Introduction to Tetraglossia

THE SITUATION OF MAGHREBI WRITERS

Réda Bensmaïa

In a speech given at the First Algerian National Colloquium on Culture, M. Lacheraf, a Maghrebi historian and former minister of national education, addressed the question of minimal requirements for the development of a Maghrebi culture, asking the following question: “At what level already or yet to be reached, does a national culture cease to be mere entertainment, and become as basic as the bread one eats and the air one breathes?” In the context of post-colonial Maghreb, it is clear that this kind of “culture,” as M. Lacheraf realized, was first of all a goal “to be attained.” That is why in his speech he subordinated this question and the answer it might receive to a much more radical one. He wrote: “To search for an answer to this . . . is once more to ask ourselves if a given terrain can usefully accommodate a culture that is also given; and whether such an operation does not necessitate that this terrain, that is to say, the mass of people, should first of all be in a position to respond, both to the cultural needs which fuel them and to the demands made on them by a small group of their fellows who are better equipped to satisfy these needs?”

Thus the first thing one should notice is that the situation inherited by Algeria at the time of independence is a catastrophic one: in the foreground a deculturation of the popular masses such that the very notion of a public seems like a luxury, or at best a difficult goal to reach; in the background a number of writers, artists (among them filmmakers) and intellectuals too few in relation to the “needs” and for the most part “acculturated.” So not only are the “products” (and the producers) lacking, but also so is the “terrain” itself where
such products might grow and assume a meaning, above all the material and objective conditions for an audience or a “public.” At the time of independence, cultural problems are never addressed in universal and abstract terms of expression and production, but necessarily always in regional and concrete terms of territorialization or re-territorialization, based on the spiritual and material fragments that the country has inherited, in order to found a new and coherent cultural background. It is a question of attempting to create from scratch, but without improvisation, a new “collective subject,” something like a national “entity,” on the “debris” of a social and cultural community that has avoided disaster and total dismemberment in extremis. And at this level, every decision, every commitment becomes clearly a question of life and death. To create or re-create a “terrain,” to define something as a national “characteristic,” to re-territorialize, are all well and good, but with what basic elements does one start?

The forgotten past? The ruins of popular memory? Folklore? Tradition? In fact, none of these things carries as yet enough force and cohesion to allow the anchoring of a national culture. Better still, to believe in the possibility of a re-territorialization through folklore, the past, tradition, or religion would mean believing in the existence sub specie aeternitatis of a Maghrebi norm or essence that 135 years of colonialism would have left absolutely intact; it would also imply a belief that to sweep away the “leftovers” of this rule would mean recovering the “spirit” of the Maghrebi people in its pristine form. Obviously, neither this norm, nor this essence, existed on Independence Day: “To what norm can one return,” wrote M. Lacheraf, “if it is not to the fleeting aspects of an essentially defunct universe, of which only illusory folkloric vestiges remain, and which would only reconstitute the past in its inoperative nostalgia?” What must be assured first of all “is the continuity of a past linked to the present by new sociocultural facts, by tangible and sure acts of resurrection more than of survival.” If such a thing as a “national character” does exist, it is yet again a far off goal in constant dialectic with whatever “living” and “active” component is left in the past, not simply based on the past.

This said, even when phrased in this way, the questions are not very clear and the problems remain abstract, because whether it takes place through folklore, the past, tradition or anything else, the re-territorialization of a particular, authentic culture should first manage to solve the problem of medium or mediation through which all this might come about: “What language should one write in? In what language should one make films? In what language should people be allowed to speak and write? In what places? At what time? Or still, in