France as an idea

(Written for Harvard University, 28th April 2016,
The 'France and the World' seminar of Sylvaine Guyot – intervention cancelled for health reasons).

A very famous phrase opens the *War Memoirs* of Général de Gaulle, 'My whole life, I've had a certain idea of France.'[1] This can be understood in two ways. The first, quite ordinary, according to which the General defends a personal idea, a particular vision of his country. The other interpretation is less commonplace, and means that his rapport with France, joins him to an idea, in the strongest sense of the term, to an abstract form[2] – and that thus he conceives of the nation less as an empirical (geographical or social) reality, or as a given state of things, than as an ideality, formal power or norm. It is doubtless what the sentence implies, at least in part, since in the historical action pursued by de Gaulle – in the course of the years related in this book – one admires above all his capacity to refuse the state of things, the factual or observable France (in defeat), or what could be called in a play on words, the French state[3], in the name of an ideal and normative understanding of what the idea-France is, that must teleologically guide political practice, by opposing itself to the empirical France. The idea of France was then that of a victory, feasible but improbable, of French 'greatness', at odds with the actual vision of a France, beaten, demeaned and prostrate.

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[1] Charles de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre, 1, L'Appel 1940-1942* (Plon 1954), Pocket 1999-2007, p. 7. « Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France. » *The War Memoirs of Charles de Gaulle*, translated by Jonathan Griffin and Richard Howard, 'The Call to Honour' (Simon and Schuster, inc., 1955). Translation altered.

[2] This does not exclude a sensible bond, evoked in the very next lines : 'This is inspired by sentiment as much as by reason. The emotional side of me tends to imagine France, [as] like the princess in the fairy stories or the madonna in the frescoes [...].' (*Ibid.* Griffin and Howard) « Le sentiment me l'inspire aussi bien que la raison. Ce qu'il y a, en moi, d'affectif imagine naturellement la France, telle la princesse des contes ou la madone aux fresques des murs (…) ». *Ibid.*

[3] It should be recalled that 'French state' was the name adopted by the Vichy regime, thus proclaiming the abolition of the 'French Republic'.

The man to whom I dedicated a book – whose English title is *A Semite, A Memoir of Algeria*[4] – was different, in every way, or almost every way, from the famous general. He was an ordinary person, a man of the people, who enjoyed no celebrity. His Algerian Jewish ancestry and his engagement as a communist placed him in every way at odds with the general of an ancient French line, who was an aristocrat, Catholic, royalist and with ideas solidly anchored to the right. However, one astonishing point connects them : both of them were stripped of French nationality for several years ; de Gaulle on an individual basis as the leader of the opposition to the collaborationist French state, and the character of my book as a Jew from Algeria, and thus a member of a community expelled from the national body. Despite the great difference in their positions, their shared rejection is perhaps not mere chance. It is on this that I would like to shed light, when bringing up the *idea of France* which sustained my father, since the book is about him. I approach him paradoxically from the position of two other ideas, which also inhabited him : those of Judaism and revolution. These two structures both ideal and normative, allow an understanding of what was at stake for him when it came to France.

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René Aldebert Guenoun, born in Oran in 1911, was completely immersed in an immemorial Algerian Judaism. In the strict sense of the term, and as far back as memory would go, this Judaism, arabised by the language, by a part of the culture, but also by clothing habits and numerous customs, kept only religion as its marked specificity. His grandfather was a rabbi, and my father had himself received a strict Jewish religious education, even if this observance was coloured, in Oran, by Mediterranean traits of lightness, tranquility, and even humour that suffused it with imagination. All the same, the religion was very directive. Now this Judeo-Arab tradition was to be turned upside down by two successive and interlinked events.

On the one hand, in 1871, a French government decree decided to attribute French nationality to all Algerian Jews[5]. The Jews of Algeria acquired, collectively and all at once, the nationality of the colonising country – something that was the case neither of the Jews of neighbouring countries (even though Tunisia and Morocco, were under French rule), nor,

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[4] Columbia University Press, 2014, translated by Ann and William Smock, foreword by Judith Butler. En français : *Un sémite*, éd. Circé, 2003.

[5] The decree signed on 24th October 1870, was generally known as the 'Crémieux Decree'. *Cf. A Semite*, op. cit., p. 20. *Un sémite*, op. cit., p. 23.

above all, of the indigenous peoples of Algeria, the Arabs and the Berbers, who were far more numerous. The Algerian Jews, who had for centuries been immersed in Arab~~o~~-Berber culture, thus found themselves all of a sudden uprooted. There followed a rapid process of 'Francisation' for a large section of the Jewish population who became integrated into French mores and customs, through habits of dress and diet, styles of accomodation etc. But first and foremost through the language. The grandparents of my father spoke exclusively an Arabic interspersed with a few Hebraic words. His parents still spoke fluent Arabic. My father used it less but still with ease, while for myself, I neither learned nor spoke it. In three generations, everyone became francophone, first as their principal then as their only language. This 'assimilation' was intense, covered all spheres [of life], and was irreversible. Thus the link to religion (which was bathed in the traditional way of life) was seriously undermined.

(I should add that, due to convictions I shall go on to describe, in addition to a particular personal constitution [*habitus*], during his whole life my father endeavoured to be intensely faithful to the complexity of his Judeo-Arabic origins. He was convinced that the Jewish, Arab and Berber genealogies had continually intermixed and believed in no kind of ethnic purity. The surname Guenoun (Guénoun, Guennoun) is itself an Arab-Berber patronymic that both Muslims and Jews carry, like many Germanic surnames which designate both Jews and non-Jews in Eastern Europe. This is why my father defined us as 'semites' – which is what prompted the title of my book[6] – that is, according to the original meaning he attached to this word, he defined us as both Jewish and Arab, 'semite' designating this exact point of indistinction joining Jews and Arabs in the heritage of a shared origin).

A second event would confirm and radicalise this development. My father had grown up in the context of the French school system, which would lead him to enter the Ecole Normale d'Instituteurs, that is the public institution which, in Algeria as elsewhere, trained the future French primary school masters. Therefore, this training was not merely linguistic or linked to 'key' subjects, such as languages, mathematics, history, geography, or science etc. The future primary school teachers received a highly structured education in literature, psychology and sociology, 'public morals' and 'civic instruction', which deeply imbued in them the value system of the French Republic : Republican secularism, progress through

[6] It was partly published under this title in the periodical *Les Temps modernes* no. 562, in May 1993, then in a complete French edition in 2003. See note 4 above.

democracy, Enlightenment culture and so on. My father's tie with the Jewish religion thus came completely undone – at least in its religious aspect : forms of worship, dietary restrictions etc. My father became a resolute atheist, like the majority of the state primary school teachers of this period.

Must it then be stated that the France, whose Republican ideas would henceforth structure his thought, and the Judaism of his childhood, were antagonistic? The picture is in fact a more complex one, since, first of all, France had appeared in the recent past as the country of the emancipation of the Jews. These enlightened milieux had an acute awareness, furthered by cultural history, of the deplorable situation of the Jews in the quasi-entirety of classical Europe, as well as, for different reasons, in the Mediterranean world. France was considered to be the country that had led the emancipation in resolute fashion, as the country of the most complete legal equality. This merit was, as it were, intensified, by the struggles of the Dreyfus Affair, in which a large part of the nation rose up against Anti-semitism and, crucially, were victorious. France was, above all others, the country friendly to the Jews, and where a good life was offered them.

But the affinity of Judaism with the French way of life was nurtured at still deeper sources. What my father retained of his Jewish heritage (beyond his conversion to atheism), was the absolute eminence of the Law. For him, it was in no way confused with the formal legalism of the ritual prescriptions, but consisted in the moral essence of legality. Law was none other than the codification of the good, and legality, in its deepest essence, was therefore moral in nature. Judaism was thus identified with the absolute and unlimited pervasiveness of prescription through ethics (he didn't use the word much and said 'morals' instead). To be Jewish, was first of all to attempt to be just. Now, this lofty moralism (even reconciled with an invigorating *joie de vivre*, and a keen sense of pleasure and well-being) met up, through affinity, with Republican legalism. Fidelity to France, was firstly, gratitude for French law, conceived as the law of justice and equity. In this sense, joy of life in the French idea of the world chimed perfectly with Jewish moralism or legalism, even stripped of all theism or religiosity. Religiousness, thus considered, appeared as an outer garment of Judaism, one not describing its essential principle. This is why he considered that some great personalities, of Jewish origin but who'd become dissociated from the religion, still participated fully in the Jewish contribution to world culture. He didn't know Spinoza, and didn't know a

great deal about Bergson, but this was for him without a single doubt the case for Marx.

On this issue, I add a supplement. The connection of my father to the Jewish condition underwent a reorientation because of Nazism. State anti-Semitism in Germany and France led him to a, doubtless, more marked fidelity than in the previous period. Before the war, he saw in Judaism one religion among others and hoped for the disappearance of all religions, and so of this one too. In his heart of hearts, he nurtured this thought his whole life long. But after living through Nazism, it would have seemed unthinkable for him to evade solidarity with the persecuted, the martyrs. Thus, he continued to describe himself categorically as a Jew. He did so with ardour, during my whole childhood. We were Jewish, because the Nazis would have considered us as such, and would have exterminated us had they been able[7], regardless of belief or religious membership[8]. This did not, at the same time, prevent him from defining himself as irreligious or anti-religious. However, from his post-war perspective, the authentic France had been recovered, as a force of anti-Nazi combat and liberation, in addition to being a force of protection for the Jews[9]. Being French, was therefore to unite in a single sense of belonging Republican, democratic anti-Nazism, and Jewish perseverance. That there is to be found here no shadow of contradiction, I would not support today. Though it is in this way that he could consider himself to be unfailingly Jewish, categorically anti-religious and proudly French.

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The second alluvium that came to fertilise, or sediment, the idea of France for this twentieth-century Algerian Jew is yet another idea, that of revolution. As paradoxical as it may seem, this second idea of France was probably nourished on the first, meaning it was reared on a Jewish source. The principle which led my father to want to be a revolutionary was the principle of justice – which he thought resulted directly from his Judaic education. At the side of his Rabbi grandfather, he had absorbed a demanding conception of this norm, to the extent that he saw this

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[7] The extermination of the Jews did not take place in North Africa, due to the landing of the Allied troops in November 1942, who liberated these territories before the implimentation of the 'final solution'.

[8] I relate a particularly significant episode in this dialectic between Judaism and religion, in *A* Semite, concerning the circumcision of my older brother, in Autumn 1940 (and consequently of my own). *Cf. A Semite*, op. cit., pp. 34-41. *Un sémite*, op. cit., pp. 37-43.

[9] The anti-Jewish legislation was repealed in Algeria in 1943.

grandfather, in his own way and according to his own limits, as akin to one of the righteous. Why therefore ‘go so far as revolution’, when this would imply a critique and a distancing of Judaism. The reply can be seen to unfurl in three phases. One day when he was explaining to me the moral foundation of Judaism, the imperative of justice, I asked him what had ever distanced him from it. He answered : [1] the concern of Judaism is the Jewish people. Through communism, I want to concern myself with all peoples, and justice for all. The critique of Judaism (which, founded or otherwise, is not my topic here today), was thus handed down to me as the calling into question of the particularism of a concern limited to the community of a single people. In this sense, it was a critique of election (even though, as we shall see, election will return via a different route). But, I asked later on, why wasn’t this desire for universality simply Christian ? Wasn’t Christianity a mutation of the Jewish heritage through its universal-becoming ? The reason was, thought he, [2] because according to the Christians the kingdom of justice *is not of this world*. For his part, it was in the concrete texture of this life that he wanted to see it come to be. [3] Revolution was therefore a sort of universalised Judaism, and maintained as its intra-worldly horizon complete justice for this world. Thus communism, through political engagement, reconnected with the heart of Jewish messianism, which has never been conceived of as a call to the *beyond*.

The revolutionary standpoint was, for my father, and for many others at this period, a political transformation of messianism. It’s doubtless an obvious point, which can be observed in countless Jews who populated the revolutionary movements, Bolshevik or moderate, Stanlinist or Trotsyist, and others ; while the messianic dimension itself, to mention but one figure, finds its ancestor in Marx. The communism of my father was a lay-Judaism that had lost its religious link. And so this man, distancing himself from the religion of his close relations, had the sincere impression of having renounced nothing. This also explains why his Jewish faithfulness, which he wished to be uncompromising, never admitted any part of the Zionist ideal. Zionism, as the dream of a nation, (whatever its initial generosity may have been) was too interwoven with a particularist aspiration, confined to the singular destiny of one people. And this confinement expressed itself in the hostility of Zionism towards the Arabs : my father, who was profoundly arabophile, felt solidarity with the Arabs, both Algerian and from elsewhere. This was due to his ancestry – which was the product of the highly arabised history of Algeria, in which Arab heritage

was also grounded, for him, with the legacy of the Berbers and Jews. His position also came from an emancipatory conviction : the Arabs of Algeria having been victims in his eyes of deeply unjust colonial occupation, there was, for him, no question of restarting the colonial adventure in Palestine.

However, this anti-Zionism included another component, to be found in numerous intellectuals of his century (who were intensely Jewish, like Rosenzweig, for example – of whom my father knew nothing). It is in the idea that the profound singularity, the true eminence of Jewish history is to be found in the capacity of this people to have written its history in the general movement of an exile, or, more precisely, to have constructed itself without a land. The dignity of Judaism is its moral anchoring – its inscription into the Law. They are the only people, he thought, to have given themselves a book for a homeland, a feat of language, a body of norms – and not a space enclosed within borders. We find here, in a surprising development, another form of election: that of having for sole shared foundation the idea of morality contained in the Law. Here is the radical metaphysical and historical singularity that, thoroughly atheist as he was, he recognised in Jewish history. To wish to repatriate Judaism within a land, to re-nationalise it, was for him equivalent to losing its deepest and most life-giving principle. My father always conceived of Zionism as a kind of de-judaisation[10].

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What did the idea of France have to do with this transfer from Judaism to communism ? It intervened directly, because France was perceived as *the country of revolution.* The succession of modern revolutions was related back to the French Revolution, if not as the first occurence, then as the fundamental origin. The revolutionary process in its complexity constituted France at once in its modern, republican and democratic existence. For this reason, the French Revolution formed the object of a real veneration, as much in French cultural life, to which my father felt he belonged (for its secularism and republicanism), as, more clearly still, in the culture of the state primary school system, which formed the Republican cultural substructure, and to which my father felt bound by

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[10] This conviction was perhaps a little less elaborate than I describe it here, but it was neither latent nor implicit : in the utter simplicity of his thought, I remember hearing him express this conviction, which set out in plain terms the uniqueness of this non-landed, non-circumscribed reference to the Law.

a real vocation – and not only him either, but also my mother and a large part of the family, which included a good many primary school teachers. Now this revolution, it should not be forgotten, was not a remote event, since the French revolutionary process had continued for a hundred years, marked by major dates, each of them destined for a revolution: 1830, 1848, 1870. For a good century, France had lived and breathed the experience of continuous revolution. And the phenomenon was not over: the great popular movement of 1936, the Resistance and Liberation of the 1940s were also, within this historical vision, held to be new manifestations of the revolutionary disposition indissociable from France, which was to appear again, might we add, in the eyes of younger people (as I then was) during the revolutionary waves in May 1968. There existed, therefore, an intimate link – close and profound – between the revolutionary process and the reality of France, through which a convergence was established between Judaic francophilia and the French Republic in its insurrectional tradition[11].

But another dimension, still more closely tied to the French idea, would come to overdetermine this link. The thing I've just called to mind, constitutes the symbolic and imaginative lexicon of a certain French nationalism, which can easily be compared to other drives to inhabit nations, in Europe and elsewhere. But in spite of this avowed relatedness, there remains all the same something singular about the French ideology. The content of French nationalism, in its modern form, took root during and in the context of the French Revolution – even if it also fed on earlier sources. It then renewed itself as Republican ideology, in the successive stages of the weakening of royal ideology and in opposition to another more right-wing and religious nationalism – for instance at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, which formed the culmination or acme of this process. It so happened that this republican nationalism wanted to lay claim to a universalist ideology. The phenomenon can be seen in several of its phases. Right from the Revolution, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, described itself as universal, and not as specifically French : all

[11] On these points, extracts from my public journal may be referred to on the site http://denisguenoun.org, by following this link http://denisguenoun.org/2016/02/08/le-journal-premiere-serie-2014-2015/, and by navigating to the entries for 15th and 16th August 2014, ('Démocratie / révolutions'), pp. 25-29, and 16th October 2014, ('De la France'), p. 47 on the PDF document. As we know, this relationship between France and the 19th century revolutions had not escaped the notice of Marx, who dedicated his only three works of political history to France: *The Class Struggles in France, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, and *The Civil War in France,* which cover and analyse its history from 1848 to 1871.

men are born and remain free and equal in rights. This proclamation doesn't concern France, but humanity. I've already noted elsewhere that in the founding declaration of French Republican history, the words 'France' and 'French' don't figure, except in the prologue to indicate that the representatives of the French people, gathered in the National Assembly, had adopted the text[12]. Furthermore, we can observe that, since then, French Republican nationalism (I'm not speaking of the forms that oppose it) has very rarely stressed any sort of French particularism, emphasising in its place a, to all intents and purposes, universal dimension of the human in general. It seems to me that this insistence can equally be observed as a dimension of French culture, in literature and the arts, from music to cinema, across its different epochs. I speak here of an ideological or imaginative orientation, not of an actual universalism to which France would have the sole right. The clearest testimony to this distinction is probably colonisation : France wanted to justify its colonial enterprises in the name of a working universalism, both egalitarian, and enlightened by universal reason and the heritage of the Lumières. Here again, I'm not describing the reality of the colonial enterprise, in its authoritarian, inegalitarian, Eurocentric and racist dimensions. I'm considering the French idea. One may note that the anticolonialist emancipation movements during their ascendancy never criticised France for its ideals, but on the countrary, its concrete infidelity to its proclaimed ideals. The majority of the leaders of nationalist movements fighting colonial France wanted to claim the universalist ideals of French history for themselves (the Lumières, the Revolution, secularism, the Republic and democracy) in order to turn them against the actual practice of the French powers. In this sense, (in Algeria for instance, and certainly for the man whose memory I here recall) to be anti-colonialist was in no sense even outwardly to be anti-French, but on the contrary – from the point of view of these militants – to prove themselves more faithful to the fundamental heritage of French culture and thought than the dominant powers who denatured its legacy and tradition. In the personal history of René Guenoun, two examples leap to mind: [1] on the one hand the Vichy regime, subjugated to Nazism, was seen as a betrayal of the true essence of France. This is no doubt why, post-war, it was considered a lamentable passage in French history, a historical aberration – and why the stripping of French nationality, undergone by the whole family, was carefully erased from family memory and was the object

[12] *Cf.* D.G., *Hypothèses sur l'Europe*, Circé 2000, p. 145. *About Europe, Philosophical Hypotheses*, translated by Ch. Irizzarry, Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 90.

of a kind of methodical forgetting. A shame veiled this episode, kept the story untold : but it wasn't out of shame for ourselves, who were the victims, (a shame at having been stripped of the status of being French), but quite clearly, a shame for France, at having temporarily given way to a demon so contrary to its nature. The will to keep the French idea unsullied enforced a silence over this lamentable episode ; in the deprivation of nationality that was inflicted on us, it was France that had been deprived, deprived of itself. [2] The other example is from colonial history. In the running of the French primary school system in Algeria, my father never ceased to remark on and bitterly lament, the inegalitarian and segregationist character of an enrollment policy which excluded the native Algerian children from an education that it should have lavished upon them. In this way, my father was not questioning French education as such, but the radical infidelity of the way the schools were run in relation to the fundamental truth of the French idea of teaching, the public education system and the school environment.

This universalist vocation of France has marked the country's history well beyond the political left in its current form. Gaullisme, whose roots are thoroughly right-wing is permeated with it. When the metropolitan territory of France was invaded by the German armies, and submitted to their domination, de Gaulle immediately asserted – in a historic flash of genius – that France could not be identified with its hexagon-shaped territory, but was in some way a global reality and idea. He thus layed claim to the 'eternal' France, temporarily dislodged from itself, against the denatured and misleading empirical France. Establishing his head quarters in England, he ceaselessly referred to Overseas France, whether Mediterranean, African or Middle-Eastern. And beyond this, French universalism was expressed in the maxim that remains painted in giant letters at the de Gaulle memorial in Colombey-les-Deux-Eglises : 'There exists a pact twenty centuries old between the grandeur of France and the liberty of the world."[13] I pass over the myth of a two-millenia-old France, which is without historical basis. It is the claim to an essential agreement between French particularism and unbounded universalism, which is asserted in these terms.

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There remains to be understood how this idea of France, this France in its ideal nature, could *be embodied* in the practical life of this man. Of

[13] Taken from the speech given at Kingsway Hall in London, 1st March 1941.

course, there was the resonance of ideologies and ideal standards of reason: republican universalism, grafted onto the ethics of Judaism, practiced through ways of being which conferred on them a living consistency, (combining the life of a primary school teacher with political militancy, and fidelity to the family, etc). But a substantial element would come to unify all the above, and give to this ensemble a texture at once more sensible and intelligible : it was the special status given to *language*, the French language, written and spoken. My father, like the milieu that surrounded him, was inspired by a passion for French. The progressive loss of interest in Arabic (that he never devalorised, retaining a real affection for it) was not thought of as a rejection, but as the downside of an amourous attraction towards the French language in all its aspects : syntactic, orthographical, semantic – and even more so: stylistic, poetic, prosodic. In these families, French literature became an object of devotion, but not merely in the sense of a cultural corpus to be assimilated. Certainly, these public primary teachers held the 'classics', in the broad sense, in great reverence, which is to say the French literary tradition from Rabelais to Zola. However, it was not this literary impregnation that I noticed so much in my childhood: we spoke of Rousseau, Voltaire and Hugo with veneration, though without being especially knowledgeable. On the other hand, I was strongly inculcated with a taste for versification, the passion of saying and listening, the sonorous pleasure of prosody, the value of diction, the joy of syllables, the music of metre. This was the milk I drank from early childhood until my youth. While these were traits to be found in one or other member of the family (in my father, for example – and my grandmother, in fact, she too a teacher in French primary school: while she was still very Judeo-Arab in her style and customs, she delighted in French poetic diction, at least as much as in Algerian culinary traditions.), this love of the French language was, in fact, a widespread cultural trait covering the whole of the Jewish and Arab Maghreb of those times. This passion for the language was the material body of devotion to France.

Then, the emphasis within the 'idea' (of France) should no doubt be changed slightly. Its mental disposition was rich in meanings, multiple, moral, imaginary and theoretical. It was nourished by images and sensations : admiration for French landscapes, for instance, exalted for their breezy, rich, green abundance, in contrast to the dryness of the Algerian world (of which my father was the pure product, and that he loved passionately, but secretly, while his professed affections went to France). But all that would have counted for nothing, or little, without a complete,

mystical devotion with regard to the language, its responsive body and formal power. I'm thus able to say that the idea of France with which my father was imbued that could be called moral, political, religious or ideological, was, nevertheless, and in some way first and foremost *literary*. This is the conviction I've arrived at on reaching the end of this journey. It strikes me, all the more so, as my father was not a *literary person* by training – achievements or profession. He was more attached to the scientific disciplines. This doesn't change my realisation and even underscores it : the French ideology of which he was the bearer melded entirely into the stuff of literature. It is this passion for books and oratory that gave the idea of France its messianic consistency. The irreplaceable thing that France had brought into the world, from the perspective of this man, (as Judaism had carried the Bible) was its Letters. *Les Lettres françaises* (to echo the beautiful name of the post-war communist literary weekly), was the body, both mystic and material, of France : the true promised land embodying the country as a physical reality, but one also trans-territorial, global, and universal. For this vocation, open to all men, Molière, Rousseau and Hugo were the true prophets – in the abundance of meaning they were able to carry, but also in the irreplaceable body of the text they gave to be read and heard.

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My father had an aversion for death. Obviously nothing out of the ordinary there. He claimed unawareness of it. Most of his life he had an iron constitution, and wanted no talk of the end, hoping for a heart attack, the exit he saw as both the quickest and most painless. It so happened that this aversion expressed itself in a readiness to ignore rituals of bereavment. He hadn't wanted to accompany his mother, whom he adored with the strongest of feeling, to 'her last resting place'. He made no plans for his own passing. I never once saw him visit a cemetery to honour a grave. It was as though the fact of thinking about death, or even pronouncing its name, were a compromise, a wound or a danger. This refusal of the tomb, was bound up with a distance he assumed in relation to soil in general. He had never invested his affections in Algeria as a land, even though this country had created him as a person. All attachments to the land seemed to him to be turned towards the past, a dependence on origins, which he wanted to leave behind. I've inherited these concerns – though not entirely, I have a taste for leaf mould, humus and sediment. Perhaps this passion for literature, he passed down to me, in part allowed me to turn this disaffection with the soil, which he expressed, into a positive. Thus,

without really intending to, in writing this book that brings us together today, I've obviously myself built a Tomb. You may know that this is the name given a literary work celebrating the memory of someone deceased. Having left with him, never to return, the land of Algeria, where he wasn't buried, for France, his promised land, I put all my literary passion, stylistic fervour, and fascination for language into the writing of what is doubtless his tomb, his memorial. It's a strange feeling to find myself before you, in this great American university, to speak of a man who knew no English, had never set foot on this continent, and knew of the United States only its music, cinema, and the cigarettes given out by the soldiers come to liberate North Africa, and who, by entering Oran on the 8th of November 1942, spared my whole family and this Algerian Judaism the fate of extermination – and to which I, probably owe, in part at least, the fact of being born and having lived. I am happy to have been given the opportunity to bear witness to these things, and in such unexpected circumstances, today, thanks to your touching invitation.

D. Guénoun, April 2016
(Translated by Thomas Newman)[14]

[14] *I have changed in a few points the beautiful translation made by Thomas Newman. So, I am clearly responsible of mistranslations and gallicisms which could be found in it.* (*D.G.)*