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Preface to *The Pillar of Salt*

Albert Camus

Here is a French writer from Tunisia who is neither French nor Tunisian.¹ It is only with difficulty that he is Jewish, since in some sense he would not like to be. The curious subject of the book that is now available is in fact the impossibility of ever quite being anything for a Tunisian Jew with a French culture. The young man whose story is told here can only arrive at defining himself by adding to the refusals that all the others make of him, refusals that set him in opposition to the world.

He is Jewish (with a Berber mother, which does not simplify anything) and a Tunisian subject, that is to say a subject from the bay of Tunis. Yet, he is not really Tunisian, the first pogrom in which the Arabs massacre the Jews demonstrates this to him. His culture is French, and among his classmates, he is the only who understands Racine properly. Yet, Vichy France hands him over to the Germans, and the day when he wanted to fight for Free France, they asked him to change the Jewish sound of his name. It would no longer be possible for him to be truly Jewish, either, if that would require him to share a faith that he does not have and traditions that seem ridiculous to him.

What will he be in the end, then? One might be tempted to say a writer, since Mr. Memmi gives proof in *The Pillar of Salt* that he is one, and since the writer is defined by an inability, otherwise nostalgic, to be based on the anonymity of a class or a race. In any case, there can be no doubt that writing has been the road to Damascus for this non-believing Paul. As for the language, at least, he wanted to be French. The reader will certainly judge that Mr. Memmi is a novelist by reading about the coughing fits of the father, the dancing of the mother, and the sexual initiation of the son. But that is not all. And the sole fact of having described with such precision and emotion the torn condition of a young Jew who lifts himself up through intelligence and willpower to the consciousness of what he is, or is not, demonstrates a deeper choice. By writing about the difficulty of being Jewish, the author ultimately chose to be Jewish (and so much the better), by replacing the traditional religious awareness of his father with an awareness that is more modern, one that is dramatic, intelligent and solidly without

illusions. This awareness allows him to remain who he is and to pay attention at the same time to the contradictions of others, whether they are French or Arab. In a certain way, he will no longer refuse anything about himself or others. It is true that the book ends with the hero's flight to South America, but this is not a literary device. This type of hero never leaves, or if he does leave, it is with a self that does not change. All of us, French and indigenous North Africans, remain what we are, riddled with contradictions that bleed today in our towns and that cannot be overcome through flight, but only by living them through to their end. With these thoughts, you will then be able to judge the value that I attach to this beautiful book by Mr. Memmi.

¹ Translated from the French original *La Statue de Sel* with permission by Scott Davidson.