

FRANÇOIS AUGIÉRAS (1925-1971)

Gert Hekma

In 1950 an unknown writer dispatched his story, *Le vieillard et l'enfant* [The Old Man and the Child], to various individuals who, he thought, could help secure its publication. He had already had it printed at his own expense.¹ One copy was received by André Gide, who wrote in his journal that he had experienced "... an intense and bizarre joy. . . in reading and rereading these remarkable pages."² A copy was also sent to Marguerite Yourcenar, and she too says that she read it with much pleasure.³ Later Michel Tournier delivered this assessment: "Perhaps because of a certain awkwardness in style, this description of the misery and beauty of contemporary life in the Sahara acquires a tone of strict chastity and incomparable truth."⁴ The author was listed as "Abdallah Chaamba," the pseudonym that François Augiéras used until the mid-1960s. His stories of the Sahara, despite all the literary praise they have received, are still unjustly neglected, even in his native France.

Augiéras was born to French parents on 18 July 1925 in Rochester, New York, where his father, a well-known pianist, had been teaching music at the Eastman School of Music. Two months before Augiéras' birth, however, his father died, and soon after his birth his mother returned with the baby to Paris, where she tried to make a living decorating pottery. She was of Slavic extraction, and Augiéras speculated throughout his life about his identity: French, American, Russian, or perhaps Arab? He loathed France, and particularly Paris; neither did America agree with him. Rather, he imagined his pagan forefathers storming Europe from the Siberian steppes. Later he identified himself as an Arab, or even as someone with no identity.



Wood engraving from title page of *La trajectoire*

The family's stay in Paris was short, and in 1931 his mother moved with him to Périgueux in the Dordogne; this would become one of Augiéras' favorite homes, and an area to which he continually returned. As an adolescent, Augiéras had a falling out with his mother: "I was happy when at age fourteen I said farewell to my mother, who remains a symbol of the tyrannical neurotic woman. . . from then on I more or less consciously loathed women. . . I believe that the world of women is more or less foreign to the world of men, that there is an antagonism, a constant war that neither love nor family life can exclude. . . Women want to create life, in contrast to the role of men, who create objects, ideas, who make art."⁵

Augiéras' schooling was interrupted by the war. However, the local library offered him an

opportunity to satisfy his hunger for books. By his own account, he read Nietzsche, Rimbaud, and de Sade. For a short time during the war he joined the Jeunesse de France et d'Outre-Mer, the youth movement of Vichy France. The German National Socialist ideology stirred deep feelings in him. He viewed the return to a kind of paganism as part of his heritage. The idea of one Europe, the emphasis on the values of nature and Teutonic myth, as opposed to Christian influences, struck a chord in him. But he did not find himself attracted to their other cultural ideas: "Anti-Christian, yes; Nazi, no."⁶ He saw himself as, at heart, a drifter, and he found the Fascist petit bourgeois mentality abhorrent. For six months he travelled through France as an actor with a theater troupe. In 1943 he spent a short time caring for fifty boys with learning disabilities who were more or less dumped on him in an isolated castle. Later, he followed a work-study course in agriculture, and lived for a while with an aunt in her comfortable country house.

In September, 1944, he joined the French Navy at Toulon, with the expectation that he thus might be able to get in contact with an uncle who lived in El-Goléa, Algeria, and about whom he had heard many stories. He did find him about a year later, but not before being committed to a psychiatric institution and spending time in a monastery, both of which experiences he claimed happened quite by accident. In his autobiography, he attributes the hospital stay to a medical check-up that got out of hand. He had been suffering from starvation, and the resulting faintness and tremors were mistaken for a mental disorder.⁷ This might be a bit of dissembling — he had had nervous troubles in the past.

His uncle was a retired colonel who had set up a desert museum in a deserted fort in the Sahara. El-Goléa was, and remains, a small oasis about 300 kilometers from the nearest village. It was here that Augiéras' themes first began to take shape: boy-love, sadism, and incest, in an atmosphere of mystic paganism. It was here that he conceived the idea for his first book.

Le vieillard et l'enfant, which did not appear in a regular edition until November 1951, is, at least to some degree, an autobiographical account of

his relationship with his uncle, though the biographical data on Augiéras is so slim that we cannot be sure how much of the book is real and how much fantasy. His other works are certainly based on his own life, but we also know from the observations of his friends that he had a rich fantasy life. Placet, his life-long friend, once said to him: "In your work, are there any heroes other than François Augiéras, surrounded by his dopelgangers? You live in a kaleidoscope. Don't ever try to get out. Your unique style is a product of this closed universe."⁸

Augiéras was already twenty when he first met his uncle. He already had behind him the experiences of the army, a theater company, a psychiatric institution, and a monastery. He most certainly was not the naïve, inexperienced, young Algerian boy who is the central character of the book. The fictionalization, and the Arab nomde-plume, demonstrate an urge to create a separate, objectified literary reality that at the same time comes to terms with personal experience. The pseudonym combines the name of one of his Arab friends with the name of the Berber tribe that lived in the desert near El-Goléa, the Chaamba. It shows his temporary identification with that milieu as well as a literary need to become Arab (or, conversely, to stop being French), or at least to identify with his subject.

This work sets the tone for the whole oeuvre. "The old man" of the title enslaves his nephew, forces him to have intercourse, and beats him whenever he feels the urge, although this is sometimes described romantically. In one scene the beating takes place on an iron bed on the roof of the house, under the starry skies of the Sahara. Certainly one of the models for the old man was his uncle. Augiéras saw him more as God than as the devil; the protagonist becomes addicted to such treatment, and to being the child ("l'enfant"). The stay at El-Goléa did not last long, perhaps a couple of months. But Augiéras continually referred to it, which the colonel did not always appreciate.

From the beginning of the war until his death, Augiéras was to wander. His important stopping places were the Maghreb in North Africa, the Dordogne, and the sacred Mount Athos. He also

visited Morocco (where he was a male prostitute), Mali, and Tunisia. When Gide sent him a letter of praise, he set off immediately for Taormina, where Gide was then staying, in order to meet the great writer. In 1960, he married a second cousin, but the homosexual wanderer did not succeed in establishing himself as a heterosexual. He always returned to the Vézère River valley of the Dordogne.

Augiéras was a true writer's writer: publishing small editions, enjoying only a limited public, and having no earnings. He was a drifter who lived on almost nothing, without home or possessions to curtail his freedom of movement. He was a pagan who lived in and from nature, and for whom the love of other "enlightened ones" was more nourishing than real food.

The Work

His oeuvre falls, by locale, into several categories. There are, first of all, the two North African desert books: *Le vieillard et l'enfant* and *Le voyage des morts* (1954) [The Travels of the Dead]. There are three volumes set in the French Dordogne region: *L'apprenti sorcier* (1964) [The Sorcerer's Apprentice], *Domme ou L'essai d'occupation* (1981) [Domme, or the Test of the Occupation], and *Les barbares d'Occident* (1990) [The Western Barbarians]. His Greek book is *Un voyage au Mont Athos* (1970) [A Trip to Mount Athos]. *Une adolescence au temps du Maréchal, et de multiples aventures* (1968) [An Adolescence during the Maréchal, and Multiple Adventures], is an autobiographical account about his youth in Vichy France; it takes place in both France and Algeria.⁹ All these volumes are highly autobiographical, even, it might be argued, *L'apprenti sorcier*, which is set in the Dordogne but tells much the same tale as *Le vieillard*, although the character of the colonel is here replaced by a priest. Perhaps an exception can be made for *Un voyage au Mont Athos*, a highly mythologized account of Augiéras's stay on the Greek monastic peninsula, where neither women nor even female animals are permitted.

Augiéras' use of language is clear and sometimes bold, with sudden, surprising twists. In *Le*

vieillard he describes thus the relationship between the old man and the boy, lying together in bed:

... this evening, I am brutally beaten. With blows of the stick, this man makes me free forever, thrashing my eternal face, saying to me, "How can it be said that a child is innocent?" ... The old man seeks my lips; as soon as he finds them, he shudders violently and cries out, surprised by the abundance and the violence of the flood that rips from him, that pours out over me.¹⁰

These are typical passages: direct, erotic, and with a striking reversal of perspective. The narrator finds a kind of liberation in bondage and being beaten. The old man begins to doubt the innocence of children even as he is driving out that innocence. The "eternal face" refers to the soul, because the old man beats not only the body but also the soul. In the original version there is a passage, removed in later editions, in which the old man says, "The idea of a zoo, which I thought of long ago, returned even more powerfully, with this variation: an animal reserve surrounded by fences, but no longer for animals, but for a child, for you."¹¹

Le voyage des morts is a poetic account of Augiéras's journey through the Maghreb. It comprises five chapters, each named for a place: Tadmit, Gardaia, El-Goléa, Agadir and "the river," the Senegal. The subject of the book is Augiéras's life. Again, in chapter five, the uncle plays a role: "I love you so, bleeding, at night."¹² But in addition to the uncle there are other lovers and sexual partners: boys, men, and whores. In Tadmit he falls in love with an Arab lad with whom he goes to the whores. After the lad has been upstairs, the narrator wants to go to bed with the same prostitute: "I desired her after my comrade had had her. I thought it was beautiful and noble that boys make love with one another, advisable that they should also go with girls."¹³ This triangle (man loves man and copulates with the beloved's woman) is sometimes a homosexual evasion, but not in the case of Augiéras, who ends in the arms of the beloved

boy.¹⁴ There are also scenes of bestiality. He describes the goats that he tends as his "harem." "My prick is big and hard, I have been among the women; after I have shut the iron door of the goat pen behind me, I screw my women. . . . Am I not a young king with a court in the mountains?"¹⁵

Augiéras has little to say about masturbation, but much to say about boys and beatings. The scene in which a man orders Augiéras and a Berber boy to embrace each other offers a remarkable tableau. "I submitted gladly. The other took a belt of red leather. When I was stretched out next to my friend, face to face, hands in front of our eyes, he hit us so that the whip struck us at the same time. The same pain at the same instant made our lips tremble in unison. He left us, saying that he had only wanted to see us happy."¹⁶ The book has as a sub-text bizarre but unique sexual descriptions: "I sometimes burned my semen; what joy to mix my young force with that of the stars and plants. . . ."¹⁷ At the end of the book he describes, always in very honest terms, how he prostituted himself in Agadir.

Augiéras considerably mythologized his life. For example, in both *Le vieillard* and *Le voyage*, Augiéras describes himself as an adolescent boy, but during his stay in Agadir he was thirty, not the best age to earn money in Morocco as a French rent-boy. We should not interpret this in psychiatric terms as infantilism, but as his wish to look at the world through the eyes of a boy: openly and without inhibition. The books explore the border between innocence and experience, where one does not necessarily exclude the other.

L'apprenti sorcier is the El-Goléa experience transposed to the Dordogne. The theme is familiar: the young narrator is turned over by his parents to a priest who by turns mishandles and caresses him: "I followed him into my room where, having tied me across a chair, he flogged me with the switch. Then, kneeling down next to me, he covered me with a thousand caresses."¹⁸ The priest's sadism only increases the child's love for him. The boy also flagellates himself: "I felt no remorse for anything, nor guilt for anything, but only a violent and wild desire to

suffer and to live. Shutters drawn, door closed, I did as I had said. I whipped myself, half-naked, in the dark room, kneeling on the prie-dieu, a shadowy accomplice in my determination to tear myself apart. After the hundredth blow I granted myself a temporary reprieve, as I was too tired to do more. . . ."¹⁹ Meanwhile, he falls in love with a baker's boy. A scandal erupts and the police arrive to investigate the affair. Augiéras' narrator is torn: on the one hand is the eternal soul, elevated far above such sexual matters; on the other hand is the body, victim of local, hypocritical morality. But of what concern are the affairs of men, and prosecutions for morals offenses? The narrator, an enlightened soul, is convinced of the goodness of his love; it is both worldly and heavenly. The novel ends with the suggestion that the boy will lose the trial, but his soul will continue to strive for new loves, uncorrupted by the banalities of earthly life.

Un voyage au Mont Athos is the tale of a pagan hermit living on an island of Orthodox monks. The narrator describes the island as a half-way house on the road to the other life. The first days after his arrival are rendered in great detail. He visits various monasteries, where he is sometimes received with extravagant friendliness, and sometimes with great harshness. As in the other books there is a lot of sex: a welcome that turns into a rape, a beautiful episode with a serving boy, another with a novice. In Part Two, the narrator goes to the Holy Mountain where the hermits dwell. He meets a hermit, a simple fellow who helps install him in a cave. The narrator strikes up a friendship with him and his boy apprentice, who disappear almost immediately from the narrative, partly because of the hermit's jealousy. The narrator's life becomes one of enforced isolation and detachment. Nonetheless, one unexpected sex scene occurs: "The lack of food renders me extremely weak, without defense against the newest rebound of my basest instincts; the feminine part of my character arises to the surface again to make me a wife. I cut a stick and carve a member, and sodomize myself; then, furious at this stupidity, I throw the stinking piece of wood in the fire. But then I ask myself, is such an aberration not an

archaic technique for *awakening* so ancient that the good produced by it is now forgotten and it passes only for something despicable?"²⁰

As the books progress, there is an evolution in the portrayal of love. They might be said to become more transcendental. *Domme ou L'essai d'occupation*, written toward the end of his life and published posthumously in 1982, describes his stay in a hospital, and his incessant walks around the institution. His bizarre conduct awakens the suspicion of the local police and mayor, although we are never certain from the narrative whether it is truly others' suspicion or merely the narrator's paranoia. He builds a refuge in the woods near the village, but twice vandals destroy it. He goes further into the woods, and falls in love, first with a girl, and then with a 13-year-old orphan named Krishna.

He often stayed with me far into the night. I have the tastes and tendencies of the other world, and no intention of changing to please men who live in an illusory time and who know nothing of the Eternal. I pay no attention to a civilization in Domme that I cannot call mine, a condemned civilization that is entirely dead and that has no connection to the God-Eternal.²¹

Augiéras no longer lives in the here and now. He closes the novel with a sigh: will people ever leave him alone?

Conclusions

Augiéras died in the hospital at Périgueux on 13 December 1971, several days after a heart attack. He died alone. He wished to be cremated on an island in the Vézère, but was instead buried with a view over the river. Only three friends attended the burial. There were no obituaries in the French press; he was too obscure.

Augiéras, a traditional prose stylist with unusual themes, occupies an odd position in homosexual literary history. Like other homosexual authors, he sought definition of his identity outside the metropolitan West, in this case,

not just in north Africa, but also in an imaginary world. He resembles Jan Hanlo, Paul Bowles, and Michel Tournier. Homosexuals, he seems to say, have an identity imposed upon them by their own societies, and can be freer to evolve something that is specifically personal if they live elsewhere. His themes are not just those of boy-love and violence, but include sadism and masochism, incest, bestiality, and a youth's passion for an elderly man. Nature and artifice, perversion and mysticism figure in his work, which links him to the work of the decadents, such as Fersen, though to describe him as one of the decadents would be inaccurate. His descriptions are too precisely natural and lack too much the romanticism of the decadents for him to be closely identified with that school. His world is sensual. He describes the sound, the color, the texture, and the smell of his surroundings with great precision. His work almost has the character of random notations, plainly written, with little embellishment. His scenes flow smoothly, informally, even the erotic ones. The transcendental theme of the separation of body and soul in *L'apprenti sorcier* appears to arise from the intention to save homosexual love from the ugly prejudices of life in this world. In *Un voyage au Mont Athos*, he describes the solitary sodomy as though it were an ancient religious ritual. He wastes few words theorizing about pederasty. To him sex is submission, whether to an uncle, to a priest, or to a monk on Mount Athos. Love is recognition, two related "enlightened" souls – nearly always boys – recognizing each other.

Every individual has a feminine and a masculine side, able to communicate with each other physically, as in the self-sodomy scene on Mount Athos. On only one occasion does he philosophize about "pederasty."²² He hypothesizes two forms: the first represents a superabundance (*surabondance*) of manhood, the second represents decadence. "In both cases there is sexual hesitation; certain youths of Greece are of the first type, healthy, robust, useful to society, with mutable desires overwhelmed by a powerful flood of the libido; the second type arises from a diminution of vitality and a despising of morality."²³ Nevertheless, we cannot really call Augiéras a philo-

sophical writer. He sought his own way in life and love, and gathered insights as he went.

Augiéras does fit into a certain tradition. The German defenders of *Lieblingsminne* (the Uranian Eros), Elisar von Kupffer and Benedict Friedländer, set the tone at the beginning of this century for a reevaluation of the Greek eros as a model for male love, in opposition to the medical models of homosexuality which Magnus Hirschfeld and others in the sexual liberation movement promoted. The cultural model of von Kupffer and Friedländer, meant that the homosexual male was masculine and loved boys and young men. They criticized Hirschfeld's "third sex" males as being too feminine; they too often fell for "normal" adult men.²⁴ Gide and Tournier typify this first tradition, as opposed to Proust or Genet writing in the Hirschfeld mold. Augiéras is at home with the former, with his predilection for the masculine, men and boys alike.

Augiéras' misfortune was to be born into a Judeo-Christian world where only parents have the right to love children. His incestuous relationship with the colonel has been described by critics as wretched and miserable, but Augiéras would doubtless have disagreed. Regarding *La trajectoire* he said, "There is not one moment of pessimism in this book. Indeed, from beginning to end it is carried by a magnificent vitality."²⁵ This constant triumph over wretchedness and misery makes Augiéras' work and life admirable. In a very Nietzschean way he has made himself over from victim to victor. For him, suffering and pain generated intense life.

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The bibliography for this article was compiled with the assistance of Erick Pontalley.

Translated from the Dutch by Words and Pictures.

NOTES

1. See the Chronological Bibliography which follows this Introduction for the works cited and a complete listing of Augiéras's publications as well as critical works about him. I have made use mostly of Rodier & Monti (1984) and Placet (1988).

2. Christian Rodier and Georges Monti (dir.), *François Augiéras*, in (Cognac: le Temps qu'il fait, 1984). Cahiers; 2. See facing page 121. Because of the subject matter of the book there was even some speculation that this was a posthumous publication of Gide himself, which one may take as sort of praise of Augiéras' writing ability.

3. Ibid, p. 37.

4. Ibid, p. 127.

5. Placet, op. cit., p. 148.

6. *La trajectoire* (1989), pp. 47-49, quotation on p. 49.

7. Placet, op. cit., pp. 185-186.

8. Placet, p. 79.

9. In a posthumous edition, 1989, this was titled *La trajectoire*.

10. *Le vieillard et l'enfant*, op. cit. (1985), pp. 73, 76.

11. *Le vieillard et l'enfant*, op. cit. (1954), p. 208.

12. *Le voyage des morts*, op. cit. (1976), p. 96.

13. Ibid, p. 37.

14. E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). Kosofsky discusses the construction in English literature of homosocial bonds and love triangles.

15. *Le voyage des morts*, op. cit. (1979), p. 39.

16. Ibid, p. 69.

17. Ibid, p. 146.

18. *L'apprenti sorcier*, op. cit. (1976), p. 17.

19. Ibid, p. 71.

20. *Un voyage au Mont Athos*, op. cit. (1970), p. 238.

21. *Domme ou L'essai d'occupation*, op. cit., pp. 175-176.

22. It is not very clear what Augiéras meant by the word "pederasty" which he uses rarely, although more often than "homosexuality." Sodomy would refer to anal sex. The French "pédérastie" can refer to homosexuality in general, although Augiéras seems to use it to mean reciprocal man-boy love.

23. *Le voyage des morts*, op. cit. (1979), p. 45.

24. Elisar von Kupffer, *Lieblingsminne und Freundesliebe in der Weltliteratur* (Berlin: 1900); Benedikt Friedlander, *Renaissance des Eros Uranios* (Berlin: 1904); and the journal *Der Eigene*. Harry Oosterhuis has prepared a collection of essays from this periodical with introduction and commentaries, *Male Bonding and Homosexuality in Pre-Nazi Germany*, which was published as a special issue by the *Journal of Homosexuality*, 22:1/2 (1991).

25. Placet, op. cit., pp. 172-173.

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