

NOTES AND REVIEWS

A Journey through the Labyrinth: Rachid Boudjedra's *Topologie idéale pour une agression caractérisée*

The eye is drawn to the labyrinth. It makes its appearance first on the surface of the man's suitcase which he is holding slightly forward, possibly because one of his shoulders is higher than the other. The suitcase is marked by lines that crisscross its surface like a lacework of wrinkles, "créant une sorte de topographie savante."¹ The use of this image persists, as in the journey of the illiterate Berber peasant: starting from his mountain village, on "le Piton," leading him down to the plain with its Arabized cities—already somewhat foreign to him with their different dialects and languages—then continuing with the departure from the large port at the capital, with its cranes and growing buildings, taking the traveler across the water to a country with the promise of well-paid work. The train races north, finally depositing him in the station where the fateful descent into the Metro has its beginning. There, already perplexed and worn from his journey, holding his heavy suitcase slightly forward with his left hand, and a piece of paper with the address of his destination in his right, he is directed to the colorful map of the Metro situated at the entrance of all Parisian subway stations: "Où les lignes zigzaguent à travers des méandres donnant à la mémoire des envies de se délester d'un trop-plein d'impressions vécues depuis deux ou trois jours et se superposant les unes au-dessus des autres à la manière de ces lignes noires, rouges, jaunes, bleues, vertes, rouges à nouveau mais cette fois hachurées de noir, puis bleues . . ." (p. 18).

The map suggests a logic of its own, like a calligraphic style whose curlicues and shapes obey a patterned structure superseding that inherent in the meaning of the words, creating a symmetry and order unto itself: ". . . le pourtour de la ligne en pointillé faisant un cercle imparfait (avec même des excroissances, des boucles, des losanges, et des carrés dont le tracé revenait vite rejoindre la courbe du cercle initial) débordant ça et là, s'enfonçant parfois mais s'entêtant quand même à respecter un minimum de circularité, fût-elle précaire . . ." (p. 19); an order, indeed, to be defined only by the description itself, both of which "se suffit de superposer les cercles concentriques, de les accumuler dans une fébrilité intérieure qui n'en perd pas nécessairement sa mollesse mais qui annihile tout espoir de retrouver le centre d'un tel déploiement fantastique qui ne rend compte que de sa propre logique inhérente à son propre système . . ." (p. 20). The order of the universe created on the map was a closed one, obeying a logic incomprehensible to the illiterate peasant whose jarred sensibilities responded with pain to a whole set of stimuli produced unintentionally by the cartographers: "Et lui pensant, confusément: comment se retrouver sans cet agglomérat vertigineux et cette confusion colorée comme un gribouillis d'enfant capricieux, indifférent à la douleur des yeux qui se plissent devant tant de matériaux . . ." (p. 20).

Similarly the corridors, with their symmetrically positioned placards advertising sanitary napkins, fruit and tomatoes, toilet paper, and vacations in exotic lands, wound like a labyrinth, a veritable complexity of tunnels, corridors,

¹Rachid Boudjedra, *Topologie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* (Paris: Denoël, 1975), p. 7. Subsequent references to the novel will be included parenthetically in the text.

arcades, perspectives, avenues, boulevards, streets, alleys, and squares "mutilant l'espace, le subdivisant en créant une sorte de géométrie bâtarde . . ." (p. 160), a sort of "qasba européenne," from which he eventually emerged, only to have the misfortune of encountering a gang of noisy brawlers, "tapageurs," whose knives and chains left his body and blood in the same fatal pattern, "en mauvais état, haché, brisé, éclaté" (p. 222).

Like the map, a labyrinth, a maze, his journey led him on a path whose logic obeyed its own interior sense, leading to a closed universe, circular in the nature of meaningless paths, "ce qui limite l'aventure et rend tout périple aléatoire dans la mesure où les extrêmes se touchent et que le départ se confond avec l'arrivée" (p. 218). Like calligraphy in an unknown language, everything stops and starts, as does the narration, in midsentence. (Interrupted parenthetically in midair, and continuing on in excursions after excursions, leading systematically away from the point of departure, assuming a life of its own, each new phrase standing alone in its own light.) The plot a "périple aléatoire," the style a "périple aléatoire"—the structure of the novel projects the disturbed "esprit" of the traveler upon whose nervous sensibilities the map, the corridors, the journey, the streets, the crowds, and strange signs, have impressed their meandering lines, their own private, inaccessible, painfully unintelligible structure.

In the end, for the traveler, only the pain comes through. The environment removed from his comprehension, the visual perception sensitized and exaggerated, his eyes and brain were now wounded by the bombardment of electrically charged particles of light, artificial light emanating from all directions, like the ions racing through the pathways of the map, lighting up not a path but a pattern whose ultimate effect was felt as an aggression. Like the posters, placed one after the other, like the corridors leading through the vast chambers of the underground to the brutal gang, like the hidden network of pipes and lines deep beneath the surface of the earth, covered over with the polished walls, ceilings, posters, signs, and maps, hiding the ugly truth of reality from the millions of riders each day: *Topologie idéale* is a novel that strips bare the cosmetics. For Rachid Boudjedra, the truth appears only when we can see the gas lines leading from the maze to the slums, the housing for almost a million émigré North Africans working on the *chantiers* throughout the country. Truth appears after demystifying the messages of the advertising posters, which obey a logic of profit, and which exploit every natural instinct and desire with their elaborately constructed images.

The truth of the labyrinth is painful and aggressive. To underscore this, Boudjedra describes the reaction of a non-French speaking Berber peasant whose unfamiliarity with the urban environment could not be greater if he came from another planet. Always perplexed and in a panic, "il avance hanté par ce fouillis d'impressions, d'objets, d'images et de signes, se dévidant inlassablement d'une pelote invisible et l'inserrant dans un filet hallucinant dont le cri, constamment refoulé, ravalé au plus profond de la gorge, serait la seule transcription authentique capable d'exprimer cette appréhension confuse du réel . . ." (p. 236). The source of the pain is contained in the image, the "dédale," the "périple aléatoire," the voyage which like Dante's wanderings through hell, Ulysses's daring venture past the gates of Gibraltar, reflects the inner workings of the mind, a mental state here best described as alienation. The necessary connection between the maze and the pain becomes clear once we perceive the subjective and the objective flowing into each other, indistinguishable to the voyager whose disordered psychic condition reflects his environment: "Et lui se demandant s'il n'avait pas déjà vécu cette situation

hallucinante, mélangeant la topographie de l'espace et celle de la mémoire, les confondant même et les malaxant . . ." (pp. 137-38).

The alienation is complete on every level. For the voyager, the environment remains *angoissant* and foreign, the others hostile and strange, the man-made conveying an aggression which sets it apart from the natural, which it hides, transforms, and mutilates. The real becomes indistinguishable from the dream, fantasy and the fictive horribly enmesh themselves in his experience, disturbing the security of his memory, rendering his state of mind perplexed—hallucinatory and paramnesiac.

In the end all around him suggests and mirrors what he himself experiences within his own subjective world. And as Boudjedra describes the confusion and disorientation, as the wanderer vacillates lost in the maze, the reader experiences the natural flow of the narrative as if led by some strange coherence and logic from the voyager's mental anguish to the nightmarish physical surroundings and moral disintegration that reverberate around him: "Les quais problématiques en leur ubiquité infernale se faisant face, semblables en tout point, avec les mêmes affiches, les mêmes panneaux, les mêmes couleurs de céramique tapissant les murs, les mêmes cages vitrées d'où parviennent des sonneries stridentes coupées brusquement de mots bizarres, comme modulés élastiquement et se répercutant dans sa mémoire, alors que sur les bancs des hommes et des femmes aux yeux pleins de malheur, cuvent chacun de son côté, leur peine et leur vin dans l'indifférence totale . . ." (p. 218).

The *dépaysment* is complete, as the universe and all within it reflect and carry through the disjointed processes of the traveler's psychic state. The experience of the two merge, "mélangeant la topographie de l'espace et celle de la mémoire" (p. 138). Neither can the reader draw the line between the impressions of the voyager—the naïve peasant—and "le voyeur," the sophisticated narrator who calmly explains the workings of each minute detail in the "topologie idéale" which is to be found in the Metro. Every route is clearly delineated, every direction minutely examined, every sign, every machine, from chewing gum dispensers to turnstiles to mechanical gates, the people and their impressions, the advertisements and their deceptive images, the walls, the lights, the colors, the rhythm—the life is dissected and laid bare in all its ugly, aggressive, and painful qualities, until there, too, in the smallest detail, the line between an impression of reality and one created by the imagination is obscured. The reader joins the peasant, as "il se rend compte que la frontière entre le réel et l'imaginaire est factice . . ." (p. 190). Thus, in describing the trembling of the riders' hands as they hold onto the handrail of the escalator, one learns that it is transmitted by the shaking of the rubberized rail itself, unless that, too, is an "illusion d'optique donnée par la mouvance de l'escalier et la trépidation de la lumière" (p. 101). Similarly the observation that the traveler had one shoulder higher than the other was only verified by witnesses, with all the uncertainty that that conveys: ". . . à moins que cette histoire d'épaule plus grande que l'autre ne fût inventée de toutes pièces par un témoin oculaire cuvant son vin et à moitié somnolent" (p. 15). In kaleidoscopic fashion, the comment on the story's inventor reflects back from the peasant to the narrator to the author, bending the image of uncertainty back on itself, like the image of the map.

Topologie Idéale is an organic expression of a haunted psychic state. It is manifested in the depiction of the protagonist, and in the harmonization of theme with style, form, and characterization. Indeed, the novel's many disembodied voices, like the myriad characters in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, each

echo various aspects of the author's own darkest imaginings, representing through different personae the different aspects of one psyche. As the projections, or split images, of an author's own fears and dreams, the voices are never attached to bodies, to names—they remain "le voyageur," "le voyeur," "trois laskars," a Parisian girl, a pinball artist, an inspector and his assistant, and a semi-undifferentiated world of "clochards" and others whose voices trail off emptily into space. But overriding all there rests the voice, "le fou rire," of the narrator himself, insistently returning to the same points of departure, like the voice in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, the eye of an ever-moving camera that refuses to rest for long on one object, one tone, yet ever recapitulating the same image, again and again, returning to descriptions framed in earlier novels,² recasting passages throughout the novel, as in that of the map, running for pages at a time, returning to earlier scenes, mixing time and place and action so that the voyage, like the map, lacks any final point—indeed, the murder occurs halfway through the novel—so that one is left, at the end, with a description of the beginning of the descent. The narrator's eye flowing along like the prose, clause after clause creates the most extreme pattern of hypotaxis possible. Yet though each clause is subordinated by the joining conjunction, the effect is to deny subordination, resulting, in fact, in its opposite: a series of independently standing images more appropriately viewed as distinct elements of parataxis. Like the central image of the "dédale," the disembodied voices, the disjointed form and structure of the novel, and the all-pervading alienation, the style is a reflection of the same troubled "esprit."

In this investigation of such a mental "topologie," Boudjedra has incorporated and sublimated the essential condition in which the writer of North Africa, often living in exile in France, finds himself today. As that condition springs out of real and objective, historical conditions, Boudjedra has succeeded in bodying forth the anguish of his own, and his people's dilemmas. As he has revealed the aggression hidden beneath the complicated topography of that condition, he has provided a framework for revolt. If *Topologie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* is to be considered difficult and elitest francophonic prose, it should also be seen as a necessary and brilliant development of Maghrebian literature if that literature is not to be waylaid by the temptations of easy position and power, and a corresponding servility in the arts.

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²On pages 155-56, 160, 224, 237, and others, Boudjedra lifts and recasts entire passages from *La Répudiation* (Paris: Denoël, 1969), and *L'Insolation* (Paris: Denoël, 1972).