breaking socio-psychological study *Portrait du colonisé, portrait du colonisateur* [*The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965), prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre], which was published in 1957 – in the midst of the Algerian War and one year after the recognition of Tunisian independence – was acknowledged worldwide to be one of the first anticolonial studies. To put it in his own terms, he is a writer and a trained philosopher with at least three homelands: the Jewish (even when he never lived in Israel), the Tunisian and the French, while he himself includes also Italy and Greece stating them to be his “patrimoine philosophique et celle de tous les philosophes dignes de ce nom!” [‘my philosophical homeland and that of all philosophers worthy of that name!’] (Memmi 2000b, 146). Albert Memmi has always insistently defended the idea of multiple belongings and affiliations, denying any reduction to only one heritage. Corresponding to that basic insight, he called as well into question, and at an early date, the separation of French and Francophone writers. He was one of the first scholars who analyzed the definition of ‘francophone’ in order to include not only the colony but also the metropole and to turn the attention of Postcolonial Studies – analogous to his own conception of the colonizer and the colonized – to the intertwined character of both (Brozgal 2013). Concerning his own position as a literary writer, he asks rightly, “Pourquoi un Maghrébin de langue française ne pourrait-il être rangé, à la fois, parmi les écrivains français, puisqu’il appartient effectivement, de manières différentes, aux deux patrimoines?” [‘Why cannot a French-speaking Maghrebi be ranked as a French writer as well when he has in effect, in different ways, two legacies?’] (Memmi 1985b, 13). Or, if we refer to Camus’ famous prologue to the second edition of Memmi’s first book, *The Pillar of Salt* (1966), he can be considered as neither a French, nor a Maghrebi author, but just a writer: “On serait tenté de dire un écrivain, puisque M. Memmi donne avec *La Statue de sel* une preuve qu’il l’est [...]” [“One might be tempted to say a writer, since Mr. Memmi gives proof in *The Pillar of Salt* that he is one (...)”] (Camus 1966, 9 [2011, 15]).

Albert Memmi was born in Tunisia in 1920 during a time when his country had been a French protectorate since 1881, as a child from a ghetto where poor indigenous Jews (called ‘Touensa’) lived. Right from the start, Memmi experienced an identity conflict placing him verily at the margins of society and of the religious majorities in

the Muslim-dominated and, at the same time, colonized Tunisia. His own life then has been shaped by his position in-between cultural, political and religious models that he shall turn later constantly into the object of his writings, relating his experiences in the form of novels and essays. That all his texts are written in French – a language he started to learn at the age of seven – and are now read all over the world indicates that he has distanced himself greatly from his origins as the second eldest of twelve children of a saddle maker living side by side in the Jewish quarter ‘la h’ara’ of Tunis. This place is described in *Le nomade immobile* [‘The immobile nomad’] (2000), one of Memmi’s rare autobiographical accounts, as a “[...] *no man’s land*, entre le quartier arabe et le quartier juif” [‘a no man’s land between the Arab and the Jewish quarter’] (Memmi 2000b, 13). Instead of following rabbinical law and patriarchal Jewish tradition and taking over not only his father’s workshop but also his religious role, Memmi became Tunisia’s most famous writer, sociologist and thinker. After visiting a Jewish preschool (‘al kouttab’), he continued at the Alliance Israelite School founded by French Jews and then entered the prestigious Lycée Carnot thanks to a scholarship. As Memmi (2000b, 41) pointed out later, this moment was decisive because “high school brought him out of the ghetto”. In his *Portrait d’un juif* (1962) [*Portrait of a Jew* (1963)], Memmi remembered that with his immersion in new cultural horizons by the time of the French lycée, a process of dissociation from the Jewish religious culture started as well. One of his teachers was the Algerian writer and intellectual, Jean Amrouche, who had been exiled to Tunisia. Amrouche introduced him to books from authors of diverse backgrounds such as El Ghazali, Rimbaud and Saâdi, a Persian poet and mystic. Nevertheless, Memmi’s scholastic career was not unambiguous at all; although education might have rescued him from the poor ghetto, he has always regretted the feeling of a deep alienation that this departure from his initial ‘milieu’ caused him (Memmi 2000b, 25).

After 1941, Memmi’s studies of philosophy at the University of Algiers were interrupted due to the anti-Jewish laws of the Vichy government. In 1942, when his Jewish friends were expelled, he showed his solidarity and gave up his studies as well. Back in Tunisia, he was working in a camp (Memmi 2000b, 60). After the war, he went to Paris to continue his studies in sociology and philosophy at the Sorbonne under very difficult material conditions. He then married in December 1946 and his wife, Germaine Dubach, found her first employment as a teacher in Amiens, a city that lay in ruins after WWII. It was here – a great distance away from Tunisia – where he started writing his first novel, *The Pillar of Salt*, in 1947. The author went back to Tunis in 1949 and finished the book in 1950. In 1952, Memmi became the director of the Tunis Centre for Child Psychopedagogy. He also worked as the culture editor of the weekly journal *L’Action* (today it is *Jeune Afrique*), politically inspired by a nationalist program. However, after Tunisia had gained independence in 1956, he left the Bourguiba-ruled post-colonial country to escape from its rising nationalist and pan-Arabic ideology and settled down in Paris. He worked at the National Research Center (CNRS) and held a chair at Paris X in cultural sociology and he acquired French citizenship.

As of now in 2017, Memmi, who is presently 96 years old, is living in the Marais quarter and is still actively writing.

His most famous book, which is still read all over the world, draws on the psychosocial condition of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* and performs the genre of a 'portrait' as the original French title indicates. The book is based on Memmi's own experience of being dominated by the German fascists during the French occupation, as well as that of a Jew dependent on a Muslim society for a particular form of protection ('dhimma') while degrading him at the same time to a subaltern. The 'colonial drama' described here is multi-faceted as it was not outside, but rather a part of his own personal drama and that of several communities he belongs to. The colonial condition is shown here, for the first time, as a profoundly rooted mental alienation that no longer implies a dialectical binary structure of two opponents as postulated by Sartre and Fanon – the colonizer and the colonized – but a complex interconnect-edness of both sides of the coin (one of Memmi's metaphors to describe the colonial system of power). As well as in his novel, he criticizes the French educational system as the origin of producing colonial consciousness and subaltern subjects. Colonialism, in Memmi's terms, represents, above all, a psychological structure inasmuch as the colonizer constantly aims at subjugating and deforming the consciousness of the colonized. Memmi called for giving up the mentality of the suppressed and, unlike Frantz Fanon in Algeria, for political action without violence. This means he did not restrict his work to denouncing colonialism in a literary way, but also offered a fundamental analysis of its corresponding structures as well as a call to change the situation. So, his publisher had at first refused to print what would turn out to be his most famous and sold text. Edmond Buchet was afraid that the writer was going to diminish his reputation as a novelist and would thus fall out with the literary critics. At that moment Memmi's name was established in the French book market as one of the first-generation authors of Maghreb origin who produce – as Mouloud Mammeri, Driss Chraïbi, Mouloud Feraoun or Ahmed Sefroui – a kind of 'ethnographic' literature dealing with social and cultural issues related to people of their region (Brozgal 2013, 36–44). Nonetheless, the impact of his first political book seemed to lead to a role conflict inasmuch as it turned a young distinguished novelist (Memmi was even considered for the famous Goncourt prize) into a perspicacious theorist of colonization and decolonization. Now, Memmi was regarded as 'écrivain engagé' [politically committed writer]. He points out himself that it can be a doubtful merit, because being considered an activist automatically recalls the image of a less aesthetically concerned author: "Je suis devenu, presque malgré moi, ce que l'on nomme, d'un terme discut-able, un écrivain engagé, ce qui implique un certain dédain de la littérature pure" ['I became almost against my will what is named – with a debatable term – an engaged writer and which implies a certain contempt of pure literature'] (Memmi 2000b, 71). Memmi doubts the unbalanced category of a politically engaged literature, but continues to defend his own preoccupation as a writer whose literary and philosophical vocation is deeply rooted in his personal experience inside of the colonial system.

In his prologue to *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, he emphasized: “J’étais tunisien et donc colonisé. Je découvrais que peu d’aspects de ma vie et de ma personnalité n’avaient pas été affecté par cette donnée” [‘I was Tunisian and so I was colonized. I discovered that few aspects of my life and of my personality had not been affected by this given’] (Memmi 1985b, 12).

In his later books, he continued to interrogate the psychosocial processes of identity-building, precisely with regard to the Jewish part (*Portrait of a Jew* [1962], *The liberation of the Jew* [1966]), and in a more generalized way, concerning people of color, women and domestics in *Dominated man: notes towards a portrait* (1968), structures of subjection (*La Dépendance – Esquisse pour un portrait du dépendant* [1979] [*Dependence: a sketch for a portrait of the dependent* (1984)]), and the anatomy of racism (*Le racisme* [1994] [*Racism* (2000)]). In one of his later texts which is dedicated not to colonized but decolonized people living mostly in France (*Portrait du décolonisé* [2004]), the author takes up this argument again and turns it into a loud and harsh critique of the passiveness of the migrants – at precisely their supposed unwillingness to integrate tied up with an essentialist view that brought a lot of critique upon him (Crowley 2009, 133–134). In the interim of half a century, Memmi published fiction along with a whole series of theoretical groundwork. Recently, his most important essays, the famous *Portraits* that discuss social, cultural and colonial conditions, racism and domination – topics that are connected with Memmi’s own ‘Conflict of Legacies’ (Crowley 2009) – have been published in a critical edition (Dugas 2015b). This deep intertwining of sociological, philosophical as well as cultural reflection and personal experiences in his work has shaped a largely unconventional collection of writing. If Memmi’s books cannot be considered as autobiographies, they are nonetheless tightly interwoven, thematically and structurally, with each step of his life, “[c]hacun de mes livres aura été une étape d’un même itinéraire [...] de sorte que ma vie et mon travail se répondent” [‘each of my books represents one stage of the same itinerary (...) so that my life and my work answer to each other’] (Memmi 2000b, 11).

Historical Origins of the Novel

Before it was published as a whole, four extracts of *The Pillar of Salt* (1953) were published in 1952–1953 in the leftist literary journal *Les Temps Modernes* – “an extraordinary godsend to an unknown writer” (Memmi 2000b, 74) – known as the journal ‘of Jean-Paul Sartre’, thanks to the assistance of the philosopher himself. However, the first step to publish it as a book was when Memmi followed the advice of his former teacher Amrouche and sent the manuscript from Tunis to the famous Parisian publisher Gallimard. After a while, as he records it in his memoirs (Memmi 2000b, 70), the stack of papers was handed back to him, “sans un mot de justification, ce que n’était guère dans les habitudes courtoises de la maison” [‘without giving any word about

the reasons why, which did not correspond to the polite manners of this publishing house’]. Another source however provides contrary information and contends that Memmi refused to divide the text in two parts as requested by Gallimard (I would like to thank Albert Memmi who gave this information in a written interview to me in July 2016). In the end, with the help of the renowned Tunisian painter Hatem El Mekki who was well-connected with the prominent French writer and critic Maurice Nadeau, the manuscript of *The Pillar of Salt* was immediately accepted in Nadeau’s own series *Les Chemins de la vie* [‘The ways of life’] at the Parisian Publisher Corr ea-Buchet-Castel. When the book came out in 1953, it became a literary success almost overnight (Prix de Carthage, Prix F en on in 1954); so much that Gaston Gallimard even repurchased and republished it in 1966 including the – now famous – prologue by Camus. For Memmi, this success with the public is a direct result of his straightforward description of an adolescent’s difficulties living under the colonial regime. The book represented by that a revelation to the part of French society that had already started – in 1953 when the colonial regime still prevailed – the process of coping with its own imperial past and establishing a highly critical distance to the empire. However, for exactly the same reason, not everybody was enthusiastic about the book and Memmi (2000b, 71) surmised that this may have been the (ideological) reason why he did not receive the most important literary prize, the Goncourt, for neither his first nor second novel. Ultimately, *The Pillar of Salt* which was dedicated to Memmi’s father, the harness-maker, can be looked at as an outstanding and fervent prelude to a series of (directly and covertly) autobiographically inspired fictions continuing with *Agar* (1955) [*Strangers* (1958)] and – in a more experimental style of writing – *Le scorpion ou la confession imaginaire* (1969) [*The scorpion, or: The imaginary confession* (1971)], *Le d sert, ou les aventures de Jubair Ouali el-Mammi* (1977) [*The Desert, or the Life and Adventures of Jubair Wali al-Mammi* (2015)] and *Le Pharaon* [‘The Pharaoh’] (1988). It was probably this novel written by a “ crivain de la d chirure” [‘torn writer’] as Dugas (1984) has called Memmi, that originally opened up Memmi’s theoretical work because he had already developed here the main topics of his later intellectual preoccupations. For instance, the topics of colonization and decolonization, different forms of domination, racism and discrimination as social and as inner conflicts are experienced in the book firsthand by the protagonist Alexandre Mordechai Benillouche who is – despite some strong biographical references – not to be identified as the author himself. On the contrary, it seems programmatic that the name of the protagonist does not coincide with the author’s name, which would have turned it automatically into a classical autobiography as insinuated by Lejeune’s famous pact (Lejeune 1975 [1989]). He focuses on the individual self and the act of recognition as well as the increasing self-awareness of a writer who is affected by social and cultural discrimination as a representative of his own class and generation: “J’ai essay  de raconter   la fois l’histoire de ce jeune homme que j’ tais et en m me temps celle d’un certain nombre de gens de ma g n ration” [‘I have tried to tell at the same time the history of the young man I was and that of other people from my generation’] (Dugas 2001, 38). Even though the book is

characterized by a strongly autobiographical storyline, a mainly chronological structure and realistic narrative proceedings, it is far from being an autobiography in the strict sense. Memmi's text is a complex aesthetic composition intended to transgress established genres and to deny any accommodation to literary norms. Furthermore, this delimitation is the result of a pluralization of cultural and aesthetic strategies occluding any origin. In order to confront his own stony and ambiguous path of emancipation from his cultural and social background without completely losing it, Memmi attempts to prevent his work from being classified by criteria that cannot adequately reflect the inconsistencies of life and the nature of multiple belonging.

Content Summary

The Pillar of Salt, a classic of French literature in the postwar period, is reminiscent of a coming-of-age story and can in fact be considered a Tunisian 'Bildungsroman' [education novel] as it relates how a Jewish boy from a poor family grows up in the French-colonized country and in the end, comes to the painful realization of his ruptured self. The first-person narrator describes – with clear reference to the author's own life – his sheltered childhood as the son of a saddler in a Tunis ghetto who left his family as well as tradition behind. Because he has deep ties with two dominant cultures, he suffers through a process of growing isolation and self-alienation from which he gains a growing consciousness. The boy in the novel, Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, and his family belong to the Jewish-Tunisian minority living in a Muslim Arabic society. After primary school, the talented boy attends the 'lycée' where he encounters classmates from higher social classes. However, he must ultimately recognize that his aspirations to become one of them fail and that his unequal position remains the same as it is in the Muslim-dominated society. The protagonist's clear orientation towards the colonial culture does not help him to escape his subaltern position. During wartime, as a Jew, he experiences a third form of oppression by the German Nazis and their collaborators. Thus, the book recounts a process of increasing self-awareness and refers to important moments in the protagonist's culturally dissonant youth, reflecting Memmi's own path. The development of an exceptional student educated in the French language and philosophy in order to become a teacher leads to several profound crises that are exposed in the course of the novel by narrative techniques of description and introspection. In an autodiegetic manner, the narrator recounts a series of daily humiliations and the dolorous experience during the process of distancing himself from his family as well as his religious and social background that leads him to a profound sense of alienation and ultimately to a loss of the self. Adopting the gaze of his classmates and their bourgeois environment, he becomes a stranger to himself. He ties up his personal account with more than 2,000 years of historical forms of colonization looking at his own individual past with more and more

distance until he is, at the very end of this process of remembering, overwhelmed by the pain of conflicting self-knowledge.

As the title of the book and the motto taken from Genesis, 19, 26 indicate, his account of the past recalls Lot's wife whose forbidden backward glance froze her in her steps and turned her into a pillar of salt. In an allegorical sense, with this biblical figure, the author deliberately alludes to the tragic consequences of the protagonist looking back to his roots and being shaped by a constant process of distancing himself from his origins. The tragic part of this process is that he cannot find 'new roots' which leads to his isolation in the end:

[...] je meurs pour m'être retourné sur moi-même. Il est interdit de se voir et j'ai fini de me connaître. Comme la femme de Loth, que Dieu changea en statue, puis-je encore vivre au-delà de mon regard?

[I am dying through having turned back to look at my own self. It is forbidden to see oneself, and I have reached the end of discovering myself. God turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt – is it possible for me to survive my contemplation of myself?] (Memmi 2008, 368 [1992, 334]).

In this sense, the book *The Pillar of Salt* is structured by a double look – one backward that gives sense to the past, and one to the future. As Hand states, “[t]he whole narrative has been structured, then, around the authorial transformation of a moment which transforms writing, a politico-ethical *dépassement* which successfully sustains a double looking back and looking forward” (1996, 100). The look into the past is dangerous inasmuch as it offers a distance and gives a posterior disappointing sense to the lived: while Benillouche thought all the time he was going consequently through a process of social and cultural advancement, he realizes retrospectively, “que ma vie ne fut qu’une suite de ruptures, de plus en plus graves, de plus en plus complètes” [“that my whole life had been but a series of breaks and interruptions, each one in turn more serious and definitive”] (Memmi 2008, 211 [1992, 192]).

The book is divided into three parts which can be understood on a macro-structural level as a three-step spatial movement (Bénaïm-Ouaknine and Elbaz 1981) from the protected space of a dead end street inside the ghetto where the family's apartment is situated (first part titled “L' Impasse” [“The Blind Alley”]) to the wider urbanity of Tunis (second part: “Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche”) and finally, with the highly symbolic departure overseas to the wide world (third part of the book: “Le Monde” [“The World”]). However, this spatial movement does not mean to find sanctuary. As Bénaïm-Ouaknine and Elbaz (1981, 20) have emphasized, the representation of closed spaces refers to archetypical structures, expresses regression and cannot offer liberation and identity so that the narrator – as we will see with the famous exam scene – finally settles down in his own writing. Shaped by the contrast to all the people Benillouche meets along his way and who belong mainly to (supposedly) more valuable social, ethnic and cultural levels, he begins to write about how he became aware of his difference and his own marginalized position as a poor indigenous Jew from the ghetto. He describes how he became deeply divided between his family ties

and the will to raise his consciousness, recognizing the mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization. He recounts how he futilely strives to cast aside his sociocultural background and all symbols of it that remind him of his origins. At first, he detests his names and blames his parents for choosing Alexandre, “claironnant, glorieux, me tu donné par mes parents en hommage à l’Occident prestigieux. [...] Les élèves ricanent, faisaient éclater Alexandre comme un coup de trompette: Alexa-ndre!” [“brassy, glorious, a name given to me by my parents in recognition of the wonderful West (...). My schoolmates sneered and blared ‘Alexandre’ like a trumpet blast: Alexa-ndre!”] (Memmi 2008, 107 [1992, 93]). He also considered his second name, Mordekhai, as stigmatizing declaring, “[d]ans ce pays, Mridakh est si obstinément révélateur, qu’il équivalait à clamer ‘je suis juif!’ et plus précisément ‘j’habite le ghetto’, ‘je suis de statut indigène’, ‘je suis de mœurs orientales’, ‘je suis pauvre’” [“(b)ut in this country, Mridakh is as obstinately revealing as if one shouted out: ‘I’m a Jew!’ More precisely: ‘My home is in the ghetto’, ‘my legal status is native African’, ‘I come from an Oriental background’, ‘I’m poor’”] (2008, 107–108 [1992, 94]). In order to get rid of this stigma, he tries unsuccessfully to suppress his second name and thus, his Jewish origins: “Au lycée, rapidement, je pris l’habitude de sauter Mordekhai dans mes copies; et bientôt je l’oubliai comme une vieille peau. Mais cette peau traînait, bien collée” [“At the lycée, I very quickly got into the habit of dropping ‘Mordekhai’ from my lesson headings, and before long I forgot the name as if I had shed it like an old skin. Yet it dragged behind me, holding fast”] (1966, 108 [1992, 94]). Finally, as a sign of his Berber ancestors, the last name of Benillouche marks his indigenous status once more. It is a ‘talking’ name, which can be translated as “he squints” (in French “il louche”) or even “son of him who squints”, as “ben” in Hebrew and Arabic means “son of” (Brozgal 2013, 93). It symbolizes the protagonist’s main characteristic of looking back and using a double eye: on the one hand, the narrator evokes and longs for the secure tribal world of the family he feels related to. On the other hand, he feels completely distanced from this past after having integrated himself into the social and cultural relations of the colonial society. The protagonist, who does not overtly coincide with the author, feels humiliated and tries to adapt to the new school environment by denying his own identity. Growing up in an indigenous Jewish culture rooted in religious and collective tradition, he increasingly turns to the colonial language and culture, and becomes deeply divided between home and the outside world. The trauma of non-integration, of being culturally torn apart and having a foot in two worlds, culminated at the outbreak of World War II when he was not allowed to join the French volunteer army in order to fight against the German fascists (as Memmi himself also was not allowed to do). In the end, he felt excluded from all parts of his culture and deeply uprooted. For Benillouche, the dramatic ‘ultima ratio’ in the face of his growing awareness concerning a ‘wrong life’ imposed on him from outside seems to be suicide. He abandons writing and burns his diary, a friend stands by him and they both escape to Argentina. The book ends with how the protagonist has recognized his unalterable subaltern position and reveals the interdependent psychological mechanisms of domination

in several ways, which are not to overcome. The break with Tunisia at the end of the novel was an element that has often been criticized in straightforward biographical readings of the story. In a similar way, other controversies about Memmi's own biography arose after the book was published. Some readers – including Jews from the Tunis community (Dugas 2001, 40) – disagreed with Memmi's critical description of the traditional Jewish milieu or the protagonist's decision to leave for Latin America and not for the newly founded state of Israel. These voices strongly demonstrate that it is difficult for the reading public to take Benillouche as just a literary figure because he shares so many characteristics with the author. Nevertheless, an autobiographical reading of the text likewise causes a fundamental problem inasmuch as it reduces the book to a specific person and ignores its universal and literary dimension. It is best to keep in mind along with Paul de Man (1979) that a biographical reference as such does not define autobiography, but rather the rhetorical models that create referentiality. To understand this principle in the context of Memmi's book, it can be helpful to take a closer look at the famous writing scene at the beginning of his book. Even if the incident is very true, as the author has repeatedly stated, it indicates here nonetheless the deeply fabricated nature of the text and its fictional dimension.

If the story of Benillouche is extraordinary as such, Memmi increases its specific effect by framing the account of his personal development within a highly complex narrative structure. The text opens up with a proleptic chapter presenting a nameless first-person narrator who is about to make a fundamental decision about his life. The young scholar – only one hundred pages later we will know that it is Benillouche – arrives at a “salle d'examen, dans l'immense bibliothèque universitaire” [“huge hall”] (Memmi 1966, 355 [1992, 323]) to take part in the famous French ‘agrégation’ (a national examination to become qualified as a teacher at university level). He is supposed to “confie aux examinateurs ce que je pense de John Stuart Mill et de Condillac” [to analyze “the influence of Condillac on John Stuart Mill”] (1966, 356 [1992, 324]), a typical question that aims at underlining the universalist concept of French thinking which, in this moment, becomes foreign to the protagonist. Then, in a kind of epiphanic moment of clarity that anticipates the breakup at the end, the narrator recognizes that the purportedly successful process of his education has always alienated him from his own concerns. He realizes the impossibility of his striving to be acknowledged by the part of society that has surrounded him since he started pursuing a scholarly career and asks, “[c]omment ai-je pu m'intéresser à ces yeux si étonnement futiles?” [(h)ow was I ever able to be interested in these games that now seem so absurdly futile?”] (2008, 12 [1992, viii–ix]). Precisely at this point, his going through the French educational system culminates in resistance. He says, “[j]e ne peux plus soutenir ce rôle” [“I can no longer play this part that I've been acting”] (2008, 13 [1992, ix]). Thus, although the protagonist wants to give up his colonized consciousness, he is still shaped by the subalternity he feels at the same time profoundly ashamed of and is unable to leave the classroom, “il me reste cette ridicule pudeur. Je baisse la tête

et je feins d'écrire" ["I still have this absurd sense of shame, so I lower my head and pretend to write"] (2008, 13 [1992, ix]). Hence, writing becomes central to him and he reflects:

C'est que ma vie toute entière me remontait à la gorge, j'écrivais sans penser de mon cœur à la plume. A la fin de l'épuisante séance, j'emportai une cinquantaine de pages. Peut-être, en ordonnant ce récit, arriverai-je à mieux voir dans mes ténèbres et découvrirai-je quelque issue. [That is because my whole life was rising up in my throat again, because I was writing without thinking, straight from the heart to the pen. At the close of this exhausting session, I had some fifty pages to carry away with me. Perhaps, as I now straighten out his narrative, I can manage to see more clearly into my own darkness and to find a way out.] (Memmi 2008, 13–14 [1992, x])

Instead of sitting and writing the exam, he turns to his suppressed past and starts to recapitulate his own life. The function of the framing chapters (at the beginning and the end of the book) entitled "L'épreuve" (that is "exam/testing", not only "Prologue" as the publisher of Beacon Press titled it), becomes clear: they emphasize in a pointed way that the recounted life here is a written one and illustrate the existential dimension of the protagonist's writing. In the moment that he chooses not to take the exam, the narrator refuses to continue on the path of assimilation he has been following because he has found rootedness in writing and – another coincidence with his authorial father Memmi – comes into being as a writer. As Kelly (2005, 163) claims, "*La statue de sel* is then also the story of a 'coming to writing', a necessary but ambiguous activity that does however permit some shift in power relations with the world that surrounds Benillouche".

Analysis: Postcolonial Writing beyond Autobiography and Fiction

Focusing on Memmi's first book, *The Pillar of Salt*, from an autobiographical perspective, we become aware of its supposedly ambivalent status: on the one hand, the text draws obviously upon biographical experiences of the author who admits at a later occasion to the importance of lived experience in all of his work. He even points out the moment when he started writing during his first stay in Paris and stresses that *The Pillar of Salt* was in fact based on his real diaries (Memmi 2000b, 68). However, especially for this book, he states that it seems "une autobiographie plus vrai que nature" ['an autobiography more real than lifelike'] (Memmi and Malka 1976, 109). If an autobiographical impulse is at play in any way in all artistic works, Memmi stresses that this is particularly true for his own artistic production where the referential part is more visible than in works by other literary authors: "Toute œuvre est plus ou moins autobiographique; mettons que la mienne l'est plus ouvertement que d'autres" ['Every oeuvre is more or less autobiographical: let's say that mine is it more openly than

others'] (Memmi 2000b, 11). That's also the reason why scholars are continually interested in clarifying the autobiographical dimensions of his work.

Nonetheless, Albert Memmi has tried at the same time to subvert any direct autobiographical reading of his texts by blurring possible references and establishing ambiguity. In this way, he insistently "refuses to allow the autobiographical as the only ground for interpretations of his work" (Crowley 2009, 130). (There is one exception: *Le nomade immobile* [2000].) Even so, the beginning of *The Pillar of Salt* is reminiscent of an introduction to an autobiographical account: a nameless first-person narrator who closely resembles the real author inaugurates his personal account, seducing the reader 'prima facie' to a referential look at this text, even if no name is given. However, part two of the book undermines this construction of an autobiographical illusion and the narrator is named Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche. This is a significant concretization of the protagonist's fictitious identity that turns the text into a novel and should not be overlooked. Hence, we clearly face a fictional structure. In addition to this, a complex novelistic composition frames the entire story of a raised consciousness. That means even if the story of the interrupted exam is a true event in Memmi's life as he confirmed (Memmi 2000b), here it is explicitly not part of an autobiographical account. We face not only a typical example of Memmi's writing practice, but a foundational process of textual production as it is considered in the light of Poststructuralist thinking. So Paul de Man (1979, 920) underlined that autobiography does not depend on the evidence-based reference itself, but on the rhetorical means that produces this referentiality.

This idea of the ambiguous nature of the western genre of autobiography has been theorized about outside of postcolonial contexts, and this might help us to understand the referential dimension of Memmi's text without immediately positioning it within the Western tradition of autobiography. Interpreting his works by using these established literary models would imply that Memmi as postcolonial author is imitating a 'universal' genre. On the other hand, ignoring the possible use of authentic autobiographical structures in Memmi's text, would presuppose a hierarchy of cultural and literary forms inasmuch as it places autobiography as a solely Western genre. Taking, thirdly, the autobiographical experience, visible in Memmi's book, as unique source of postcolonial writing means to disregard the literary value of his novel. To avoid these typical restriction of the "story of Maghrebi literature trapped in the 'ghetto of autobiography'", as Brozgal (2013, 56) labels it, we should call into question established notions of the autobiographical and relocate *The Pillar of Salt* against the background of the author's own textual production. As it has already been recognized, a consistent reference to the lived is not only present in his novels, it is an overarching and a constitutive element of all of Memmi's work. Strictly speaking, the problem of this "autobiographical impulse" (Brozgal 2013, 47, 54) lies not in the literary text, but in the problematic of categorization and can be better clarified in relation to the methods of criticism. It might be likewise productive – instead of searching to determine Memmi's 'case' – to analyze the different critical approaches which would suggest (or prevent)

such readings as autobiography. Looking at the academic studies on Memmi and particularly those on *The Pillar of Salt*, most critics agree that the book is equivocal and offers a contradictory stance regarding its own textual status. Two monographic studies (Strike 2003 and Brozgal 2013) can be understood as delineation of a critical field along two opposing lines of defining Memmi's handling of the autobiographical. One group of scholars focuses mainly on the personal side of Memmi's texts in a search for their existential dimension; it is true that the author refers constantly to his own exceptional life as it relates to the problem of cultural and social belonging, as well as his experience as being colonized which have motivated his writing. Within this line, the act of writing is considered as a lived autobiographical practice, even as a healing and curative process, which then comes full circle and affects the author's life. Kelly states that this characteristic seems especially true for Memmi's book *The Scorpion*, where "the problems of identity, of belonging and not belonging, of exile and of finding a place in the postcolonial world appear to find resolution – indeed some kind of salvation – in the act of writing" (2005, 204). Also Strike (2003), looking at a selection of Memmi's novels, interviews and essays, uses the category of autobiographical writing when she conceives of the act of textualization as 'autographical' self-constitution. This neologism by excision of the 'bios' is established by Stanton (1984) to emphasize the change from life to life-writing and rejects, according to de Man, any facile presumption of referentiality. Strike (2003, 10) affirms moreover that Memmi's writing does not turn out to be an intentional act but on the contrary, it is rather an involuntary modification of the writer's subject. In this manner, she pays attention to the supposed psychological foundation of *The Pillar of Salt* and concludes that Memmi's Jewish and Maghrebian roots appear (as part of a secretly modified self) in his novels to be finally integrated in the written subject, while his essays seem to concentrate more on his relationship to the other (Strike 2003, 210). However, this interpretation postulates that Memmi's writing stems from a pre-textual psychological situation and refers again, perhaps unintentionally, to the 'bios'.

In contrast to these studies, which focus on the life of the author, the existential dimension of writing or the referential side of the text, we find other academic works whose main concern is with textual characteristics and the specific cultural and historical dynamics of discourse. Here Dugas (2014), in a scientific lecture, concludes that Memmi has overcome autobiography from the moment he started writing and refers to the author's statement when he defended *The Pillar of Salt* against political and cultural attacks. Concerning *The Scorpion*, Doris Ruhe (1998, 54) emphasizes, in line with this, Memmi's role as an important precursor of the new autobiographical paradigm and reveals the specified reading of Memmi as novelist or as autobiographer the result of a cultural blindness. Metropolitan critics have always considered writers from colonized countries as "docile pupils of their European masters" (Ruhe 1998, 54), so the problem resides not in the author Memmi, but in the shortsightedness of a critique which perceives literary transformation only in relation to canonical authors at the center. Therefore, the most famous theorists about auto-

biography neglected to consider the corpus of Francophone texts not by accident: “Philippe Lejeune [...] aurait pu trouver dans *Le Scorpion* d’Albert Memmi [...] une œuvre qui défiait les normes établies [...]” [“In Albert Memmi’s *Le Scorpion*, Philippe Lejeune (...) could have found an oeuvre which challenged the established norms (...)”] (Ruhe 1998, 54). Thus rewriting literary history, we can look also at *The Pillar of Salt* as an important precursor setting the stage for the new autobiographical model, which would later emerge with French models such as ‘nouvelle autobiographie’ and ‘autofiction’.

The most radical and original reading of Memmi in this regard comes from Brozgal whose recent book is programmatically titled *Against autobiography* (2013) and denies every totalizing gesture of reading Memmi whether it be the paradigm of autobiography, of fiction or theory. Brozgal proposes to avoid any classification with reference to the specific Western genre tradition. She openly criticizes scholars who “pressed Memmi’s personal narrative into the service of literary interpretation, using his life story to explain his literature and thus limiting its analytical possibilities” (2013, xii). Furthermore, she unveils the hegemonic background of this approach that cannot be compared to the “interpretation of metropolitan French Literature of the same period, where criticism generally accounts for the complexity of first-person narratives” (2013, xii). Referring to the omnipresent focus on the tradition of autobiography and the concept of the author in literary criticism, Brozgal declares in the end that:

Such practices, which continually return us to questions of the author’s intention, illuminate neither the works they interpret nor the genre of autobiography itself in its complex, protean nature. Further, they do not account for a whole raft of textual possibilities such as generic ambiguity, hybridity, and subterfuge (Brozgal 2013, xii).

Brozgal proposes focusing consequently on the “theoretical operation as it is produced in novel sites [...] and to reconceptualize theory itself and reimagine its proper location” (2013, xiv–xv). Following this line, her analysis outpaces any autobiographical approach and relocates Memmi’s writing with four fundamental questions in Western theory: the crisis of the auctorial subject, the blurred boundaries of the novelistic form, the ocularcentrism of western culture and the problem of colonialism (2013, xix). Regarding *The Pillar of Salt*, she especially emphasizes the discourse of writing back and its resistance against all forms of cultural hegemony (2013, xxii). In particular, her analysis of Memmi’s contrasting descriptions of the site of writing history is intriguing because it underlines the process of blurring referentiality and identity. On the one hand, Memmi shows that he is aware of his origins as a nodal point and he repeatedly provides information about the place of the Impasse Tarfoune. On the other hand, he creates ambiguity when he introduces another name for it, Impasse Tronja, in order “to resist both identification and classification” (Brozgal 2013, 45).

In summary, instead of attributing the specific features of Memmi’s text to his exceptional life experiences, we can qualify Memmi as a writer who innovated genres.

Ultimately, *The Pillar of Salt* can perhaps best be considered not only as preliminary work for Memmi's world famous postcolonial analysis of *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957), but also as a textual precursor of the new autobiographical paradigm which has not only been conceived by Western thinkers, but by Memmi himself. Nevertheless, his text continually provides a generic indeterminacy beyond autobiography, theory and fiction. If the *Pillar of Salt* is characterized by a strong autobiographical impulse and focuses narratively on models of subjectivity, it escapes quite consciously from being classified according to the Western logic of this genre. Thus, Memmi's complex strategy of indicating and blurring autobiographical references serves ultimately to resist all kinds of real and symbolical domination, classification or categorization, be it by the colonizer, by religious or traditional authorities, by pedagogy or criticism. His aesthetic project seems neither oriented on autobiography nor against it, but can be rather seen as a work of complex postcolonial writing that represents colonial consciousness and suspends it at the same time.

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