

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED FRANCE? *

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I begin this evening with the first page of a late mediaeval French romance, *Le Chevalier du papegau* (*The Knight of the Parrot*). Thanks to Julian Barnes, most of us are familiar with Flaubert's parrot, but the great and grumpy Gustave Flaubert had many predecessors. In his creation of his literary parrot, Loulou, he was himself a mimic. Significant parrots are abundant in the French literary tradition, where, among other things, they stand as symbols of the multiple mysteries of language—its enigmatic origins, its powers of articulating and transmitting thought, feelings and ideas, its uncanny ways of bending its users to its own history, structures and devices. Language mirrors our fundamental existential in-betweenness—or so I see it, and it seems appropriate to begin with an acknowledgement of that. So I am dedicating this lecture to my teachers, and to all those students who, over the years, have given me the opportunity to pass on what I have learned. Of course, among those students have been some of my most important teachers, so they earn a double dedication.

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There was never really much chance that I would finish up as a monolingual English-speaker. Of my two grandmothers, one was Irish, the other of Dutch Jewish origin; one of my grandfathers was Scottish, the other a Barossa Valley German. One of my uncles by marriage was the descendant of a Chinese Murray River paddle-boat captain. I was thus born into a propensity for wandering and for other tongues, as well as into the respect that my forebears had for the value of language generally. When I was adolescent in 1950s Adelaide, my exposure to compulsory Latin and French was made more meaningful by the presence of growing numbers of migrants more recent than my own family: my stepfather, who gave English classes to supplement what was a modest income as a primary school teacher, often brought groups of his students home, where we were nourished by a medley of accents and culinary discoveries; my mother, for her part, as well as expanding her own cooking repertoire, became an active member of the city's Good Neighbour Council, so that my home ethos was one of cultural and linguistic openness and diversity.

* Public Valedictory Lecture given at the University of Melbourne on Wednesday 16 March 2005.

These days, I have the reputation for being a francophile. Well, why not? When I look back on the more than 50 years that I have devoted to the study of French language and culture, I see a texture of experiences that, in very great part, I have not only enjoyed, but loved. And it has been the desire to share that passion that has guided my teaching and writing, and shaped my academic life. Before I undertake my final official effort in that direction, I would like you to indulge me in a few minutes of soft-focus personal impressions. Do not fear. I am not going to do a Peter Mayle or a Sarah Turnbull. The spirit of my talk is probably closer to what the Canadian mixed-language couple Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow have written about in their very engaging and well-researched book *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't be Wrong*. I particularly like the wit of the Nadeau and Barlow conclusion: "France is not what it used to be. France has never been what it used to be, and it never will."

When I ask myself the question: "What is this thing called France?" I get answers that constitute not just a field, and certainly not just a field of study, but a world. France is a geographical space inscribed into the memory of my muscles and my senses: it is hiking in the Vosges mountains, or the Alps; it is the terror, felt only after the event, of clambering around the precipitous cliff-face of the Pointe du Raz, the westernmost part of Brittany; it is crunching across the stubble in the frozen wheat-fields of the Beauce, on the way to the cathedral at Chartres; it is splashing through the water under flights of flamingos in the glacier-fed Mediterranean in the Camargue. My exploration of that geography has inevitably meant building a gradual knowledge of French history, which is still pitifully—but also tantalizingly—incomplete: ancient and mysterious movements of people and peoples that have left their traces in the grottos of Lascaux and Les Eyzies; the more easily documented movements of Greeks and Romans and the Christian cathedral-builders; the violent conflicts that accompanied ambitions of territorial annexation, both before the word "France" connoted any kind of sovereign nationhood, and afterwards, when struggles between centralism and regionalism and between different religious persuasions and political ideologies often brought France close to, and even into, civil war. I am fascinated by the strange and powerful centuries-old aetiology that permits today's canonical French history (that which is taught in the nation's schools) to enfold into a single, mythical continuity, kingdoms, revolutionary regicide, Napoleonic imperialism, military victories and military defeats, Catholicism, Protestantism, secular republicanism, Gaullist nationalism, and the claim for leadership of the European Union. It can rightly be pointed out

that this assimilative model, in recent decades, has encountered serious obstacles, and it is this question that I would now like to address.

On 6 June 1944, in the Washington DC neighbourhood of Georgetown, a thirty-year-old East Coast American woman called Eleanor Clark met with a distinguished Frenchman in his late fifties. Eleanor Clark was a spy. The reports that she wrote on French wartime exiles for the Foreign Nationalities Board of the Office of Strategic Services (precursor to the CIA) stand out from those of many of her colleagues because of their clarity of construction and their linguistic elegance. She later considered this period of her life to have been “drudgery”, but the texts in the OSS archives suggest that she rather enjoyed herself as she questioned these artists, politicians, scientists, journalists and so on about their opinions and activities. Her interlocutor’s name was Alexis Léger, and he was more than willing to be spied upon. Former French ambassador to China, Director of Aristide Briand’s diplomatic cabinet and General Secretary of Foreign Affairs in France in the critical years from the rise of Hitler to the outbreak of war, Léger had firm opinions about the way in which post-war France should be developed and managed. He was a direct confidant of President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Sumner Welles, and the opportunity of sharing his views with the OSS was a welcome one.

Clark would later become a prize-winning author. She won a National Book Award in 1965 for *Oysters of Locmariaquer*, her book on the Breton town that produces Belon oysters—for oyster lovers, the prince of the species. By then she was married to Robert Penn Warren, and she was destined for a long life, which ended at the age of 82 in 1996. Léger was also a writer. He too was to have a long life: when he died in 1975, he was 88. Under his pseudonym of Saint-John Perse he had established in pre-war France a reputation equal to that of the greatest poets of the time, such as Claudel and Valéry, and in 1960 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.

I have chosen this episode to introduce my talk because it opens the way to a different understanding about post-war France from the one we may get from accounts that concentrate exclusively on events on a much grander scale taking place on the other side of the Atlantic. While the young spy and the ex-diplomat were murmuring over their coffee in Georgetown, the massive D-Day allied invasion of Normandy had already begun, starting the process that would drive the occupying army out of France and finally lead to the defeat of Nazism.

In her report on the meeting, Clark noted Léger's bitterness that there was no French presence in the Normandy invasion. He saw this as the fault of General de Gaulle, whom he interpreted—not unreasonably—as being obsessed with political power. Through Clark, he urged the American administration to maintain its policy of non-recognition of the provisional government that de Gaulle had created in Algiers. Léger's positions were well known in Gaullist circles, both in New York and in London. In 1942, with the smoothest of diplomatic tongues, Léger had turned down an invitation from de Gaulle to join his cause. In truth, he considered de Gaulle dangerously authoritarian, a potential dictator, and he did not hesitate to transmit these opinions to the US authorities. It was therefore predictable that when de Gaulle finally wangled an American visit in July 1944, Léger was not on the invitation list. In fact, for some time, his name was on a black list of those French exiles not to be given a re-entry visa after the Liberation.

The conflictual relationship between de Gaulle and Roosevelt was to have long-lasting repercussions in exchanges between France and the United States, and I shall return to this point shortly. But I want to dwell for a moment on the differences between de Gaulle and Léger, because they illustrate very well the critical tension between the forces of change and continuity at this pivotal moment in French history. I think it can be said that, from a short-term perspective, de Gaulle understood Léger better than Léger understood de Gaulle. De Gaulle was without doubt authoritarian in both temperament and method, but he was not ever inclined towards a governmental system based on dictatorship. Although, famously, he made disparaging remarks about how impossible it was to govern a country that had 246 cheeses, he never abolished a single cheese. He was convinced, however, that the particular form of democracy that had existed under the constitution of the Third Republic was responsible for the disastrous unreadiness of France to resist the forces of totalitarian aggression. Léger, for his part, was a devoted servant of the Third Republic, committed to the legitimacy of its constitution, and to what he saw as the absolute need to respect that constitution in the reconstruction of post-war France. From de Gaulle's point of view, Léger was the very incarnation of a mentality that had to be abandoned if France were to recover from the war and once again occupy a position of influence in the world.

De Gaulle's extraordinary successes in the modernization of France—its industry, its economy, its military, its system of governance—are well enough established for us to be able to say that Léger got it wrong. But

there were two areas in which these two towering figures shared significant common ground. Both believed wholeheartedly in the underlying strength and resilience of France as a great centre of civilization, and both understood how the future of that civilization depended on the creation of a more unified Europe. De Gaulle may never have forgiven Léger for interfering in his political plans—he was not strong on forgiveness—but there can be no doubt that he would have embraced the contributions to the French literary tradition that Léger made under the name of Saint-John Perse. De Gaulle was devoted to the centrality of artistic culture in his vision for a reinvigorated France. He had some plausible claims to artistic merit himself: an inspirational orator, he was also a masterly craftsman of prose, as his memoirs demonstrate. When he became President of France for the second time, in 1958, he institutionalized this aspect of his vision by creating a separate ministry for culture, and by placing at its head André Malraux, whose pedigree as a resistance hero was strengthened by his reputation as one of France's great novelists and finest commentators on the history of mankind's artistic endeavour.

On the other side of the equation, Alexis Léger, as a visionary, epic poet, understood quite clearly the changes that were sweeping through the world. It is an odd thing that although comprehensively trained in the world of practical politics, he should have been unable to see what was so right and necessary in de Gaulle's programme. During the Nobel Prize speeches, Saint-John Perse was praised for his universality, but also for his prophetic expression of the global changes that humanity was facing, and for his belief in the human capacity to meet those changes creatively. It is worth quoting a little of his work to give a taste of its tone and scope. These stanzas are from the beginning of Hugh Chisholm's translation of "Vents", first published in 1946.

Winds

These were very great winds over all the faces of the world,

Very great winds rejoicing over the world, having neither eyrie nor
resting-place,

Having neither care nor caution, and leaving us, in their wake,

Men of straw in the year of straw. . . . Ah, yes, very great winds over all
the faces of the living!

Scenting out the purple, the haircloth, scenting out the ivory and the
 potsherd, scenting out the entire world of things,

And hurrying to their duties upon our greatest verses, verses of athletes
 and poets,

These were very great winds questing over all the trails of this world,
 Over all things perishable, over all things graspable, throughout the entire
 world of things. . . .

And airing out the attrition and drought in the heart of men in office,
 Behold, they produced this taste of straw and spices, in all the squares of
 our cities,

As it is when the great public slabs are lifted up. And our gorge rose
 Before the dead mouths of the Offices. And divinity ebbed from the great
 works of the spirit.

For a whole century was rustling in the dry sound of its straw, amid
 strange terminations at the tips of husks of pods, at the tips of trembling
 things,

Like a great tree in its rags and remnants of last winter, wearing the livery
 of the dead year,

Like a great tree shuddering in its rattles of dead wood and its corollas of
 baked clay,

Very great mendicant tree, its patrimony squandered, its countenance
 seared by love and violence whereon desire will sing again.

The echoes of T. S. Eliot here are quite probably deliberate: the two men
 knew each other well and Eliot himself translated Saint-John Perse's first
 major collection. Of greater import for me is the confident deployment of
 a magnificently rich language and rhythm across such vast stretches of time
 and space. Saint-John Perse, here, is demonstrating (as well as celebrating)
 the ambition and power of the French language to account for monumental
 historical transformations, and I believe that in doing so he is claiming, fun-
 damentally, the same territory as de Gaulle. Both were drawing on a deep
 knowledge of the history of French civilization and an unshaken faith in its
 capacity to transcend the decay, destruction and collective humiliation of
 the immediate past, and to project a hope-restoring and regenerative future.

Many people today, even in Europe, are unaware of the seminal role
 played by Léger in laying the foundations that would later be used by Robert
 Schuman, Jean Monnet and others for building the European Union. His-
 torians may remember, but probably nobody else, how possible and close

such a union appeared in the mid to late 1920s, when Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann, the one a French statesman, the other German, shared the Nobel Peace Prize, and when the idea of a united Europe was no longer a dream but a budding programme of action. In September 1929, another French poet-diplomat, Paul Claudel, tested the concept of a "united states of Europe" in a speech for the Lafayette anniversary day at the West Point Military Academy. "This name", he told his American audience, "You will find it today not only on the lips of poets and dreamers but on those of diplomats, economists and tough businessmen. It is no longer a dream, it has become a concrete living proposal, an immediate and pressing question and probably a necessity." Claudel was proud that the initiative for such a bold and beneficial idea was coming from France. Chances are he was unaware of how direct and instrumental Alexis Léger was in its elaboration and development, but the space that these two poets occupy together in the archives of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs is for me a powerful symbolic reminder of the degree to which culture—in this case, literary, poetic culture—is integrated into French political thinking.

There are many reasons why the European project was not realized at that time. Among them, we can place accidents like the death of Stresemann in 1929, and that of Briand in 1932. We can see the resurgence of German nationalism as a consequence of issues badly resolved during the Versailles peace conference of 1919. We can also see British resistance and the American refusal to engage with the League of Nations as contributing factors. But the seed did not die, and when a more propitious time came for it to germinate, it did so. Léger's tree, to use his own image, has grown.

Léger and de Gaulle, the poet-diplomat and the soldier-politician, have impacted differently on recent French history. What they have in common, beyond their patriotism, is a sense of history in which decisions and plans for the shorter term are always embedded in longer-term cultural perspectives. This is both a burden (in that it carries with it the weight and complexities of all kinds of traditions and habits) and the privilege of a cultural community that has been evolving for many centuries.

Nadeau and Barlow suggest that misunderstandings between French and American cultures owe a lot to a difference in cultural habits around the question of arguing in public. Such argument, they point out, is an inherent and tonic part of French political and cultural life, while for Americans it is more readily seen as a form of impoliteness, and public rejection by so-called allies can only be experienced as arrogant and annoying. This is a

clever insight, but I think the misunderstanding between France and the US is more basic and derives from contrasting relationships with history and opposing notions of freedom. How can a mentality structured by exclusive focus on the future, on perpetual growth, on the primacy of material and economic progress, concur with one in which the past is so carefully memorialized and ritualized, and in which construction of the future inevitably favours the political and the social over the economic, precisely because the values and achievements of the past are intrinsic to a whole way of life?

Today's United States appears to be leaning strongly towards a concept of freedom based more on "keeping out" than on taking in. This has happened from time to time in the past: one can hope that it may be a temporary aberration. The "war on terror" with its Guantánamo Bay is a reflex not unlike what occurred at the time of McCarthyism or of Prohibition, and indeed in the refusal of Congress to adopt Woodrow Wilson's post-World War One plans for a new global political order. Given the immensity of American power, recent presidential promises to have the sacred flame of freedom penetrate the darkest corners of the earth are worrisome, even frightening, when we think just how pervasive that darkness can appear from the perspective of today's Washington.

There are problems with the concept of freedom in France too. When the French defend the specificities of their culture, and work to have it excluded from free trade agreements, they do so in the belief that there is something about culture that should not be subject to the purely economic laws of production and consumption. They are convinced that any loss of cultural autonomy weakens their very identity and damages their way of life. I find this admirable, and I wish our own governments would emulate such attitudes more. But French defence of particularity can also be petulant and silly—a nostalgic grasping for lost prestige—such as the periodic efforts to legislate against the use of English words in advertising and various branches of technology. (We should note that such laws fortunately provoke within France as much ridicule as elsewhere, and wide-ranging disregard.)

Even people very familiar with France can be perplexed by governmental approaches to non-conformity. One such challenge is posed by the large and growing Islamic population in today's France—eight or ten per cent on present reckoning. Many here this evening will have been bemused and shocked by newspaper reports about the laws passed in France to prevent Islamic girls from wearing headscarves to school. In Australia, our multicultural tolerance is sufficiently ingrained for the French decree to

appear simply bizarre (though as I say this, I am aware—alas!—of how significantly our levels of tolerance have been eroded since the institution of the policy of fear with the Tampa crisis of 2001). Criticism in the local press showed no understanding that the recent French laws were a product of the earlier, complicated laws of separation of Church and State, passed in 1904–1905 with the aim of reducing the influence of religion in the secular Republic. They purport to apply to all religions: Jews are forbidden to wear yamulkas and prominent Stars of David, while Christians cannot display large crucifixes. But nobody misunderstands the primary aim of the laws, which is to prevent any public sign of religious identification that might threaten the holistic uniformity of French secular citizenship—a particularity which applies especially to Islam. The French secular state is itself, somewhat paradoxically, a quasi-religious creation, based on a shared belief in the values that define citizenship. In this context, a headscarf appears almost as an act of heresy. Is this ridiculous? Well, from our perspective, it is; and in France, for all the public flurry over the laws, there have been very few practical repercussions.

France's problems with Islam are not limited, of course, to the few feisty young women who want to wear headscarves. There are large numbers of legal and illegal migrants from Africa and North Africa, who are subject to capricious police raids, detention, and summary deportation. The high-density housing estates that cluster around most of France's bigger towns and cities contain large populations of Islamic immigrants, among whom unemployment rates are double or treble the already high national average, and where the schooling system—traditionally the great leveller in France—is manifestly in crisis. The failure of the French system to provide adequate mechanisms of inclusion for these populations is producing social tensions and levels of human distress that are in sharp contrast with the State-projected image of an open, egalitarian and fraternal society. A key sign of just how fraught this situation is can be seen in the resurgence of anti-Semitism. France no doubt thought that it had left this evil behind when, in the mid-1990s, the French President and Church leaders, separately but convergently, apologized for France's treatment of its Jewish people during the Second World War.

There will be no short-term solutions to the dilemma of Islamic assimilation, but France's ways of dealing with the situation should be of interest to all democracies. French experience with Islam is more than a millennium old, and a vast body of specialized scholarship has been developed across all aspects of Islamic civilization. This is something of greater import

than the now familiar sight of Arab-run minimarkets and couscous restaurants in every Paris neighbourhood. It is of powerful symbolic significance that one of the great architectural creations of the Mitterrand era was the Institute of the Arab World, designed by leading architect Jean Nouvel. Its geographic centrality, at the edge of the ancient Latin quarter on the banks of the Seine, is a sign of the enduring presence and importance of Islam *within* the French cultural landscape.

Conversely, the Algerian war and its legacy are, notoriously, passed over in much of France's official discourse about its recent past. There is no doubt that this silence reflects an inability and an unwillingness to face up to a painful loss of prestige and influence. The complexity of the situation is encapsulated in the story of the current Minister for Veterans' Affairs. Hamlaoui Mekachera is of Algerian birth, but his prominence was gained from distinguished military service as a *harki*—that is, a Muslim who fought with the French against the Algerian Islamic separatists. His political experience and skill cannot be impugned and his appointment is a belated acknowledgement of the contributions and sacrifices of a sizeable group of Algerians who for a long time were shamefully ignored. But from a present-day Algerian perspective, the *harki* were traitors, and it is hard to see that Mekachera's conciliatory brand of Islam will have much influence on the disaffected and increasingly militant Islamic youth of the suburban housing estates.

Nonetheless, if we work our way below the often violent surface of the socio-political situation, we can find encouraging signs for the future. In recent years the main Islamic religious groupings in France have signed agreements with the State that bring them into alignment with other religions and affirm adherence to republican principles. Interfaith conversations are highly developed and institutionalized, and while they rarely get much press coverage, they do allow for some transcendence of stereotype and caricature in the everyday lives of many people. In addition, there is a considerable and growing body of music, and an equally vital body of narrative art, that examine the conditions and issues facing France's recent Muslim migrants and the large clandestine population. For me, this cultural activity indicates that the traditional French process of assimilation may not be doing as badly as some think. In reality, the ideology of assimilation has never meant a one-way street. In my recent book on the impact of jazz in France, I was able to report on how this African American music, as it was being absorbed into French culture, did much to transform its host. Similar things are

happening today in French popular music. The nation's post-colonial connections in Africa and North Africa are a fertile source of musical cross-pollination of many kinds. The integration of *rai*, which was originally an Algerian fusion, and American-inspired rap, for instance, have produced highly original sounds, as have admixtures of harmonies and rhythms from Africa. In the world music scene today, French musicians such as les Négresses Vertes and Khaled have a distinctive presence.

Just as significantly, the interfaces of French literary and cinematographic production with Islam are becoming more visible and are promoting greater levels of intercultural exchange. Major French novelists such as Romain Gary, Michel Tournier, Jean-Marie Le Clézio and Daniel Pennac have, over time, explored different aspects of the experience. More strikingly, the post-colonial period has produced a plethora of African and North African novelists who write in French, and whose work, quite surely and not all that slowly, is swelling and reshaping the French literary canon. Some of them, such as the Moroccans Driss Chraïbi and Tahar Ben Jalloun, have become veritable classics, and can already be considered comfortably assimilated; others, like the Algerian Anouar Benmalek, continue to probe at the sore points of intercultural and interreligious conflict.

In France, as we know, the cinema enjoys a special role as a forum for analysis and debate of all kinds, and the industry prides itself on its own distinctiveness and on its support of other minority cinema cultures. Within French cinema itself, the Islamic theme is prominent. In 1991, already, leading film-maker Bertrand Tavernier cut against the grain in creating a disturbing testimony about the Algerian War called *La Guerre sans nom*. This film has helped break down the official silence surrounding the conflict. Other innovative and high-profile directors, such as Matthieu Kassovitz, Claire Denis and Coline Serreau, have also taken up problems of social, cultural and religious exclusion as an integral part of their artistic territory. Some might be tempted to see such work as a form of post-colonial paternalism, but in my view this would be overly cynical, for in parallel there is an expanding corpus of work done directly by film-makers of Islamic background. Since 1994, one particular cinematographic group has established itself at the forefront of the artistic avant-garde. This is *kourtrajmé*—backwards slang for *court métrage* or short films—which has brought together a loose coalition of young, mainly male, first- and second-generation migrants prepared to use cinema as a weapon of extreme independence and provocation. Another film-maker whose work has drawn wide critical acclaim and mainstream popular success is Yamina Benguigui,

a daughter of Algerian migrants. Her documentary work during the late 1990s on immigrant Islamic women made it possible for large areas of previously hidden experience to become the subject of open discussion. This year's winner of the short feature prize in the French cinema awards, Lyès Salem, an Algerian male director, is very much in Benguigui's lineage. A new genre, or sub-genre, has been established within the framework of French cinema, which, in enabling the inclusion of what had been excluded, has expanded the framework itself.

There is a surprising amount of humour in the work of French Muslim film-makers, as well as satire and anger. In exposing so publicly the disadvantage from which many migrants suffer, it not only raises consciousness, it provides a context and a basis for further struggle, and perhaps, in due course, for more concrete social and political change. My optimism is based on the centrality of cultural expression in the French ethos. Yamina Benguigui speaks of her role in French cinema giving her an identity that allows her to discover and talk about aspects of her background that would otherwise have remained inaccessible to her audience as well as to herself. In other words, her work is both a personal discovery and a form of self-expression; a vehicle of self-liberation and growth, it is also a revelation for those who see it. There is, clearly, a process of assimilation occurring, but it is occurring in two directions at once.

The hopes and difficulties of that process are dramatically thematized in the brilliant film which won the best film-César (French Oscar) in the 2005 French cinema awards. Made by Abdellatif Kechiche, *L'Esquive* (*Evasion*) is about a group of high-school students from a housing estate involved in the study and performance of Marivaux's classic play *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard* (*The Game of Love and Chance*). The film is a searing critique of the absurdly contradictory messages that France is sending to its disenfranchised immigrant youth, who are very largely of Islamic background. On the one hand, there is the alluring invitation to participate fully in the edifying power of cultural citizenship; and on the other, a soul-crushing, police-enforced oppression and ghetto-ization. The former is the way of relatively peaceful integration. The latter not only reinforces exclusion, it actually serves to exacerbate structures and practices of violence and abuse *within* the Islamic community.

The film thus presents an image of the French cultural community as torn between an attitude of generous welcome and one infused by fear—a tension all too familiar in the current Australian setting as well. But for all its ambiguity and lack of resolution, *L'Esquive* demonstrates quite clearly the

strength and openness of French cinema as a cultural space. The fact that it was judged best film of the year underlines the point.

By encouraging self-expression of the Islamic migrant experience as well as reflection of more established artists on their encounter with Islam, French cultural practice is exposing itself to the likelihood of significant inner transformation. But hasn't that always been the case? I can see no essential difference between the present situation and that which faced French culture when it encountered German Romanticism, the Russian novel, or jazz. Beyond the French borders, the French cinema industry (and indirectly, the French State) provides financial support for film-making in many Islamic countries: in Morocco and Algeria, in Africa, in Iran. Similar support exists in Eastern Europe, Israel and Vietnam, but the cultivation of cinematographic distinctiveness will be a particularly relevant factor in France's ongoing conversation with Islam. Part of the uniqueness of French cinema today is the very strong presence of Islamic themes, film-makers and actors. Within the French setting, this is now accepted as normal, but it also points to the way in which contemporary French culture offers a privileged perspective on the meeting of Islamic and Western traditions.

By way of conclusion, I want to return to Charles de Gaulle's failure to reduce the number of French cheeses. This is an outstanding example of a *felix culpa*. In the Adelaide of my youth, cheese was cheese when it wasn't Kraft, and my discovery of the multiple wonders of what the French call *fromage* exemplifies my discovery of French geography and history and its cultural traditions. One way of distinguishing between francophiles and francophobes is by testing the attitude of people towards the Paris *trottoirs*. Francophobes see the Paris sidewalks as essentially filthy, and they identify that filth with the bad habits of the natives. In particular they point to the droppings that no French dog-owner ever seems to think of cleaning up. For francophiles, the Paris sidewalk is the promise of a pedestrian adventure that can turn every man and woman into *flâneurs*. The *crotte de chien* will be little more than a passing annoyance even if they happen to put their foot in it. To come back to cheese, francophobes are not likely to be lovers of *fromage*. Some of the finest cheese in France is made from goat's milk, and some of the best goat cheeses come in the form of flattened spheres that are known affectionately as *crottins de chèvre*. For the francophobe, the very idea of such a cheese evokes images of the dreaded Paris sidewalk. For me, on the contrary, the cheese extends a plenary indulgence to the word *crottin*. There is a mysterious transformation of the unpleasant and edgily contemporary *crotte de chien* into an older and more leisurely image of Paris street

life, when the *crottin de cheval* was a common sight that offered reassuring connections to the more carefree rhythms of rural life. In sum, francophiles feel, with the Impressionist painters, that even the darkest shadows in the word “France” will ultimately be seen to be made up of colour.

The discovery of otherness and difference in French culture which has so enchanted me has of course been experienced by many people in relation to other cultures. I know enough German, Italian and Spanish to realize that, in different circumstances, I could have had a similar inner adventure by taking the path of Goethe and Grass, Dante and Calvino, or Cervantes and Garcia Marquez. From my travels in Morocco, Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia, I can readily imagine, too, other stirring linguistic and cultural journeys. One of the profoundest effects of acquiring extensive knowledge of another language and culture is an increased alertness to one’s own place and origins. In June 1997 my wife and I had the good fortune to attend a session at UNESCO in Paris where elders of the Ngarinyin people of the West Kimberley region were presenting their story and their claims. A year earlier we had been welcomed by these people in an idyllic setting not far from the Mitchell Plateau together with our French friends Pierre and Marie-Odile Brochet, who were organizers and facilitators of the presentation at UNESCO. That day in Paris, questions of national identity or *appartenance* seemed to fade into the background, although it was obvious a momentous and marvellous cultural confluence was occurring. There we were, in the centre of Paris in a building designed by a Jewish Tunisian that is a significant monument of modern architecture, and we were listening to an elder of the Ngarinyin people, a man who had only once before in his life set foot in a city, addressing an international assembly in one of the earth’s most ancient living languages.

I felt that day—to quote from the Saint-John Perse poem I cited earlier—that there were “very great winds rejoicing over the earth”, and that humanity was indeed showing that its shadows could generate colour, in a spirit of both symbolic and practical conciliation. This was part of a story that would lead to a happy ending—at least relatively: a story not of “patrimony squandered”, as Saint-John Perse put it, and no longer of patrimony usurped, but of patrimony regained: in December 2003 the Ngarinyin won their land rights claim in the Australian courts. They are now the acknowledged keepers of both the Wanjina and the Gwion. It might seem ironic that it took the French and international contexts for me to hear the Ngarinyin story, which has changed my understanding of what it means to be Australian. In truth, there is no irony involved, but rather an almost organic

process through which my exploration of French language and culture has broadened my own humanity. This in turn has brought me to something that I now consider not just a personal conviction but a truth. Encounters with other peoples, cultures and languages need not give birth to fear, anxiety, or stiff-jawed calculation. They do not call for a psychology or policies of exclusion and detention, but can be welcomed with enthusiasm, open-hearted curiosity, and gratitude.

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