

ABDELLAH TAÏA'S LITERARY PALIMPSESTS

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This article is interested in the relationship of contemporary Moroccan writing to the French literary tradition, concentrating in particular on the texts of Abdelkebir Khatibi and Abdellah Taïa. It focuses on how the culturally composite prose of Abdellah Taïa seeks to transform the neocolonial assumptions about Franco-Maghrebi relations, in which any trace of a metropolitan French author is presumed to be no more than the result of an imperial education. From Flaubert to Genet, from the *Lettres portugaises* to *L'Immoraliste*, Taïa and Khatibi often resurrect metropolitan French authors in their writing. Yet, rather than parroting French stories in a colonial act of self-effacement, I argue that Taïa's texts explicitly rehouse French narratives on the Moroccan page to produce a shared space of intergenerational and transnational memory.

« Mais qui se réclame encore, disons-nous, de l'unité de la langue française ?
Qui parle encore, aujourd'hui, de LA littérature française ?
Sans doute, il y en a plusieurs. Lesquelles, diriez-vous ? »
Abdelkebir Khatibi (1987, 15)

In 1987, one of the most important Moroccan thinkers and postcolonial theorists of the twentieth century, Abdelkebir Khatibi, published his reflections on the figure of the stranger in the French literary tradition. Eager to break away from the imperial monolith of exoticism that had defined France's representation of Arab, African, and Middle Eastern worlds since the nineteenth century, Khatibi opens his essay by suggesting that the Other has long been at the heart not just of French, but all Western literature. Since classical antiquity, he claims that Western texts have been driven by an interest in alterity: from the epic narratives of Homer onwards, writers have sought to greet the foreigner on the imaginary territory of their page and play host to an outsider in an effort to shore up the dialectical relations of self and other. This literary fascination with "l'extranéité" (11), with a world beyond our immediate homeland, is motivated less by the appropriative energy of colonial politics, and more by the universal

possibilities afforded by poetic discourse. Writings that complicate, resist and reimagine the borders of a national territory are able to transport both reader and author to an elsewhere from which the individual can position themselves in relation to the linguistic, cultural, and spatial outsides of other frames and contexts.

Khatibi is optimistic about these literary encounters with otherness. For him, they reveal “*l’exotisme du dedans* [...] inhérente à toute littérature [...] et] qui rend toute littérature étrangère à elle-même et à son cadre national ou patriotique” (10). Rather than turning outwards to promote a national identity, or exert some dangerous form of jingoism, Khatibi suggests that literature can aspire to its own internal exoticism, its inner otherness, as a way of defying the suffocating unity foisted upon it by a state-sanctioned canon. The literary text becomes a space in which diversity can be experienced without assimilation, to cite Khalid Lyamlhay’s recent article on Khatibi in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (2019); this *exotisme du dedans* moves away from orientalist forms of domination that subjugate the other as a fictional entity, to suggest instead that the writer can experience self-discovery through alienation. In other words, only by going in search of other cultures, of other languages and of difference itself, can literature achieve its potential to supersede the limitations of nationalism and reach a more polyphonic space of encounter that disrupts the hierarchies in which the stranger is ever ostracized.

This article is interested in the ways in which Moroccan writing draws on that literary otherness to contest, pastiche, and refashion the borders of “LA littérature française”. Just as Khatibi warns in the epigraph, the false singularity of such a term drowns out the multiplicity of voices he finds at play within Francophone writing; wrongly binding “la langue française” to a centralized Hexagon governed by the linguistic straitjacket of the Académie française. Instead, Khatibi is interested in the relationship of Maghrebi writers towards their French literary heritage, eager to establish a kinship that is not solely based on the indelible traces of an imperial upbringing. Like his fellow Moroccan author Leïla Slimani, who has been campaigning more recently for a departure from “une vision jacobine du français où le bon français serait ici [en France]” (*Le Point*, 2018), Maghrebi writers have been vocal about breaking the yoke that binds French fiction to an outdated Napoleonic canon. Those founding fictions of post-Revolutionary France hailing from “Racine, Molière, [et] les bons auteurs du siècle de Louis XIV” (Voltaire, 170) that promised to construct a shared, cultural memory for the mainland, also institutionalised the classical rules of rhetoric established by Aristotle, Horace, and Boileau such that French literature became a prestigious object available to the scholarly elite alone. In

response, a swell of recent Maghrebi writers, including the *Qui fait la France?* literary collective (which deftly plays on the Arabic homophone "kiffer" in a linguistic performance of the very cultural hybridity the group vaunts), have joined Slimani's cry to create a more inclusive literary Republicanism. This aims to grant Moroccan authors access to a French textual citizenship that celebrates a more porous, creolised literary language able to entwine both Arab and French cultural narratives. For Denis Provencher, borrowing from William Leap's linguistic coinage of the "flexible accumulation of language" (26) as being "the broad accumulation of linguistic and other symbolic resources" (Leap, 417), contemporary Maghrebi writers often pastiche French literary discourse in order to position themselves more legitimately within it.

Refusing to be annexed by misplaced, exoticist fantasies of Arabic alterity in a hackneyed version of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, this article explores the ways in which contemporary Moroccan writing accommodates the foreignness of a French literary heritage in order to reinvent its narratives. More specifically, I ask how the often culturally composite prose of autofictional writer and queer activist, Abdellah Taïa, transforms the neo-colonial assumptions about Franco-Maghrebi relations, in which any trace of a metropolitan French author is presumed to be no more than the result of a colonial education. From the *Lettres Portugaises*, *Phèdre*, and *L'Assommoir* taught on French school curriculums, to the philosophical icons of Foucault, Sartre, and Barthes studied at university, I ask if the textual migration of French classics within an intergenerational, transnational Francophone context attests to Taïa's desire to reclaim a common French epistemological heritage. Or, if they expose a neo-colonial legacy where Moroccan authors must learn to write on top of French texts, such that Taïa's novels are constructed as postcolonial palimpsests that cannot forget their imperial history. Arguably, Taïa's novels operate on both these levels, dramatizing Khatibi's more positive perception of Maghrebi writing as constitutively palimpsestic. Forged out of the accumulation of stories once written by the oppressor (the French), the Moroccan subject re-energises those narratives by reclaiming their agency within them. Khatibi explains in *Amour bilingue* that:

[j]'étais un livre parlant, qui s'arrachait de ses palimpsestes, pour parvenir à se faire comprendre, se faire admettre. Je suis donc un texte de cet arrachement, et peut-être suis-je le premier fou de ma langue maternelle : faire muter une langue dans une autre est impossible. Et je désire cet impossible. (35)

Figuring himself as a talking book onto which the traces of a French and Arabic heritage are etched, preserved, and superimposed, Khatibi presents his Maghrebi identity as a palimpsest that builds on previous narratives in order to

produce new ones. That self-text is written in both his mother tongue, Arabic, and his acquired one, French, in what Jane Hiddleston perceives as a “plural, relational form of writing [...] in which languages jostle against one another and provocatively permeate one another with fragments of alterity” (132). Khatibi demands that the mother and foreign tongue co-exist, that Arabic and French sit contiguous rather than try to fight for dominance. Only by embracing his own alienation, does Khatibi discover the syncretism at the heart of his vision not just of Maghrebi writers, but of his universal vision of literary communities more generally. He explains in *Figures de l'étranger* that “[é]crire dans une langue qui *était* étrangère, est une façon de fonder la légitimité de l'acte de d'écrire. Cet écrivain dit d'abord : voici ma naissance, voici mon nom, voici mon terroir et voici 'mon cœur qui ne bat que pour vous'" (210). The Moroccan author that assumes a Francophone voice plays host to a fundamental alterity, hailing the layers of cultural difference that lie at the heart of any literary internationalism. Khatibi presents Maghrebi literary identity as a tessellation of narratives inherited from birth, solidified by the proper name, circulating around one's native land and then transformed by allegiances to an adopted one. If, as Max Silverman has argued, “the palimpsest captures most completely the superimposition and productive interaction of different inscriptions [...] whereby one element is seen through and transformed by another” (4), then only by appropriating Arabic and French narratives in tandem, do Taïa and Khatibi figure Maghrebi fiction as an exemplar of literary internationalism.

Khatibi's *bi-langue*

Before turning to an analysis of Taïa's novels, we must first decipher the complex power dynamics of how Franco-Maghrebi voices are imbricated more generally. In 1992, at a conference in Louisiana entitled *Renvois de l'ailleurs* and presided over by Edouard Glissant, Khatibi engages in a conversation with Jacques Derrida around the postcolonial potential of French-Maghrebi identity. Khatibi vaunts the epistemic possibilities of Arabic and Francophone bilingualism, eschewing a dyadic structure in which a universalizing, imperial West effaces a nostalgic, original Arab homeland. He sees this as outdated for those who, like himself, “appartien[nen]t à cette génération décoloniale [qui] ne so[nt] plus dupes [...] ni tenaillés par les affres de cette conscience malheureuse” (2008, 11). At the beginning of *Maghreb Pluriel* – a treatise on the Maghreb as a space of mutating cultural relations not bound by a quest for roots – Khatibi quotes Frantz Fanon's call for a departure from European society in the Maghreb. But he expresses caution at Fanon's over-simplified Hegelianism: “humilié durant l'époque coloniale [... Fanon] ne finit pas de se décoloniser”

(9). As Belinda Jack has argued, by using deconstruction as a mode of decolonization (158), Khatibi fragments a dialectical vision of Arab and Western identities, asking “de quel Occident s’agit-il ? de quel Occident opposé à nous-mêmes, en nous-mêmes, et qui sont ‘nous-mêmes’ dans la décolonisation ?” (11). There can be no divided Moroccan self and French other here. Only the interpenetration and hospitality of both in what he calls the ‘bi-langue’: a perpetual, simultaneous migration from one language to another in “une scénographie des doubles. Un mot : déjà deux ; déjà un récit” (11). Or, more expansively in the preface to Marc Gontard’s *La Violence du texte*, “la langue maternelle est à l’œuvre dans la langue étrangère. De l’une à l’autre se déroule une traduction permanente et un entretien en abîme, extrêmement difficile à mettre au jour” (8).

Khatibi’s *bi-langue* is a stage, a performance space for the drama of two cultures to intermingle as the memory of a mother tongue resurfaces in the acquired voice; the *bi-langue* an interlocutor unto itself as native and foreign, hegemonic and marginalized stories speak through the same word, while never “forming a new unity” as Winifred Woodhull states (ix). What Tunisian thinker Albert Memmi decried in 1957 as the “alienation of colonial bilingualism” (124), now offers a site of narrative creation for Khatibi thirty years later. The gap between inherited and imposed idiom forms the *tabula rasa* on which to forge a syncretic linguistic identity. The *bi-langue* is thus neither property nor territory to be colonized, but the hospitable linguistic thoroughfare in-between, a linguistic Mediterranean of multi-belonging.

Derrida stages a sort of Socratic dialogue with Khatibi at the Louisiana conference that he later publishes as *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre* (1996). He probes him on the stakes of this non-appropriative language. Confronting Khatibi’s notion of the *bi-langue* in their *lingua franca*, French, Derrida poses the dilemma that “je n’ai qu’une langue, ce n’est pas la mienne [...] il est possible d’être monolingue (je le suis bien, non ?), et de parler une langue qui n’est pas la sienne” (19). Derrida’s monolingualism operates like a ventriloquist parroting a foreign language because it never learned its vernacular. And yet his French monolingualism is nevertheless an intrinsic site of memory, “en quête d’histoire et de filiation”, even if “l’écriture se destine comme d’elle-même à l’anamnèse” (22): the enunciator remembering while disregarding the otherness that governs their discourse. Derrida’s understanding of Francophone writing thus

s’appelle de mémoire. Une aveugle pulsion généalogique trouverait son ressort, sa force, et son recours dans la partition même de cette double loi, dans la duplicité antinomique de cette clause d’appartenance :

1. On ne parle jamais qu'une seule langue – ou plutôt un seul idiome.
 2. On ne parle jamais une seule langue – ou plutôt il n'y a pas d'idiome pur.
- (23)

Being born into French cultural citizenship, Derrida nevertheless attests to the weight of his Algerian inheritance whose alterity is masked by the homogeneity of a “monolinguisme imposé par l'autre” (69). Judith Still argues that Derrida universalizes his exceptional situation of being “à la fois maghrébin (ce qui n'est pas une citoyenneté) et citoyen français, à la fois l'un et l'autre *de naissance*” (27), to highlight how all discourse is mired in a contradiction: any mother tongue always plays host to an inherited cultural memory that it is silenced by the law of the metropole and master. By revealing this invisible doubling within language, Derrida portrays monolingualism as itself palimpsestic: behind one voice, another is remembered and resurfaces. His project is thus to split the enforced “unité historique de *la France et du Maghreb*”, fracturing it through the sexual difference of the language itself to remind us that “le ‘et’ n'aura jamais été donné [...] le silence de ce trait d'union ne pacifie ou n'apaise rien, aucun tourment, aucune torture. Il ne fera jamais taire leur mémoire” (27). If, as Samin Amir reminds us in *The Maghreb in the Modern World*, these identitarian ambiguities are already etched into the term ‘Maghreb’ itself, whereby it signifies the West in Arabic, and the Orient for Europeans, by what means can we extricate, then commemorate, the layers of the Franco-Maghrebi relation without erasure? How to find an inclusive form of writing that allows for Derrida's approach to a Francophone monolingualism that is no longer blinkered but that “sees double” (to use Réda Bensmaïa's terms)? To respond, I turn to Abdellah Taïa to show how his texts create palimpsestic relations with his French literary ancestors, to pastiche and refashion both.

Taïa's postcolonial palimpsests

As the first Moroccan author to publicly assume their homosexuality in a dramatic ‘coming out’ interview in the Moroccan journal *Tel Quel* – whose French avant-garde origins in 1960s Paris saw the likes of Kristeva, Blanchot, Derrida, Sollers, and Foucault grace its pages, paralleling the kind of re-claiming of the French intellectual we come to see in Taïa's texts – Taïa recounts how indentured the layers of colonial violence are within the canonical stories he has learned as a scholar of French letters at the university of Rabat. In his 2017 epistolary novel *Celui qui est digne d'être aimé*, he recalls one of his undergraduate *exposés*, in which he transfers into his native Moroccan city the inequalities that have been romanticised and re-enacted by the Arab subjects who are

reduced as props in dominant European narratives. Speaking through the lens of his own vertical relation as the erstwhile lover of his French professor, Emmanuel, from the *École Normale Supérieure*, Taïa recalls:

Oscar Wilde et André Gide en Algérie, à Biskra. Le premier offrant au second un garçon arabe et lui permettant ainsi de vivre sa première expérience homosexuelle. Cet épisode ultra célèbre, tu me l'as raconté je ne sais combien de fois. Au Maroc, suivant aveuglément tes conseils, j'avais fait un exposé sur ce sujet à l'Université de Rabat. J'avais osé faire cela. Tu avais été fier de moi. Tu parlas de 'moment politique' [...] moi, le pédé arabe d'Emmanuel, j'avais tué à Rabat une énième fois le garçon qui devrait être le véritable héros de cette histoire. J'aurais dû lui servir de voix, d'avocat, d'ami, de frère lointain. Encore totalement colonisé dans ma tête, je n'avais parlé que des deux écrivains faisant du tourisme oriental-sexuel en Algérie. J'avais récité ce que j'avais bien appris en croyant être un littéraire parfaitement sensible et audacieux. (102)

The transmission of Gide and Wilde's fabled sexual freedom in North-eastern Algeria constructs a one-sided memory that legitimizes the erasure of Maghrebi subjectivities. As a scholar of French literature, Taïa is not just taught to extol and iterate a European, *fin de siècle* practice of dissident sexuality and non-conformist modes of kinship; rather, he is granted ontological affirmation by effacing his own cultural difference. Taïa's self-identification as "le pédé arabe d'Emmanuel" who parrots the lessons of queer identity taught to him and authorised by Wilde and Gide's colonial dominance, produces a double reification: on the one hand, like the "Arab boy" in the anecdote, Taïa the "good Moroccan student" becomes a foil who illuminates the hegemony of two European icons whose legend of homosexual self-discovery is allowed to pass from generation to generation, from the North to the Global South. Because Taïa silences the anonymous Arab boy, he not only objectifies the gay Arab lover, but he alienates his own self, turning himself into a non-subject by assimilating Gide's identity as though it were his own. Taïa learns to be accepted only as the Arab son made in the same image as the French, bourgeois father Gide. The relation seems to ape the power dynamics of patriarchal lineage, rather than those horizontal networks of fraternity, friendship, advocacy, and advice that Taïa promotes in the 2017 retelling. The four roles he aspires to fulfil – "de voix, d'avocat, d'ami, de frère lointain" – make visible the vertical power relations of a French canon that are then flattened out. His texts must first bring "le garçon arabe" to life in order to establish a progressive Maghrebi-French literary network based on embodied experience, not flat characterisation on a French page.

Faced with the shame of reification by his French literary ancestors, Taïa's corpus sets out to remember these canonical tales differently. But, like

Khatibi, who also condemns “les journaux de voyage de Gide à propos du Congo et du Tchad” for their resistance to “une pensée de la différence culturelle” (9-10), Taïa does not launch a parricidal attack on his French literary kin. Instead, he seems to eroticise French cultural mythology. In his 2004 autofiction, *Le rouge du tarbouche*, he narrates his visit to Jean Genet’s grave with his 19-year old second cousin Ali, a French literature scholar who “était beau comme un dieu berbère [et qui] venait d’entrer à l’université pour étudier les lettres françaises” (45). A syncretism emerges where Maghrebi mythology mixes with French scholarship; Taïa’s homosexual desire intensifying because of Ali’s mastery of the French classics and his assumption of a shared Franco-phone literary heritage. That inheritance passes down to Taïa who states that:

j’ai choisi, comme Ali, la littérature française pour mes études et pour mes rêves. Pendant six ans, j’allais quotidiennement à Rabat, laissant Salé et ses fous sur l’autre rive [...]. [J]e m’arrêtais toujours à l’avant-dernière station, celle qui jouxte le grand jardin Moulay Abdellah où Jean Genet aimait se promener. (51)

French literature is fetishized as a quixotic space of cultural escapism. Indeed, he disavows his native city of Salé as a site of monocultural folly against the lush cultural garden of Genet’s old Moroccan haunts. Yet, note the language of borders: the bank; the penultimate station; the bus-stop adjacent to the garden. Taïa’s language situates him on the outside of the *milieu* he exalts, contiguous not to the classics, but to the pariah of French letters, Genet, whose perennial exile from France and burial in Larache, Morocco, a provincial town about an hour away from Tangiers, teaches us something of the trans-national hybridity that Taïa seeks in his French studies. The poetic tropes surrounding Genet’s Moroccan burial gesture to a non-essentialised model of belonging that cannot assimilate a French identity: his liminal tomb sits in a Christian cemetery that is contiguous to a Muslim one, abjectly next to a prison and a landfill site, facing the North Atlantic sea that is poised half-way between Europe and Africa, his marginal posture defiantly rejecting a France that he wants to “plus que haïr, plus que vomir” (Genet, 149). Having had his tomb placed in the direct line of sight of the house he built for his Moroccan lover, Mohammed El Katrani, and his wife, perhaps his burial site remains more as an ephemeral French memory etched into the Moroccan landscape to be kept alive by their cultural myths. Indeed, in Taïa’s preface to the Tangiers journal *Nejma* special issue *Jean Genet, un Saint Marocain*, he recalls the transcendence of Genet’s narrative via his illiterate mother, and in the rewriting, ascribes a French literary heritage to his own Moroccan culture:

Ma mère, M'Barka, le connaissait. Cette femme du bled, qui vient de partir et qui n'a jamais appris à lire et à écrire, était en communion avec lui. Quelqu'un lui avait parlé de cet écrivain. C'est elle qui a voulu m'emmener sur sa tombe [...]. C'est elle qui m'a mis sur la voie de Jean Genet [...]. Aujourd'hui, dans *Nejma*, je ne fais que célébrer, en compagnie d'autres écrivains et de photographes, cet homme bon et cruel avec les mots de ma mère, dans sa façon à elle de réinventer les rituels, de dépasser les lignes, les dieux. (6)

As Taïa sanctifies Genet à *la marocaine*, he reinvents Jean Paul Sartre's own consecration of Genet in 1952, in the imperious 600-page *Saint Genet, comédien et martyr*. Yet, unlike Sartre who entombs Genet as the radical existentialist hero, Taïa's pilgrimage to Genet's actual tomb is imagined as a communitarian birth-right tour. Like a mythologised game of Chinese whispers – where someone tells the mother, which she passes on to Taïa, who cross-fertilises this with writers and photographers in Morocco, and disseminated across the world – the tomb in Larache is figured by Taïa as a queer space that destabilises Moroccan anti-homosexual norms, mixing religious clans and cultural myths. Taïa casts his Muslim mother in Christian communion with the pagan 'genie', or Jean (Gene) Genie (to borrow David Bowie's phrasing). He imagines the parochial, illiterate M'Barka leading the charge towards the canonical, cosmopolitan author. Taïa's identity shapeshifts in relation to Genet, as he adopts manifold roles: his namesake 'Abdallah' the tightrope walker; the archetype of the poor Moroccan boy; the friend or vassal. Being "mis sur la voie de Jean Genet" leads to the troubling of any essentialised or monolithic identity. Rather, the legacy the mother passes down to her progeny is to "réinventer les rituels" and "dépasser les lignes", to deviate from those sacred and secular norms by which identity is determined. For Ralph Heyndels analysing this scene, Taïa manages to establish "une substitution qui n'est pas un effacement, car le 'Jenih' la mère d'Ali demeure, telle une autre manière de dire 'Genet'" (92); the contiguity of the Franco-Maghrebi Genet/Jenih allowing two literary heritages to sit alongside one another without hierarchy or dominance.

As Denis Provencher's 2017 study *Queer Maghrebi French* has astutely pointed out, Taïa draws on Genet to invent his own idiolect. He revels in the tale of having butchered the pronunciation of Genet's name, Francophile Ali didactically explaining that "[i]l ne s'appelle pas Jenih comme dit ma mère, mais Genet, Jean Genet. Dis-le!" (2004, 48). But Taïa refuses any automatic mimicry, avoiding the symbolic violence he promoted by having "récité ce que j'avais bien appris" in his Wilde-Gide Rabat presentation. Instead, he takes pride in a linguistic palimpsest that allows Khatibi's *bi-langue* to resonate:

je sais à présent bien écrire et bien prononcer son nom, même si au fond je reste fidèle à Malika et à sa manière d'arabiser et de s'approprier cet écrivain en l'intégrant à sa réalité quotidienne. Jenih... Sidi Jenih. (51)

Taïa's idiolect sits in neither camp – neither just Jenih, nor just Genet – but in the interstitial play of knowing and switching between the two. The anaphora of “bien” establishes a grammar of normativity that Taïa does not transgress as such, but which he modifies according to his own diasporic experience. Sidi Jenih subtends a host of competing oppositions, attuned to a maternal/fraternal, homosexual/familial, Arabic/French, illiterate/scholarly, daily Moroccan reality. This channels Genet's own prismatic self-representation in which “la solitude de la prison me donnait cette liberté d'être avec les cent Jean Genet entrevus au vol chez cent passants” (Genet, 168). What Genet inspires is a self-discovery that transcends nations, characters, genders, to be found instead in mutation and scattering of oneself into hundreds of shapes, performances and forms. Seeing himself in “hundreds of passers-by”, he identifies and disidentifies as and with an eternally changing network of nomadic relations, forging himself in others, as others, just as much as Taïa casts his own Moroccan family as dispersing and de-territorializing themselves into their own experience of Genet's legend.

Like Deleuze's writing on minor literature, so Taïa buries himself inside other French authors not as a form of mimesis, but to eviscerate the monocultural hegemony of French literary language just as Genet did fifty years prior. Where Genet justifies speaking in the language of his *tortionnaires*, in a literary French that is “fixe, elle a été fixée au XVII siècle” (230), so Taïa's objective is “non pas aimer le français, mais l'utiliser comme une arme, comme une technique, une méthode précise et tranchante” (2018, 165). Taïa seeks to force French writers once empowered in an imperialist metropole into a new-found cultural exile. Such is Khatibi's own celebration of Genet, as Hiddleston notes that he holds him up as “an apt example of a writer continually in search of other cultures, other countries and other languages as his life is described by Khatibi as one of ‘apprentissage, exercice de l'altérité et d'altération dans une réalité tout à fait traitable et intraitable’” (178). It is Genet's pursuit of self-alienation, of a renunciation of his national identity and of what Frenchness might represent, that paradoxically offers a model for Maghrebi self-discovery.

Take the epistolary structure of *Celui qui est digne*, which impersonates the structure of Gabriel de Guilleragues' seventeenth-century text *Lettres Portugaises*: a set text on the *baccalauréat* about the erotic, unrequited love of a Portuguese nun whose form is hijacked by Taïa to house another illicit, unrequited but now homosexual love. Or his 2006 *Bildungsroman*, *L'armée du*

salut, when he mistakes a man at the front desk of Geneva's Salvation Army for Michel Foucault:

Mon cœur était heureux de le retrouver, un visage depuis longtemps familier, un être fait de mots rencontré d'abord dans les livres puis un livre d'amour à la main, un homme qui souriait déjà alors qu'il faisait encore noir. Un homme qui n'était pas mort, même si la réalité disait le contraire. Je ne pouvais que l'admirer. Que l'aimer. (103)

Outcast in the Swiss city, Taïa fashions an imagined salvation through the resurrection of his philosophical idol as a Swiss *Doppelgänger*. His lyrical insistence on words, books, and love letters constructs the French literary *milieu* as a literal refuge: Foucault the icon metonymically provides a form of cultural asylum precisely because Taïa allows him to live on in his Moroccan texts. Any social shame of non-integration in the city is effaced in this imagined intellectual inclusion, as though Foucault the man and his work embody the universal ethics of a literary Republic. Foucault is reborn on Taïa's page as an *Ersatz* Foucault, who, crucially, is just as venerated as the original. Taïa's language explodes a monolithic understanding of Foucault's identity here; his prose materialises an intergenerational, transnational form of queer kinship that celebrates new forms of relation made possible by the fantasies created in French literary texts.

Yet, it is Taïa's 2019 novel, *La Vie lente*, that best presents the discomfort of trying to repurpose the cultural ownership of canonical tales. Losing Kha-tibi's multicultural optimism, Taïa remembers an iconic scene at the Louvre from Zola's nineteenth-century novel *L'Assommoir*, in which M. Madinier leads a party from the *Goutte d'or* through corridors of artworks he does not understand at the Louvre.¹ Taïa lends the scene a now transnational realism: superimposing Mounir, the exile from Rabat, a PhD in seventeenth-century French literature, and his imagined lover, Antoine, a Parisian police officer who has never visited the Museum, onto Zola's scene in a painful, *mise en abyme*. Zola's class wars are refracted in the postcolonial dynamics of a new Master-slave dialectic, in which Moroccan cultural curiosity is policed by the metropole. However, Taïa's scene is no direct imitation or "remake triste de la visite du célèbre musée [...] c'était comique, franchement comique, mais pas comme chez Émile Zola" (189). Rather, he charts a course away from an orientalist vision of pre-colonial Maghrebi culture to insist on a shared memory of epistemological and cultural exclusion familiar to a French literary consciousness; Zola re-appropriated and repurposed for a Franco-Maghrebi struggle in which historical injustice reigns true.

Because Taïa's palimpsestic fictions house so many fragments of French writers, because he is adamant that French literature would grant him an epistemological passport since "avec le français [...] j'allais rejoindre une autre sensibilité. Une autre réalité. Belle et mythique. Arthur Rimbaud. Gustave Flaubert, Isabelle Adjani. Marcel Proust. Avec et dans le français je ne pouvais être que libre" (168), he rightly fears that his own writing style becomes vampiric, feeding on the words of those authors he accommodates. The subject he is trying to forge through writing, his own sense of self, is thus "bouffé cru par les mots, par le style. Par ce qu'on appelle la littérature" (168). If Taïa is bitten by French letters, then arguably this is how he dissolves the unilateral vision of "le garçon arabe". Taïa masters French literature to "résister au regard de l'Occident sur des gens comme moi, [ce qui] me permettait d'éviter les pièges et de ne pas entrer dans la prison que la France avait réservée depuis très longtemps pour moi" (168). Only when Taïa finds himself inside the prison of taxonomy, where he is minimised in the clichés of being "arabe et musulman et gay" (168), does he discover that to be made welcome by the words of writers like Foucault, Genet and Zola, is to open up a mosaic of identity formations that nimbly explode the very reductive labels in which they are housed. After all, it is only in prison that Genet conceives of freedom.

If Taïa resurrects and ventriloquizes hegemonic French intellectuals from Derrida to Barthes, or literary greats like Zola or Genet, positioning them as interlocutors in his writing, arguably he is seeking to redetermine who is granted access to a French epistemological heritage. By channelling both Kha-tibi's *bi-langue* and his literary internationalism, in which accents of Maghrebi experience echo through the tales of his French ancestors, he wrestles those canonical works free from the clutches of the colonisers. Yes, his Francophone voice speaks a Derridean "langue qui n'est pas la sienne", but he exploits such foreignness to collapse French as a language of power in Morocco; instead, Taïa turns French letters into the Arab boy of Oscar Wilde and André Gide, a prop he uses to emancipate Franco-Maghrebi relations from the strictures of imperial dominance and subordination, to create a new space of solidarity. Perhaps Taïa is reminding us that his French literary kin are not so far removed from his own Moroccan experience, and that, in the wistful words of Beckett in *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, "we're of one mind, all of one mind, always were, deep down, we're fond of one another" (77).

Notes

1. « Gervaise demanda le sujet des *Noces de Cana* ; c'était bête de ne pas écrire les sujets sur les cadres », Zola, *L'Assommoir* (Paris, Flammarion, 1877), 80.

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