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Letter to a Frenchman

When you told me you wanted to leave Algeria, my friendship suddenly assumed the cloak of silence. Images, stubborn and sharp, sprang forth in the gateway of my memory.

I was looking at you and at your wife beside you.

I saw you already in France . . . New faces around you, very far from the country where for some time now things are certainly not going well.

You told me the atmosphere is getting rotten, I must leave. Your decision, without being irrevocable because you had expressed it, was progressively taking shape.

How inexplicably the country bristles! The roads no longer safe. The wheat fields transformed into sheets of flame. The Arabs becoming hostile.

People talk. People talk.

The women will be raped. Men will have their testicles cut off and rammed between their teeth.

Remember Sétif! Do you want to see another Sétif?¹

They will, but we won't.

All this you told me, laughing.

But your wife wasn't laughing.

And behind your laugh I saw.

I saw your essential ignorance of this country and its ways.

I'll tell you what I mean.

Perhaps you will leave, but tell me, when you are asked, "What is going on in Algeria?" what will you answer?

¹ Sétif was a central point in the Moslem uprising that occurred in the region of Kabylia in May 1945. In the repression which followed, lasting some two weeks, aviation and artillery took a heavy toll of lives.—*Tr.*

When your brothers ask you: "What has happened in Algeria?" what will you answer them?

More precisely, when people will want to know why you left this country, what will you do to stifle the shame that already burdens you?

The shame of not having understood, of not having wanted to understand what has happened around you every day.

For eight years you have been in this country.

And no part of this enormous wound has held you back in any way.

And no part of this enormous wound has pushed you in any way.

You have been free to discover yourself at last such as you are.

Concerned about Man but strangely not about the Arab.

Worried, anguished, torn.

But right out in the open, your immersion in the same mud, in the same leprosy.

For there is not a European who is not revolted, indignant, alarmed at everything, except at the fate to which the Arab is subjected.

Unperceived Arabs.

Ignored Arabs.

Arabs passed over in silence.

Arabs spirited away, dissimulated.

Arabs daily denied, transformed into the Saharan stage set.

And you mingling with those:

Who have never shaken hands with an Arab.

Never drunk coffee.

Never exchanged commonplaces about the weather with an Arab.

By your side the Arabs.

Pushed aside the Arabs.

Without effort rejected the Arabs.

Confined the Arabs.

Native town crushed.

Town of sleeping natives.

Nothing ever happens among the Arabs.

All this leprosy on your body.

You will leave. But all these questions, these questions without answer. The collective silence of 800,000 Frenchmen, this ignorant silence, this innocent silence.

And 9,000,000 men under this winding-sheet of silence.

I offer you this dossier so that no one will die, neither yesterday's dead, nor the resuscitated of today.

I want my voice to be harsh, I don't want it to be beautiful, I don't want it to be pure, I don't want it to have all dimensions.

I want it to be torn through and through, I don't want it to be enticing, for I am speaking of man and his refusal, of the day-to-day rottenness of man, of his dreadful failure.

I want you to tell.

That I should say for example: there is a shortage of schools in Algeria, so that you will think: it's a shame, something has to be done about it.

That I should say: one Arab out of three hundred is able to sign his name, so that you will think: that's too bad, it has to stop.

Listen further:

A school-mistress complaining to me, complaining about having to admit new Arab children to her school every year.

A school mistress complaining that once all the Europeans were enrolled, she was obliged to give schooling to a few Arab children.

The illiteracy of these "Ayraab" tots that spreads at the same rate as our silence.

Teach the Arabs? You're not serious.

So you just want to complicate our lives.

They're fine the way they are.

The less they understand the better off they are.

And where would we get the funds?

It will cost you a fortune.

Anyway, they're not asking for that much.

A survey carried out among the *Caïds* shows that the Arab doesn't demand schools.²

Millions of young bootblacks. Millions of "*porter, madame?*"

Millions of give me a piece of bread. Millions of illiterates "not knowing how to sign, don't sign, let us sign."

Millions of fingerprints on the police reports that lead to prisons.

On Monsieur le Cadi's records.

On the enlistments in the regiments of Algerian infantry.

Millions of *fellahs* exploited, cheated, robbed.³

Fellahs grabbed at four in the morning,

Released at eight in the evening.

From sun to moon.

Fellahs gorged with water, gorged with leaves, gorged with old biscuit which has to last all month.

Motionless *fellah* and your arms move and your bowed back but your life stopped. The cars pass and you don't move. They could run over your belly and you wouldn't move.

Arabs on the roads.

Sticks slipped through the handle of the basket.

Empty basket, empty hope, this whole death of the *fellah*.

Two hundred fifty francs a day.

Fellah without land.

Fellah without reason.

If you don't like it you can just leave. Shacks full of children. Shacks full of women.

Wrung-out *fellah*.

Without dream.

Six times two hundred fifty francs a day.

And nothing here belongs to you.

We're nice to you, what are you complaining about?

What would you do without us? A fine country this would be if we left!

Become a swamp in no time at all, yes!

² A *caïd* is an indigenous magistrate.—Tr.

³ A *fellah* is a peasant.—Tr.

Twenty-four times two hundred fifty francs a day.

Work *fellah*. In your blood the prostrate exhaustion of a whole lifetime.

Six thousand francs a month.

On your face despair.

In your belly resignation . . .

What does it matter *fellah* if this country is beautiful.

time we disregard our profession, each time that we give up our attitude of understanding and adopt an attitude of punishment, we are mistaken'. *This is a stance that he expresses even more clearly in his editorial of 20 December 1956, in which he pleads that the idea of formulating a series of disciplinary rules must be abandoned once and for all. That was his last contribution.*

All the editorials that Fanon wrote present and further his ideas for a hospital that conforms to the lessons he learnt at Saint-Alban. The patients themselves take up the reins and endeavour to express themselves, especially the women of the fifth ward. We see some names crop up frequently, such as Cécile Nouad, a patient who often expresses her happiness and also wrote poems. In the later issues, the names of Muslim men start to appear, especially on topics concerning sport, football or bowls competitions.

A change occurs in the very last of Doctor Fanon's editorials, especially in the December 1956 issue, a change that is impossible not to notice. In the articles written in the years prior, he addressed both patients and the nursing staff, while the last three editorials revolve around the orderlies and their training, as if Fanon were now handing over the reins. In March 1955, according to Pierre Chaulet (Fanon colloquium, Algiers, July 2009), Algerian officials, including Chaulet himself, met with the young psychiatrist who from then on committed to the Algerian revolution. This parallel activity, to which he devoted himself with characteristic passion, probably explains the somewhat distant tone notable in his last texts. In December 1956, Fanon sent a letter of resignation to minister Robert Lacoste, refusing to participate any longer in the enterprise of 'de-humanization' that France was carrying out in Algeria. His expulsion order came in the first week of January.

24 December 1953, no. 1. *Memory and journal*

At the previous pavilion meeting at De Clérambault, we made the decision to publish a journal. We also pondered about the name we would give it: the question was raised and no one found it obvious. After a while, however, some titles were timidly put forward. I recall one of them: namely, *Journal de bord*.³ I would like to dwell a little on this title and try to clarify the journal's importance.

³[Fanon himself wrote an 'on-board journal' ('*journal de bord*', lit. ship's log or journal) during his reconnaissance mission to Mali during the summer of 1960 (*Cŕuvres*, pp. 860–71).]

On a ship, it is commonplace to say that one is between sky and water; that one is cut off from the world; that one is alone. This journal, precisely, is to fight against the possibility of letting oneself go, against that solitude. Every day a news-sheet comes out, often poorly printed, without photos and bland. But every day, that news-sheet works to liven up the boat. In it, you are informed about the 'on-board' news: recreation, cinema, concerts, the next ports of call. You also learn, of course, about the news on land. The boat, though isolated, keeps contact with the outside, that is to say, with the world. Why? Because in two or three days, the passengers will meet up again with their parents and friends, and return to their homes.

Note that every traveller has a journal. The tourist sends cards or long letters to his friends in which he tells of his encounters. Storytelling is a very difficult discipline to acquire. I remember a young boy of eight years of age who never managed to tell *Little Red Riding Hood* properly, jumbling up all the different parts of the story.

The discovery of writing is certainly the most beautiful one, since it allows you to recall yourself, to present things that have happened in order and above all to communicate with others, even when they are absent.

7 January 1954, no. 3. *Memory and action*⁴

Some days ago, I drew a very abrupt reply. I asked a patient from Reynaud⁵ what the date was. 'How do you expect me to know the date? Every morning, I am told to get up. To eat. To go to the courtyard. At noon, I am told to eat. To go to the courtyard and afterward to go to sleep. Nobody tells me the date. How do you expect that I should know what day it is?'

The patient was clearly right. In the Middle Ages, a town crier was specially employed to announce the days and the hours. It was very useful. In modern times, we have calendars. But we don't know where to put a calendar in a ward. And also, where do we get this calendar from? It's a very difficult problem to resolve.

⁴[From this issue onwards the journal is subtitled '*Hebdomadaire intérieur du pavillon De Clérambault*' (Internal Weekly of the De Clérambault ward).]

⁵[One of the wards.]

Mrs Mina, for example, has to organize a recreational session for January 7. For this she will have to draw up a timetable. She has to know that there are only a few days left to her. She has to get her companions and work with them. For Mrs Mina's team, January 7 is an important date. Mrs Mina's entire team is working toward January 7. The rest of the ward, however, is waiting for January 7. For the whole ward wants some entertainment.

Similarly, Miss Donnadiou is preparing a recreational session for January 21. For Miss Donnadiou, this is a very important date. She and her team will have much to do. As I was told by a patient after asking whether the choir was working: 'Doctor, between the rehearsals, the walks and the workshop, we barely have time to eat.'

'Tomorrow is the Christmas performance.' 'Next Sunday, we will set out on the path of Medea.' 'Today I wrote an article for the journal.' 'Next Monday, during the meeting, I want to ask you a question, doctor.' Such phrases show precisely that it is possible to live in time. Days are not similar to one another, for each day demands a new plan of action. The calendar is a schedule of action. To rediscover the calendar, that is to say, time, is to rediscover a work schedule.

The patient from Reynaud was right. Who was in the wrong? Nobody. Everybody. Me, Mr Gil, Mr Dussauge. And then perhaps, if one looks closely, one or two 'housekeepers'. Well everybody! De Clérambault has given us a lesson, we must examine it without special consideration for others but also impartially.

21 January 1954, no. 5. *Hospitalization or lockers?*⁶

Yesterday, Friday, De Clérambault received a visit from Mr Lempereur, the hospital's treasurer, accompanied by Mr Nedjimi, the Works Manager, and Mr Rabet, the Head Builder. This visit was motivated, because only De Clérambault, we were told, has had no renovations done since it opened.

After a first inspection, Mrs [illegible] presented the requirements of the ward: 1) one locker per patient; 2) one locker per orderly; 3) a space where

⁶[On the copy we were given the word is barely legible.]

Mrs [*illegible*], head of the ward, can write. I was present. We looked at all the possible options. After two hours of looking into things we were indeed obliged to recognize that none of the three requests could be met.

Mr Lempereur, after stating the first point, asked us very nicely if the night tables did not suffice. Then the observation was made that there aren't any. It is from him that I take the title of this article. 'Your patients cannot settle in. They must surely have the feeling of being in transit'. And that is strictly accurate. I would go even further: the patients do not have the feeling of being anywhere.

It is an establishment in which the patient's quality of being a spouse or a mother is contested. This quality is contested as their marriage is deliberately ignored. It is an establishment in which they have nothing of their own. Not even their face, since there are no mirrors at De Clérambault. The patients are obliged to carry small bags containing: toothless combs, bread crusts, ripped handkerchiefs and lollies left by the latest visitor! These bags are objects that others covet. Not an uncommon desire: 'I want your comb'. Whence, upon attempts at visual break-ins, the macular reactions, the motor discharges, the overall explosive behaviours that our orderlies so naively call: agitation.

But no modifications will be able to make the ward into a pleasant place. Every inch of space is already used up. And the beds are all piled on top of one another. The patients obviously as well. The truth is that De Clérambault was built to accommodate ninety beds. Today we have one hundred-and-sixty-eight beds in it.⁷

1 April 1954, no. 15.

A ministerial circular has asked for psychiatric hospitals to desist with the attitude of calling hospitalized women by their maiden names. In terms of innovation, this circular stipulated that it was good to allow the patients

⁷[Fanon's skepticism toward the notion of agitation is stated in several articles. The sorts of behaviour subsumed under this term do not result directly or only from some endogenous causality, but also from structures imposed on the conditions of existence. Concerning Algeria, Fanon would draw up an inventory of them with his colleagues, from 1955 on, in 'Current Aspects of Mental Care in Algeria' (see below, p. 395).]

to hold onto their personal clothes and their wedding rings. These small modifications seem unimportant, but it is always necessary to remember that mental illness is often manifest through an alteration in the notion of the 'I'. To call a married woman, a mother of two or three children, by her maiden name, means obliging her to take a step backward. One of my friends, I recall, had a *nom de guerre* during the war, and found it troublesome to be called by this name again in 1949. The point being that, ever since the end of the war, he had regained another personality, one with different reactions, thoughts and concerns. In 1950, he was no longer a member of the resistance, he had again adopted his official name, his normal life in a country that had regained its normal state.

At each major shake-up of one's life, one needs to rediscover one's dimensions, one needs to stabilize one's positions. We ought not to collaborate in the destruction of these positions. How many times have I felt that training needs to be carried out in certain hospitals? Staff are sometimes not content to call patients by their maiden names and would instead use a first name or a nickname. Some do not take care to pause, such as, for example, the orderly who called a patient suffering hallucinations 'Joan of Arc'.

8 April 1954, no. 16.

Future generations will ask themselves with interest why we were persuaded to build psychiatric hospitals remote from any centre. Several patients have already asked me: 'Doctor, will we hear the Easter bells ring? – I don't know'. I didn't want to answer the question, because, though I was only new in this hospital, I felt responsible for the fact that we are unable to hear the bells from here.

Regardless of which religious attitudes you adopt, daily life is cadenced by a certain number of noises and the church bells represent an important element of that symphony. In France there is a poetry of the Angelus that the peasant close to the land lives in a very profound way. It is very likely that in small urban areas in Algeria this sonorous melody also exists.

Easter is coming. But the bells will not die to be born again because they have never existed at the Blida Psychiatric Hospital. The Blida Psychiatric Hospital will continue to live in silence. A silence without bells.