

Libertinism and Utopia

Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrates that the fantasy of an ideal community, whether subjected to critical dismantling or not, plays an important part in any discourse contributing to the constantly changing perceptions of Europe. It engages on various different levels with the concept of freedom which so many see as a defining feature of the European identity. This chapter will focus on Utopia as a distinct entity in the novels of literary immigrants into French and discuss how it contains the concept of freedom, blurring the boundaries between *libertaire* and *libertin*. The opportunistic approach to passing pleasures and a need for a communal fusion go hand in hand as characteristic expressions of nomadic freedom.

It is no coincidence that France – whose national identity is built and maintained on the revolutionary spirit – is the country and French the language in which immigrant writers have found it appropriate to celebrate a contemporary sentiment of revolutionary community. In both Semprun's *L'Algarabie* and Kundera's *La Lenteur*, two of the works of fiction studied in this chapter, this is not purely a homage to the adopting country. It would be more true to say that the homage to France is a consequence of the writers having adopted, at least for the duration of their novels, the French world view. The revolutionary spirit *L'Algarabie* and *La Lenteur* celebrate is not an imitation, but a disciplined and inspired development in the best French tradition. This chapter will also briefly turn back to *La Montagne blanche* which was already studied in the previous chapter to stress some important Utopian and libertine moments in this novel, particularly in relation to friendship, a significant Utopian notion throughout Semprun's work.

Occasionally a certain Bohemian gentleness or Castilian fatalism and arrogance, which are not an obvious match for the subject matter, can be detected in these novels. They are not just a cross-pollination intended to enrich French literature, but also a very important expression of the versatility of each writer's repertoire, and a statement of their choice.

All three novels explore the logic of freedom in such a French way that the historical stages of French cultural development – from seventeenth and eighteenth-century libertinism, via revolutionary pragmatism and rationalism, to numerous nineteenth-century social Utopian projects – seem a more seamless development than in reality. In addition to this, how this heritage was and is written down becomes more important than the historical facts. This primacy of text over fact finds a spontaneous expression in the works of literary immigrants. The focus on the “how” of literary expression removes the pressure from the narrative to be real or feasible. The narratives still remain more real(istic) than not, but that has little relevance for literary expression. Recognition that the power of “how” is irreversible, tracing future limitations, is crucial for the use of freedom.

Neither Semprun nor Kundera proffer a new interpretation of the historical or cultural history. They write *about* it, adding their names to it. The novelty of their point of view allows them to restate their existing aesthetic values in a new way.

The French language itself has been conditioned through that cultural development to become the language of libertinism *par excellence*. This quality of the language is difficult to analyse. It is contained within the world view whose adoption is necessary for expression in French to be as natural as that of the native speaker.

L'Algarabie

Political Utopia

Had De Gaulle been killed in an accident in May 1968, the world might have been a different place. From this historical premise, Semprun constructs a Second Paris Commune. Established through the unrest in 1968, the Commune comprises most of the Left Bank, more precisely the fifth, sixth, fourteenth and parts of the thirteenth, and also the first and second *arrondissements* (districts). Three groups contest its hegemony: (1) a communist/anarchist bilingual Spanish community headed by Eleuterio Ruiz, marginal by its very nature, (2) the gang of criminals of Joe Aresti, owner of the most famous underground brothel in Europe, and (3) the *maos*, the army of Auguste le Mao, a dogmatic follower of the thought of Mao Tse-Tung. The violent interaction of these groups, in addition to attracting numerous