

FRANÇOIS AUGÉRAS (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 chasty and incomparable truth."⁴ The author was listed as "Abdallah Chamba," the pseudonym that François Augéras 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.

Augéras 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 Augéras' 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 Augéras 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 Augéras' favorite homes, and an area to which he continually returned. As an adolescent, Augéras 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

Augéras' 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 doppepgangers? 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

veillard 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 tips 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 bears 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 Augéras's journey through the Maghreb. It

comprises five chapters, each named for a place: Tadmirt, Gardaiya, El-Golca, Agadir and "the river," the Senegal. The subject of the book is Augéras'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 Tadmirt 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 Augéras, who ends in the arms of the beloved

was more nourishing than real food. For whom the love of other "enlightened ones"

The Work

Augéras 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"

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

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

