

Laurant Ropa and Paul Achard: Second Thoughts on Colonial Encroachments

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Abstract

Laurent Ropa's *The Song of the Noria* (1932) and Paul Achard's *Man from the Sea* (1931) are twin novels which deal with the Maltese community that settled in Algeria under French rule. Today, in hindsight, the reader realizes that the Arabs and Berbers, who in colonial literature are treated with paternalism, were later on in 1962 to 'turn the tables on' the European community. In this paper, I intend to dwell on a double insularity, that is, on islanders who in the long run turn out to belong to a besieged community.

The surname Ropa sounds familiar to many a Maltese academic for the reason that a translation of *The Song of the Noria*, the first novel by this author, from the original French to Maltese was published some decades ago¹. Laurent Ropa was born in Gozo in 1891.² When he was only two years of age, his parents emigrated to French North Africa, more exactly to the hinterland of the port of Bône. Eventually Ropa became a French citizen and settled in the Sarthe district of France where he passed in 1967. He can be termed as a French novelist and poet of Maltese origin. Paul Achard was born in Algiers in 1887.³ Eventually he moved to Paris where he continued to work as a journalist and where he became a novelist, playwright and scriptwriter. Ropa's *The Song of the Noria*, published in 1932 and Achard's *Man from the Sea* of 1931 are twin novels which deal with the Maltese community that settled in Algeria under French rule.⁴ This doesn't imply that any author influenced the other. On the contrary, Ropa wrote his novel during a five year span, from 1926 to 1931. As regards Achard, born to French parents, he had no need at all to delve into documents seeking information on Maltese immigrants. Achard was born in Rovigo Street where in everyday life he rubbed shoulders with neighbours who were Maltese or of Maltese origin. Hence his knowledge of this community. It must also be borne in mind that the French Empire reached its apex in the 1920's, with the French government expressing its pride by inaugurating in 1931 a grandiose Colonial Exhibition in Paris.⁵ Some 8 million visitors thronged the Bois de Vincennes to learn with awe about the diverse ethnic groups over which France held sway, and to admire their monuments, their exotic crafts and arts. Surely Ropa and Achard could draw the attention of the French in metropolitan France to the way of life of the Maltese on North African shores.

The Song of the Noria and *Man from the Sea* pertain to colonial or more exactly to "Algerianist" literature since that is the epithet which is oftentimes applied to literature written by Europeans of Algeria during the 20th century. Algerianist literature is today side-lined for ideological reasons in the sense that, in this type of literature, the masses of Arab and Berber Muslims play a relatively insignificant role. Writing in the early 1930's, Ropa and Achard could barely imagine that some thirty years later, the Muslim masses would not only come to the fore, but would even boot almost all the Europeans out of Algeria. Hence the double insularity of our two novelists. Algerian Muslims are astir in the background of these twin novels. Since by hindsight we know the dominant role that they will soon start playing in the future of Algeria, I intend to pay special attention to passages where these characters appear unobtrusively and each time their land is mentioned. Despite the ideology of an imperial political agenda, in a poetic text, the unconscious does manage to filter to the surface and cause a few surprises. In my paper on *The Song of the Noria* and *Man from the Sea*, I will highlight first the

¹ Laurant Ropa, *L-Għanja tas-Sienja* [translated by Guže Aquilina] (Malta, 1971).

² Biographical information on Ropa is given in a paper read by the Reverend Father (?) to the *Société littéraire du Maine*, France, on April 20th, 1969 (Mimeograph by François Cunen, University of Malta, March 1972), 14.

³ The following website contains biographical notes on Paul Achard, plus bibliography and filmography. http://www.memoireafriquedunord.net/biog/biogHC_Achard [accessed 26.4.2014].

⁴ Laurant Ropa, *Le Chant de la noria* (1932) (éditions de l'Atlantique, Versailles), 1980.
Paul Achard, *L'Homme de mer* (1931) (éd. R. Laffont coll. L'Algérie heureuse, Paris, 1979).

The titles of these novels will appear in their equivalent English translation.

⁵ Didier Grandsart, *Paris 1931 revoir l'exposition coloniale* (éditions Van Wilder, Paris, 2010).

Maltese community of French Algeria, then the Arabs and Berbers. Finally I will be on the lookout for any signs of decline in the whole colonial setup.

The Glittering Lights of Paris

Ropa's and Achard's approach to the Maltese of North Africa is very different indeed. Achard's *Man from the Sea* encompasses a timespan of fifty years in the life of the protagonist, Titus Galea, who is born in a village called Bouzaréah, four kilometres south of Algiers, in 1880. The name itself underscores Titus's heroic spirit and as such a sketchy family tree bears some importance. Titus's grandfather, Pascal, was born in the Maltese islands exactly on the same day that the victorious French expeditionary force under Marshall Bourmont entered the city of Algiers, 5 July 1830.⁶ In 1855, Pascal and his elder brother Salvo crossed by sailing boat — a tartane — to Tunisia and, by hugging the coast, they eventually made their way to Algiers. They started goat husbandry at Bouzaréah. Titus helped his father Spiro by leading the herd to graze further south in a ravine at Cheragas, where grandfather Pascal had bought land. Feeling the pull of the city, Titus persuaded his father to sell some produce there. After selling potatoes in the harbour area, the son took over a small shop in central Algiers. Some years later, Titus struck a good deal with Schiaffino Shipping Co. which accepted to transport his potato produce to Marseilles free of charge.⁷ On the eve of World War I, Titus, by now a well established businessman, together with Fenech, — which Achard writes “Fanatche” — another Maltese, set up the Algerian Export Co.. Of course, Titus marries a young lady from Toulouse and the couple have a child.⁸ But as the anthropology of imagery points out - that it is imperative for a hero not to pause but to continue his struggle⁹ - the wife conveniently passed away after just two years of marriage. Titus, who by now has become a French national, sees combat in the trenches of World War I.¹⁰ After the armistice, he realizes what a mine of opportunity show business in Paris is. In truth, he already had some experience in this field. In Algiers, once he received payment for performing an odd task for a music hall. At the Casino Music Hall, the general manager, noticing how rowdily Titus behaved amongst the audience, summoned him and offered him money to organize a claque. This very dubious entry into the world of the music hall proves to be a boon for Titus who is clever enough to acquaint himself with all the sundry jobs that go with the trade. Eventually he was appointed general manager of the Municipal Theatre of Algiers. During the roaring twenties, Parisians were carried away by the urge to enjoy life.¹¹ Titus marvels at the ubiquitous tango lessons, jazz bands and bandoneon music. He invests his capital well. Soon he is the owner in Paris of four music halls, a cinema, a restaurant and a casino. Here I would like to stress that Achard attributes the courage of Titus to the very fact that he traces his origins to an island. “He had the intent gaze of islanders, the sombre glistening of his velvet irises denoted a boldness that would not shirk from the immense sea.”¹² Titus is partial too to classical music so much so that he finances the production of a grandiose Wagner festival. Not surprisingly when an international conference is held in Barcelona, Titus is sent as a delegate for *Spectacles de France*. As can be seen, Achard depicts the career of a youth who from humble origins rises to become a show business magnate in the metropolis. As such, *Man of the Sea* exemplifies the Balzac structure of the novel. Achard is keen to convey the message that the mingling of ethnic groups in Algeria generated dynamism and, within the French Empire, men of enterprise always won their reward. If *Man from the Sea* conforms to the Balzac novel structure, in spirit it is far from recalling the famous author. As the Marxist critic Pierre Barbéris observed, in Balzac there always looms a threatening adversary,¹³ whilst this, in Achard, is missing.

In *The Song of the Noria*, Ropa deals with the Maltese who immigrated to Bône, a port in eastern Algeria, close to the Tunisian frontier. Ropa falls back on childhood memories and Lazarus, who along with his family settles in the Aalig district to grow market vegetables, is surely modelled on the author's father. Contrary to *Man from the Sea*, *The Song of the Noria* gives an account of the tough trials of our earthbound life and of failure lying constantly in wait. The extensive fields rented by Lazarus require an unremitting backbreaking effort so much so that he hires Kabyles as seasonal labour. Though the yield of crops is abundant, Lazarus, with a wife and four children, has difficulties in making ends meet. At one stage luck is on his side for, the new landowner, a Frenchman by the name of Casimir, proves to be very helpful. Lazarus becomes confused since he is not used at all to meeting French people.¹⁴ On inspecting the noria, Casimir, realising that the mechanism is

⁶ Achard, *Mer*, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁹ Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire* (1969) (éditions Bordas, Paris,1978)178-190.

¹⁰ Achard, *Mer*, 240.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹² *Ibid.*, 259.

¹³ Pierre Barbéris, *Le Monde de Balzac* (1973) (éditions Kimé, Paris,1999), *passim*.

¹⁴ Ropa, *Noria*, 44.

old, promises to send his blacksmith to do repairs. Then Casimir speaks of new technology — he obviously has in mind water pumps — to improve the water supply without one having to rely on beasts of burden. Here Lazarus gives a hint of his obtuseness when he declares to his wife that he thinks it inconceivable to have a water supply without the help of mules. Casimir imports a hundred saplings from Avignon in order to have a peach crop, but when the saplings finally arrive he gets irritated for the first time seeing Lazarus has not made any preparations to plant them. Later on, Casimir is killed by sunstroke¹⁵. His successor is a mean person only interested in getting rent money on time. Lazarus's stubbornness is matched only by his negligence as becomes clear during a scene whose horror reminds us of a sequence from *Un Chien andalou*, the film directed by Luis Buñuel and scripted by Salvador Dalí.¹⁶ Months of turning around the noria has left wounds on the body of the poor mule Marabout. One fateful day the wooden bar of the noria slips backwards uplifting the dead tired mule over the opening of the well.¹⁷ Two other Maltese peasants come to lend a hand to Lazarus, but all is in vain for the mule meets an atrocious end by strangling. This catastrophe is especially Lazarus's fault due to the fact that for months he had never bothered to build a proper wall separating the well from the mule. So Lazarus is quite the opposite of Titus. The hapless character will have the opportunity to redeem himself towards the end of the *The Song of the Noria*, but all along the reader senses that his deficiencies stem from the desolate background he comes from. Instead of accepting gracefully the help offered by Casimir, Lazarus actually thinks that only the Maltese are able to tend the orchards and market gardens of the Aalig district.

Conquered yet still undaunted

The two novels show the Arabs and Berbers as having been reduced to a secondary role in Algerian society. In *Man from the Sea*, where the plot unravels in Algiers, the Muslims form part of the crowd, they are one component in a society that has become cosmopolitan¹⁸. The intermingling of different ethnic groups became a hallmark of colonial society, so much so that Europeans could be traced even in the quarters of Algiers known as the Kasbah. In the rest of the territory, wherever a European settlement cropped up, you would very soon expect to see a Muslim hamlet sprouting close by, separate, and mainly composed of mud huts. Achard describes one of these hamlets situated near the ravine at Cheragas where Salvo and Pascal Galea led their flock of goats to graze in summer. Muslim society was especially a tribal one and the tribe that congregated in Cheragas was the Beni-Messous.¹⁹ The huts were usually made of mud and thatching though the huts of richer members of the tribe were of bricks and painted in gaudy colours. Prickly pear trees afforded some protection to the huts from the elements. Access to the hamlet was made possible by paths winding through the heavily eroded earth and, in winter, these paths turned oftentimes into rivulets. Achard comments that Arabs and Berbers were nomads by nature and the scene portrayed was timeless. It could easily have been likewise one thousand years before.

European settlers had introduced into Algeria a veritable agricultural revolution using tools that were superior. Besides they seized the opportunity of exporting their produce to mainland France. Arabs and Berbers felt dazed by this new investment of energies and capital and accepted to be hired by European farmers. The Kabyles who work in Lazarus's market gardens come every spring by ferry from Djidjel, a port which is some 200 hundred kilometres west of Bône.²⁰ Some come from even farther away, from Bougie. Then, after the first autumn rains, they all pack their meagre belongings and return to mountainous Kabylia.

Faced by this invasion of different mores, of a new administration and of a formidable French army of occupation, the Muslims nevertheless were adamant in sticking to their traditions. Here Achard gives one good example. The poor inhabitants of the Cheragas hamlet had ragtag attire, some men wore a buttonless army uniform salvaged from the rubbish dump of barracks, others an old sweater picked up from the garbage. What was important was that all men wore a fez.²¹ The reader can observe a Muslim otherness at work in Ropa. Someone had to permanently watch over the mule of the noria, to goad the beast into continuing its interminable rounds. For a long period Akli used to be on night duty. Oftentimes Lazarus's two sons, Luigi and Pietro, used to slip out into the night to keep Akli company. Once they asked him whether he was afraid of spooks. Akli assured the two children that the Demon never gave him any cause for worry because, unlike Christians, Akli

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁶ Sequence of the dead donkey in Luis Buñuel, Luis dir. (1928). *Un Chien andalou*. Script Salvador Dalí, perf. Simone Mareuil and Jaime Miravilles. DVD. Classic Movie collection.

¹⁷ Ropa, *Noria*, 146.

¹⁸ Achard, *Mer*, 113.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁰ Ropa, *Noria*, 71.

²¹ Achard, *Mer*, 72.

was circumcise.²² Evidently Muslims cherish a different set of moral values. Lazarus keeps sinking in debt due to the careless management of his agricultural enterprise. Where three labourers are enough, he employs a dozen. When the day of reckoning arrives he makes a number of Kabyles redundant. Without any utterance of surprise, without any complaint about being unfairly treated, the dismissed Kabyles leave and are never heard of anymore.²³ The last episode of *The Song of the Noria* concerning the death of Lazarus is revealing in this regard. The noria once more proves to be the undoing of Lazarus, for one calm night he falls asleep on the wall of the cistern. After feeling unwell, Lazarus passes and his body rolls onto the water where it remains afloat. At dawn, as he is accustomed to, Bou Djemaa comes to recite his prayers beside the cistern. On the second time he prostrates himself, he catches a glimpse of the floating corpse. Unperturbed Bou Djemaa continues his prayers. When he finishes, he draws near the corpse and invokes Allah.

Other Muslim traditions widen the rift between Berbers and Europeans. Such is the case with polygamy. In *Man from the Sea*, the chief of the Beni-Messous tribe flaunts his three wives who serve as status symbol.²⁴ The two novels in question show Arabs and Berbers earning their living through humble jobs or working as hired labour in a market garden. Though they lost all initiative to Europeans, they seem to have finally marked their territory by defending their traditions and religion. In this aspect they are definitely able to stand their ground.

A peasant Cassandra

When *Man from the Sea* and *The Song of the Noria* were published, the one in 1931 and the other in 1932, France, which had emerged victorious in the 1914-1918 conflict, had practically the mightiest army on the international scene. The mere thought of a widespread rebellion by the Arabs and Berbers of its Algerian colony was inconceivable. Never was there a moment in the 1920's and the 1930's when European Algerians, Maltese included, felt that they were about to be thrown on the defensive as happened later on from 1960 to 1962 with the tragic consequences that ensued. My task is now to try to show that in these two novels written when French prestige was at its apex, it is possible to discover signs of decline in the system of empire building.

In *The Song of the Noria*, some Maltese, unlike Lazarus, manage gradually to make a fortune out of farming. Such is the case of one peasant known exclusively by the nickname "Kandju" — and whose wife is obviously Kandja — who from humble beginnings proceeds in due course to own some 35 hectares of orchards.²⁵ The end result though is not all edifying. Kandju puts on weight so much so that he earns for himself a second nickname : "pot-belly". On her part, Kandja, by donning for her son's wedding a showy hat, elicits comments that she apes French ladies.²⁶

The influx in French Algeria of thousands of Spaniards, Italians and Sicilians, the frequency of mixed marriages and a certain buoyancy of the economy started giving the impression towards the end of the 19th century that a new nation was about to be born. European Algerians needed a model to spur their ego and soon the expression "Latin Algeria" came to be bandied about. Louis Bertrand who, during the last decade of the nineteenth century taught in colleges of Algiers, embarked on a writing career and got elected to the *Académie française* in 1925, was fond of using in his essays and novels the expression "Latin Africa". Achard too makes use of reminiscences of Imperial Rome. Pascal is described as having the grim features of Cato the Elder²⁷ and Titus's Caesarean profile is striking.²⁸ Achard also jumps to the conclusion that the Maltese surname Galea is of classical origin, "galea" meaning in Latin "helmet" and "galearius", "a helmeted warrior". In fact Achard hails Titus as a worthy successor of the "galearii".²⁹ Achard's etymological explanation of the Maltese surname deserves our attention, however many experts in onomastics would beg to differ. Anyway exhuming ancient Rome was surely not the antidote to the ills of 20th century Algeria.

In the two novels in question, the Arabs and Berbers seem to be well under control. However Ropa especially harks back to past colonial wars. In *Jacqueline*, which is his second novel published in 1936, one of the main characters is Séraphin Vella of Maltese origin³⁰. Séraphin's grandfather became a naturalized Frenchman, joined the French army and got killed during the El-Mokrani uprising of 1871 which though short-

²² Ropa, *Noria*, 138.

²³ *Ibid.*, 185.

²⁴ Achard, *Mer*, 74.

²⁵ Ropa, *Noria*, 48.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁷ Achard, *Mer*, 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 280.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁰ Ropa, *Kâline* (Albert Messein éditeur, Paris, 1936).

lived spread to one-third of Algerian territory.³¹ The opening of *The Song of the Noria* narrates the life of the first European landlord of Aalig, Clement, who was Maltese. This sequence embodies the theme of insularity on both levels, that is spatial and ideological. In 1832, Clement took part in expeditions against Muslim tribes of eastern Algeria. In September 1836, he was seriously wounded in the leg during an ill-fated attack by the French army on the city of Constantine.³² Limping Clement, as he was now called, set out to reclaim the bush territory known as Aalig initially for pasture, and little by little for tillage. Limping Clement's ambitious plans became possible both because the Arabs had been militarily defeated and also due to the mettle, which according to the two novelists, is an asset of islanders. At the end, limping Clement lorded over a territory of some one hundred hectares, built a small chapel dedicated to Saint Clement and died at the venerable age of eighty-five.

Of course in *The Song of the Noria*, Ropa is not all inclined to discuss modern political thinking, he is more intent on describing Maltese common folk and their superstitious nature. Limping Clement's bountiful wealth made many a Maltese neighbour jealous and it was not long before rumours attributed riches to secret dealings with the Prince of Darkness. Lazarus's neighbour is in fact limping Clement's very own nephew who is known by a nickname, Wailing Angelo, whose wife, as can be expected, is Wailing Grazia. The latter comes to lament before Dora, Lazarus's humble wife, peasants' common plights and their misfortunes. Wailing Grazia speaks in a Biblical manner. According to her, limping Clement's death, which was deemed to be very sudden, proves that he had irked the Almighty. Today the norias of the Aalig had almost dried up, limping Clement's chapel had been closed down and was now used as a stable. Surely God's curse had descended upon the Aalig. The narrator remarks that in some instances Wailing Grazia's tone resembled that of a prophetess. Though Wailing Grazia is obviously a hysterical woman, the narrator is not far off the mark. Ropa sets the plot of his novel in the very early years of the 20th century. But the reader realizes that some utterings by Wailing Grazia can easily be applied to 1962, the year European Algerians were evicted from their land of birth. "Plague and cholera couldn't have wreaked such a total catastrophe" declares portentously Wailing Grazia.³³ And then, "God strikes down not only the family that has succumbed to the temptation of the Evil One, but even those who come after to inhabit their accursed abode."³⁴

In conclusion, French colonization of Algeria gave rise to a cosmopolitan society. Ropa and Achard hail the Maltese community that was giving a valid contribution to the building of a new France in North Africa. Both novelists show that some traits of the Maltese character are distinct due to the fact this people traces its origins to a defiant archipelago. Achard's *Man from the Sea* is a more complex novel of which we considered two themes only. The critic today sees the factor of time and space in Algerianist literature as being of paramount importance. Ideology linked to this particular space in time that is colonial Algeria risks throwing *The Song of the Noria* and *Man from the Sea* to the ash heap of history. Hence my need to broaden the meaning of insularity, to make it denote isolation from the ideological point of view, missing the train of history. Ropa and Achard show Arabs and Berbers of Algeria at a low ebb in their political development. How could they surmise that the same — or an even worse — predicament was soon to befall the Europeans including the Maltese from there?

³¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

³² Ropa, *Noria*, 7-8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.