

Tentation Caméléon et métissage culturel

(Dans ce texte il n'y a que des interrogations, aucune certitude même si certaines phrases en ont la structure. Ce n'est alors que le résultat de mon incapacité à traduire ces interrogations pour ce qu'elles sont.)

(Lorsqu'on m'a demandé de participer à un recueil devant porter sur les thèmes de la métamorphose ou du caméléon j'ai d'abord écrit une nouvelle. Ensuite je me suis rendu compte que cette nouvelle traitait de l'empathie entre deux hommes. De fil en aiguille la pensée faisant son chemin j'en suis arrivé à l'idée de « tentation caméléon » comme opposée à l'empathie)

Le caméléon, par mimétisme et pour des raisons biologiques que j'ignore, change de couleur de peau en fonction du support sur lequel il repose.

Il adopte la couleur de la pierre, de la branche ou de la large et solide feuille sur laquelle il se tient. C'est pratique et amusant, pour un animal, mais ça ne l'est pas pour un être humain.

C'est pratique pour l'animal parce qu'ainsi il se dissimule, ou croit se dissimuler, aux yeux des autres, quels qu'ils soient, confrères ou ennemi.

Un être humain s'il lui arrivait de faire comme le caméléon, s'il lui arrivait de changer de pensées, ou de changer de perception et d'expression aussi vite et aussi souvent que l'animal change de peau,

il en viendrait à perdre son identité à chaque jour et à chaque heure, tout le temps.

Il ne serait plus personne, il ne serait plus crédible.

Cette personne ne pourrait plus apporter quoi que ce soit à l'Autre.

Elle ne serait qu'un pâle reflet déformé de cet Autre à qui elle espère en se transformant prodiguer amour, compassion et soutien.

Et pourtant beaucoup de gens, sous les tropiques, succombent à cette tentation du caméléon et adaptent leur discours et leurs productions artistiques à ce que j'appelle « l'humeur collective » du moment.

C'est tellement plus facile et plus réconfortant.

C'est aussi bien plus simple de ne pas exercer son intelligence, ou de ne l'exercer qu'en se laissant porter par le discours ambiant le plus dominant, le plus « sympathique » le plus attrayant.

Occulter son propre sens critique, occulter le doute intelligent c'est en définitive s'interdire toute création, toute originalité et par conséquent toute opportunité de faire avancer l'humanité au profit d'un immobilisme par trop conservateur.

Je désire faire une digression à propos d'écrire en Nouvelle Calédonie, écrire en « pays dominé, lorsque sa propre langue et sa propre culture sont les langues et cultures de la domination »

Writing in a dominated country cannot be a neutral act, no matter which community you belong to. When you belong to the dominating community, the one holding the keys, not only to power, but not particularly those keys, but especially those that make it possible to understand the concepts underlying the laws of all kinds which govern society, when your own language is the dominating language, the language of colonisation, the language used at school, the language of communication between the various ethnic groups, of course, but also between the speakers of various indigenous languages, when your culture is the culture of colonisation, that which contributes to stifling the indigenous culture, writing then becomes a commitment, at the opposite of any neutral act.

But let there be no mistake, it will not be enough to produce words, sentences, chapters and publications for writing to be effective. Writing is above all the dialogue with oneself, it is questioning, doubt, and writing is living on the edge. If you want your writing to be effective in achieving rebirth, if you wish to attain another consciousness through it, in other words if you write because your energy exceeds your will, then the only solution, the only door through which you can pass is to open up to **au quotidien tout autant** the world.

To be born again through writing requires the pen to be dipped in the ink of sincerity and experience. There is no point in writing with a guilty conscience because I am not guilty of anything other than my own acts. Self-flagellation, mea culpas, shouldering the coloniser's burden, are all no doubt necessary at some stage in one's development. This is only true of writing until such time as the realisation comes. To continue down that path, if that relieves your conscience and gives you a sense of morbid exaltation, is futile when you find oneself at the frontier, when you must create, find your own way. To write constantly with a guilty conscience provides no assistance with overcoming or transforming the situation at hand, it is not enough, and you expect more of writing. To restrict you to feeling guilty as a purpose in itself unfortunately also means succumbing. By submerging myself in writing, I hoped, I expected to get to know the world better and myself and especially to better understand the relationships, which have built up between human beings. In a country still colonised or being decolonised, this issue of human relationships, between different ethnic groups and cultures is of course fundamental, essential. Writing is this creative energy, essentially looking to the future, towards more justice, a better balance, more friendship, more consideration, a better quality of life. The idea is not particularly to write about the suffering of the colonised people, that suffering can only be written about by he or she who has experienced it or still experiences it on a daily basis. One can write about compassion, understanding, knowing, suffering and the trials and tribulations suffered by the other. In a situation still experiencing the consequences of colonialism, to write in this way is not a waste of time, neither is it useless because many people are still quite unaware of all aspects of the other's life. It is an essential step, without which there can be no continuation to writing. To write of the suffering of the other is a primary form of vigilance but not an end in itself, it is a first step towards a greater understanding of your country's situation. However I believe that it is dangerous to appropriate another's suffering because that would be like writing about something you had not experienced. No one can write of another's suffering. Writing in a dominated country when your own culture is the dominating one means first and foremost writing of **grandeur**, of universality, of the contribution of the other's culture to the genius of mankind. There is a duty to this other person who for a long time has been reduced to the simple existence of a Stone Age man without a real culture, the duty is to reveal to the world the existence, in the most complete sense of the term including the cultural, political and economic dimensions, of the other. To reveal that those who we rub shoulders with have been able to and still can exist without us. To write about my feeling and my experience of the existence of the other in his every dimension, far from being a risk, is quite on the contrary, a unique chance to grow, a source of enrichment and development, on the spiritual, moral, cultural and political levels. To write so that others may open their eyes and love and respect the other, he to

whom the dominating culture, one's own culture, has denied all humanity, without realising that this has meant that it has denied its own children that same humanity. **La sincérité c'est aussi être conscient que ce n'est pas en se niant, en étant son propre fossoyeur, qu'on peut espérer accéder à l'amour de l'autre. On peut créer son propre déséquilibre affectif et mental par la négation de soi même..** In other words by attaching excessive guilt to one's culture, one's civilisation, cannot contribute at all in the short-term to emancipation or the achievement of more justice and more equity. This again would be to succumb, to commit cultural suicide; the rejection of one's roots is another wall to be imprisoned behind.

To write at all times with vigilance.

It is preferable to be vigilant about yourself rather than commit self-mutilation.

What I call vigilance is avoiding these various ways of giving up. Colonial self-satisfaction and the rejection of the full dimension of the other, self-guilt as an end in itself, cultural suicide and its attendant refusal to accept responsibility for yourself. Vigilance means being careful about yourself, about what I love in myself and what I love in the other, it's about expressing that love. Vigilance also means being careful to keep watch around you for what goes against what I believe in, the understanding of people, particularly in a multi-ethnic and multicultural situation, and to say so.

The universal can be encapsulated in a few words, a few ideas, a few dramatic circumstances and so much the better. In the name of this universal, the dominant culture has set too much aside. Vigilance is also exercised to maintain differences and too bad for that which, only apparently, goes against hastily defined universal values.

La tentation Caméléon est à rapprocher, dans son aspect superficiel, de l'affirmation péremptoire de la nécessité du métissage culturel. Certains en Nouvelle Calédonie vont jusqu'à prétendre que ce métissage culturel est déjà opérant si ce n'est réalisé et abouti ! (je crois rêver). C'est une affirmation précipitée qui relève davantage des culturel et politiquement corrects, que d'une prise en compte réelle de la vie artistique et intellectuelle locale. Le rêve de la fusion entre tous les hommes anime encore beaucoup de personnes, souvent très bien intentionnées mais peut-être trop sentimentales. Et pourtant dans le contexte actuel de la Nouvelle Calédonie ce rêve ne peut que conduire à des aberrations artistiques et à des formes de dominations culturelles bien plus pernicieuses que la domination coloniale. Se fondre dans l'Autre dans un abandon de soi pathétique, pour expier la faute de ses parents et ne faire qu'un avec autrui, quelle terrible tentation. Mais quelle facilité également et quel aveuglement. Il faut résister, si on ne veut pas être transformé en caméléon par l'aspiration que suscite le quasi-décret du « métissage culturel seul espoir culturel pour le pays en devenir ! ». L'identité commune relève avec succès du domaine politique ordinaire ; un passeport pour tous, une carte d'identité pour tous. Mais lorsqu'il s'agit du domaine culturel dans son sens le plus large, celui qui englobe non seulement les dimensions artistiques mais également le vécu quotidien, alors l'identité, commune, identique, est une parfaite chimère pour encore plusieurs générations, c'est certains.

As a writer and therefore a creator but also a seeker of meaning and beauty and truth, I prefer to think and say that I am in a cultural interface, to use a term borrowed from economic geography, both for the area of exchange and encounter that it provides and also for the mental space that it can

engender in everyone. I have the feeling that I am living in a place of borrowings, of meetings, of confrontations, or friendships, of love and of rejection. A space, which is that of a blank page, a theatre or dance, stage, a path where two or more cultures have decided to meet. The attitude of the writer, but such that it is an attitude that one can believe to be that of all creators can only be one of momentum. Cultural integration, in contrast with biological integration, is never achieved. It can only be perpetual creation, alloys, alliances forming and disintegrating, borrowings, rejections, questioning of oneself and one's parent and historical culture, free and independent exchange.

This path is that of 'cultural interface', which stands in opposition, at the present time, to the widespread and too easily accepted idea of 'cultural integration', a rapid and practical association of terms, forming a vague shapeless sack into which everything is stuffed, in the bottom of which you find more mouldy crusts than fresh bread. Cultural interfacing, however, is the recognition by creators, artists, painters, musicians, writers, architects and poets of the vision that we exist in a space where fortunately the borders are vaguely drawn, where Pacific and Western cultures meet and cross-fertilise.

Therefore the idea of an integrated culture, with mixing as the ultimate goal, leads the artists to want to create something mixed, something fully and finally mixed (as if what happens genetically could automatically happen in painting or poetry). The idea of cultural interfacing leads one to create something personal, a one-off result of energy from different horizons. I dream of no longer seeing paintings in exhibitions boasting to be the manifestation of culturally integrated painting and recognised as such just because an artist has contented himself or herself with sticking a couple of signs on a canvas (masks, totems or even petroglyphs), of Kanak culture, without any multiplied energy showing through.

Our generation will never see the integration and it is fallacious to assert the contrary and it is indeed the best way of never getting. The interface as a mental attitude is the attitude which makes it possible to guarantee an intellectual and mental equilibrium, to keep the field of spontaneity open, to remain within oneself and at the same time to be closer to the other, while avoiding fusion.

What I reject is not the idea of cultural integration, it would be madness and ignorance on my part to do so, but it's the fact that in New Caledonia the political, administrative and cultural authorities are using this idea, this possible future reality, and presenting New Caledonia and cultural integration, not only as a fait accompli but, and more especially, as a wish expressed and totally shared by all the people of this country. It's a bit early for New Caledonia. We are just starting out with the real meeting between free communities and only now just beginning to look at each other with a frank and open expression. That is why I prefer the idea and the practice of cultural interfacing because there is less risk of seeing the hope of a real and constructive friendship fade away.

Ce regard ouvert sur l'Autre et sur l'extérieur nous aide à ne pas craindre et à ne pas éviter le déséquilibre. La peur du doute, du questionnement, la peur de l'insoumission à la pensée unique et consensuelle sont les plus grands des dangers, les plus grands obstacles à l'évolution de notre pays, tant politique que culturelle. Le consensus ne doit pas être le prétexte du refus de toute opposition critique, voire virulente. Le pays doit avancer, c'est par le doute et l'interrogation permanente que ces avancées se feront ; elles ne peuvent être décrétées, elles ne peuvent venir que de l'effort de chacun, et souvent cet effort ne commence-t-il pas par le questionnement ? Il faut de l'audace, à l'image de l'audace des accords de Matignon et de

Nouméa ; cette audace ne peut rester l'apanage des hommes au pouvoir, il doit être aussi celui du citoyen, comme si un nœud gordien devait être constamment dénoué et parfois tranché, ouvrant la route qu'il nous reste à emprunter. Le devoir d'insubordination est notre véhicule, celui des écrivains. Il ne s'agit pas de reprendre les sentiers des années quatre vingt, mais celui qu'on imagine être du vingt et unième siècle ; je souhaite qu'il soit celui de la vigilance. Vigilance vis à vis de soi tout d'abord, en ne succombant ni à la conscience coupable ni à l'arrogance qui guète le détenteur d'une seule parcelle de pouvoir.

It is up to the artists as much as it is up to ordinary people to practice and give life to a possible future cultural integration and not up to the various powers to decree that it to be so. To assert the urgency of an integrated culture from the top of the pyramid of the hierarchy also accelerates innovation in the dominated culture despite that culture's own internal tempo. The results are likely to benefit a not-always-very-pleasing process of world cultural globalisation, because in the process of acceleration, yet again, it will be the cultures of powerful countries, which have the most chance of coming out on top.

Le fait de vivre dans un lieu qui est un véritable Interface Culturel, permet à notre identité culturelle d'évoluer, de se transformer, d'être vivante et non figée dans un académisme pontifiant bien assis sur des certitudes illusoires par trop éloignées du peuple. Sachons en profiter en gardant le cœur et l'esprit ouverts. Tout en nous gardant de n'être que caméléons, en badigeonnant nos pensées de la teinture en vogue - mais qui sera cependant bien vite oubliée lorsque politique et économie n'y trouveront plus leur compte. Gardons-nous de n'être que miroir de l'extérieur car ce qui fait la force d'un cœur c'est sa capacité de puiser en lui l'énergie de vie et d'en irriguer l'espace tout autour. Le caméléon est sympathique et attrayant, il a l'illusion de la liberté et du changement mais à terme il n'est plus rien, il est triste et à bien le regarder, il ne semble pas si heureux que ça. Le caméléon change de couleur sans que ce ne soit de sa part une décision réfléchie, il le fait parce qu'il ne peut pas faire autrement. L'animal est conditionné pour cela et il n'y peut rien changer. Le pauvre animal n'est que tromperie et mensonge, il se trompe lui-même en tout premier lieu, ensuite il trompe l'Autre, mais il ne trompe qu'un autre aveugle, qui prend le changement de teinte pour une métamorphose. En ce qui nous concerne, une métamorphose constante et consciente pourrait en effet être salutaire. Pour y parvenir il nous faudrait oser ne plus rien être, n'être plus rien, oser la transformation permanente, celle qui est toute disponibilité et discernement. Cela le caméléon ne sait pas le faire.

La disponibilité à la compassion, à la métamorphose et à l'empathie, ne sont possible que si l'assise est solide, et cette solidité est tout à l'opposée de l'ignorance du caméléon qui confond la peau avec l'être.

Les différents Accords, de Matignon puis de Nouméa, ont créé certaines conditions favorables au développement de la création artistique et donc de la rencontre avec l'Autre. Il nous appartient de tirer le maximum de cette situation et d'explorer le plus à fond possible l'espace que nous occupons.

Mais je parlais tout à l'heure d'Interface culturelle, je me demande si nous ne sommes pas davantage dans une situation de Front culturel. Un espace où se font face des différences irréductibles, toutefois moins dans les domaines artistiques, mais plus certainement dans les domaines économiques, politiques et même de l'enseignement.

FIN (octobre 2003)

Nicolas Kurtovitch

The following short texts illustrate my exploration, my conscious movement around that cultural interface that is New Caledonia.

Text No 1

Text written light-handedly No 2 Ouvea July 1999

Here, all is incomplete; the house I am in, where I am going to sleep for just one night, is finished. The cement walls are polished and smooth, but unpainted, none of them are painted, except the four inside walls of the bedroom, the owner's bedroom, not the one he has given me. In the main room, the sitting-room, the electrical circuitry has been installed in accordance with the new standards; white ducting perfectly sized for its purpose, thick for the main switchboard and thinner for supplying current to the ceiling light, from which hangs just a bare 60 watt bulb! No lampshade. Everything is in place around the windows and even the wooden frame is painted, the handle is on, except that three panes of the eight are missing and have been replaced with squares of cardboard temporarily taped in with liberal amounts of brown adhesive tape. In one corner of the kitchen, some cartons full of ceramic tiles have been stored with the tiles still in the half-open boxes, whereas they should have been laid already. And there are some shrubs which haven't really been planted, some trees which have been there for a long time right in front of the house from before the owner's time, a dilapidated plastic chair is an unstable support for some leftover structural timber intended apparently for a future veranda. So everything is incomplete but totally bearable.

Here then, just a few steps away from an immense beach, some 15 km of unbroken, smooth fine white sand, perfectly untouched except for an occasional dinghy pulled up on the beach and this beach gives onto the lagoon stretching out for an untold distance well beyond the horizon, and almost within touching distance, all that incompleteness. Almost well-ordered incompleteness, of virtually all at the island's buildings, because I realise that this house shows the same features as their gardens and fences built in such a way that no-one really notices their existence, from the half-painted classrooms with half-fixed ceilings and all along the roadside I see incompleteness, no signposting to the airport which still has no public toilets worthy of the name. Why?

So as to say that over and above the bare minimum, material things should not demand of people more effort or money than necessary, otherwise this would be detrimental to the time and energy to be spent with other men and women in the community. One must preserve the time and the strength of being together, the desire to merely talk about what you should do today, this very day, 20th July 1999, discussion, a pretext for living together, almost side-by-side, and always knotting the threads of conversation, friendship, heart and spirit.

Nicolas Kurtovitch

Text No 2

Here where I am, where I grew up, my land was nothing but a bit of cement, a bit of tarmac. Under my bare feet then no earth no mud no dust when it was dry, everything clean, smooth neat and easy to wash, concrete and from time to time the floor squeaking, which is old and splintering, but which is soft and grey and which we haven't polished for ages.

In the yard, the all-wood house was located right at the end of the street and the yard stretched out behind it, it could have been made from beaten earth like most of the houses in this old neighbourhood that for reasons of cleanliness, hygiene and easiness we would have claimed also modernity, it has been clumsily paved over with large concrete blocks 1 meter square, therefore in this yard the cement has easily and completely replaced the earth. Sometimes the join between the slabs is far from perfect and while at the beginning nothing dropped into the gap, after a few weeks wild grass started coming up where it shouldn't have where a few square centimeters of earth still survived. Nobody thought of pulling up these weeds and so much the better because my feet could still get lost there and wonder between the slabs to find what was missing, something soft, something damp, something gentle something surprising and something changing.

A few days ago, I walked close to this house which no longer seemed inhabited, where I had lived for a few years during my youth, far from my own family, but not in any way abandoned, I met a man who was waiting on the pavement, which is now perfectly straight and flat, with street lamps. dustbins and a clean gutter because it is regularly cleaned. That man! What was he dressed in!? Strips of cloth, it looked like, with old patched up clothes picked up from the heap that the Catholic Relief refused to take in and left outside the main door of their store a few steps down from the cathedral, not exactly over-dressed but sufficiently dressed to be able to stand on the street corner without running the risk of being arrested and in his right hand alongside his body he held a scruffy faded jute bag which must have been brown at one time. The bag hung from his shoulder by a few pieces of intertwined string. The tip of a bushknife poked out of it and two or three sticks, or what I thought were sticks, but after thinking about it they must have been taro plants. I'm sure he was smiling, not the beam of a clown or a moronic television presenter, but a barely perceptible smile but a definite one.

This poor man was happy, content by what awaited him at this very early hour. I knew where he was going, I did not know what his exact destination was, but I knew which place he was going to; the field somewhere out behind the street, behind the houses and their yards on the hillside, where men and women after clearing the land planted their root crops. The prospect of soon being in his field, a familiar place, beautiful and warm, surrounded by the bushes, the flowers and the large green banana leaves, the wild mimosa, the promise of contact with freshly-turned soil, around his ankles, all this filled him with happiness. His happiness reached me, that happiness that I could feel just by exchanging glances because I was familiar with it myself firstly many years ago, when after my little toes, as if they were pulling me behind them, I completely disappeared between the cement slabs in the yard and

now today by the random influence of friendships, I walk through several hundred meters of forest to one of those still-wild gardens.

Text started at Do Kamo at 3 pm

Finished at Galleria at ten past five on 17 09 1999

Nicolas Kurtovitch

Text No 3

Text written light-handedly No 13

Somewhere, hanging from a nail on the side of one of my bookcases, I have a slingshot made by a young man whom I know well. I don't know how he made it and I'd be quite incapable of making it work, but it is very familiar. I often touch it, because of a young man himself who is far away and I miss him and it is almost him, almost his body and also because of the material the slingshot is made from. At the beginning it was a big piece of banyan skin, about 50 cm by 30 in size, but the general shape, although roughly rectangular, wasn't straight in any way. The skin comes from the bark of the roots of the tree and still looks plantlike, with many wrinkles of varying depths like on an old man's face worn by the years; it's neither yellow nor orange, rather a colour in between the two, the possible name of which I do not know. It is not smooth as a piece of silk could be, it is rough as if it had been thrown on the ground after being peeled off dirty from the root and blown on: there is something of this earth still on the skin. I imagine that this is how it got its rough texture but really I don't know. The young man spoke with the young woman who gave it to him for a long time. He wanted to know everything about where it came from, how the root was chosen and wanted to know if it was chance that decided the quality of the material or whether the choice was a very careful one; he also wanted to know everything about the way it was extracted and what she would have wanted to do with it. He wanted to know what people of her clan usually did with them and whether women alone were entitled to prepare the bark to make it look like this. He had so many questions to ask. I did not listen to the answers, they remained alone for two long hours while I contented myself with the shade of the banyan tree.

She must have told him all about it, told him what it was possible to say in such a short time. When he joined me, I understood from his happy face that he knew about the skin, what it was. He knew about the metamorphosis of the banian bark after being cut up and prepared, becoming an almost human skin. The young man knew exactly what he was holding in his hand. His determined attitude, just a few words to tell me about what had been said, in a detached way, no explanation on what he was going to do with it, as if he had no plans. Everything in him suggested that he considered his day as being complete and that he was expecting something quite different during the hours we still had to spend together.

This young man has now gone and left me his slingshot. He has patiently cut in the skin into several strips and from the strips made string which he has skilfully woven together. To make what I call the palm of the slingshot, a place which resembles the hollow of the hand, where you place the stone you wish to throw, he used a piece 8cm by 2, the smoothest possible one. The really surprising thing is that this part of the whole thing concentrates all my attention on it, all my interest, all the mysterious strength that I grant to this banyan skin, as if I guessed that by uncontrollable magic what had been one of the buried roots, now pulled from the earth and transformed, was going to project into the heavens all the desires and wants of that young man.

Nicolas Kurtovitch