

the maligned victim of her husband's paranoid fantasies. This is not to say, however, that *The Professor of Desire* is a more satisfactory novel than *My Life as a Man*. Though its final intentions are unclear, *My Life as a Man* retains a certain interest simply as a "case study," the vagaries of its narrative technique serving as a sharp dramatization of an utterly befuddled mind. *The Professor of Desire* can claim no such clearcut achievement. Kepesh's mental processes have been too simplified and stylized for the novel to be approached as a case study. Indeed Kepesh moves so regularly and predictably between extremes that he often resembles a metronome as much as a human being. However, despite the stylization of the hero and most of the supporting characters, and despite its close ties with the almost emblematic *The Breast*, *The Professor of Desire* is not satisfying as an allegory. The characters may be one-dimensional and the hero's basic problem well established, but their sum total is not at all clear. Thus, the larger intentions of this novel are no better defined than in *My Life as a Man*. *The Professor of Desire* bats around certain large oppositions—desire/duty; literature/life—but it never comes close to synthesizing them. And what general conclusions its hero reaches are either rejected almost immediately or seem to have only the most tenuous relationship to the action of the novel. At one point, for example, Kepesh declares that he is learning the truth of Chekhov's "overall philosophy of life" that "we are born innocent . . . we suffer terrible disillusionment before we can gain knowledge, and then we fear death—and we are granted only fragmentary happiness to offset the pain" (p. 94). This does not turn out to be a satisfactory coda, however, because one of Kepesh's final realizations is that he has suffered disillusionment without gaining knowledge. Ultimately the hero learns nothing and neither does the reader. Whatever profundity the novel achieves comes from Roth's sources, particularly Kafka and Chekhov, not from the novel itself. *The Professor of Desire* is full of hints that its truth might be revealed if the reader pursued the same course of study in these authors as Kepesh does. However, I suspect that any reader who took time off to do this would never feel the need to return to Roth.

For all that *The Professor of Desire* is frustrating and intellectually meretricious it has many incidental virtues. Those who

relish the kind of outrageous humor that characterizes *Our Gang* and *The Great American Novel* will be delighted with Roth's presentation of Herbie Bratasky whose ambition as a mimic is to "do diarrhea" (pp. 6-7) from "the rasp of the zipper" (p. 7) to "wiping" (p. 9). Moreover, inconclusive as he may be, Kepesh is nevertheless a brilliant monologist and the reader is swept along by the rapid narrative tide. The novel's finest moments come, however, when Roth breaks through the banally sentimental tone that characterizes much of his writing, particularly in those sections dealing with Kepesh's stereotyped Jewish parents, and hits a note of genuine pathos. This is more evident in Kepesh's final and truly moving reflections on his failure to make anything permanent out of his relationship with Claire: ". . . and here is the result! I know and I know and I know, I imagine and I imagine and I imagine, and when the worst happens, I might as well know nothing! You might as well know nothing!" (p. 262).

Like much of Roth's work, then, *The Professor of Desire* is extremely unsatisfying. In its parts, it is often brilliant, but, for all its promises to say something significant about the central dilemmas of modern existence, it finally lacks any coherent vision.

David Monaghan

RACHID BOUDJEDRA
L'Escargot entêté.
Paris: Denoël. 1977. Pp. 172.

"Enough is enough!" writes Jean Déjeux in a recent review of Boudjedra's *Topologie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* (1975): "Despite the talent, one would like to see more simplicity and mastery." Whatever the justification of Déjeux's comment, Boudjedra has more than answered the criticism with the publication of his fourth novel, *L'Escargot entêté*, for "simplicity and mastery" are precisely the qualities which characterize the composition and style of this latest work by the most gifted, productive, and controversial of the younger generation of Algerian novelists.

The plot is easily summarized: the hero discovers that he is being followed, seeks to escape, turns finally upon his tormentor, and kills him—the victim: a snail. Boudjedra's readers, however, will soon recognize that once again plot is largely irrelevant. The true action and significance are internal and homogeneous, present from the beginning within the mind of the unnamed narrator/protagonist and revealed to the reader through an accumulation of imagery and statement by which a whole fabric of obsession and fear gradually comes into focus. Here the protagonist's obsession is order: the city's gas and water systems (which it is his job, as a petty bureaucrat in charge of rat extermination, to protect), the twenty pockets sewn into his clothes which he uses to classify his notes to himself, etc. His fears have to do with threats to that order, threats which seem to focus in the organic: the reproductive capacity of rats (and humans), the hermaphroditism of snails, his own "nocturnal pollutions," the secret twenty-first pocket containing his emotional and aesthetic reflections, etc. These fears and obsessions enter, leave, and reenter the consciousness of the narrator like a rapid and random fingering of notes on a keyboard. The problem of the protagonist as narrator (for the process of narration is the subject of the book) is that these notes pour forth of their own accord, indifferent to his efforts to select and harmonize.

In Boudjedra's earlier novels, the protagonist's "insanity" is largely a consequence of his efforts to resist the forces that control society. Here, it results from

his efforts to adapt to those forces, systematically denying his family ties, emotions, sexuality, aesthetic responses, and religion. But such a radical repression of elements basic to one's identity is not viable, and the result is the obsessional mentality of the narrator, a mentality whose structural parallel in the workings of society within the novel cannot escape the reader.

In contrast to the verbal outpourings of his previous novels, the author's stylistic rendering of obsession here is characterized by a rigid control of syntax (linear, clipped, often telegraphic) and vocabulary (precise, technical wherever possible). Occasional lapses into reverie, doubt, or ambiguity are immediately censored, marked "for the twenty-first pocket" or "to be reworded." Partly as a consequence of these procedures, a certain distance separates the protagonist from the reader, whose attitude is that of a fascinated observer rather than of one who is in sympathy with the character. *L'Escargot enîêlé* is a less ambitious (if more "accessible") work than Boudjedra's earlier novels, relatively speaking little more than a highly developed sketch, but at the same time it significantly expands Boudjedra's stylistic repertoire as well as his thematic treatment of the social issues essential to post-independence Algeria in particular, and to modern society in general.

Louis Tremainé