

When Reality Goes Beyond Fiction. The Question of Realism in the Novels of El Mostafa Bouignane

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Abstract

If we were to trust appearances, we would be tempted to consider Bouignane as the Zola of Moroccan literature in French. With him, the story abounds in indices of readability and likelihood as they were listed by Philippe Hamon: detailed documentation, inscription of the plot in a marked historical framework, spatial anchoring of the fiction in known, familiar places. The story puts in place, at first sight, a reading contract based on the shared conviction that what is told is very real. However, the narrative dynamic implies a different orientation. The initial horizon of expectation is set only to better be exceeded. We then witness the intelligent integration of the fictional component within the narrative framework itself. The entire romantic universe of El Mostafa Bouignane is therefore built around the bipolarity (reality/fiction) so that the mimetic power of romantic narration, and of the arts in general, is constantly questioned. This original way of approaching the status of the fictional takes us away from the transparency of the realistic narrative which starts from the reassuring postulate of the adequacy between reality and fiction. From there, it would be relevant to point out that the naïve realism of El Mostafa Bouignane does not prevent the deployment of a subtle intelligence in the face of reality. Otherwise, how can we understand that the novelist likes to celebrate forms of fiction stripped of the mimetic function? Above all, how can we understand that he does not hesitate to reverse the order of values by recalling that fiction is not necessarily where we expect it? In the marginalized neighborhoods of Fez, the reality far exceeds anything the wildest imagination can hope to achieve. In other words, the novelist does not need to resort to his creative genius to stand out from verisimilitude. The implausible emerges from reality itself. This is an ultimate stage in the destabilization of the benchmarks and reading habits of realistic narrative.

Keywords: realism, reading contract, mimesis, reality, fiction.

Introduction

El Mostafa Bouignane belongs to this generation of Moroccan writers who cultivate the satirical vein. For him, as for his colleagues, it is essential to testify, to record the different manifestations of a multifaceted crisis. The novelist flaunts his insolence, he dares to tell the

truth, the whole reality and nothing but the reality. His writing can shock, disturb, he only relates what he has seen and heard. Realism then draws its strength from the authenticity of saying. We feel, however, El Mostafa Bouignane cramped in this posture. His romantic universe never ceases to

shift the boundary between reality and fiction. If the narrative device remains apparently in conformity with the traditional diagram, the diegesis, it, integrates enough disturbing elements inciting the reader to constantly question the relationship between the real and the fictitious. The major question that arises is then the following: how does a work that could easily be described as "realistic" come to stand out from the foundations of realism by disturbing the fictional levels, by questioning the status and powers of The fiction? What is at stake, it seems to me, goes beyond simple positioning within the literary field, that is to say the claim for the autonomy of novelistic writing in relation to the dogmas of an aesthetic, of a particular school, even if this dimension remains present, it must be recognized, in the work of El Mostafa Bouignane. By celebrating a fiction freed from the purely mimetic function, the novelist wishes, in fact, to point out that the debate on the representation of reality is not closed and that this debate, already very interesting in itself, takes on a particular dimension in our society where realism imposes itself a priori as a necessity, as an emergency. To study this problem, three points will be addressed. It will first be a question of seeing how El Mostafa Bouignane installs, at the start, a reading contract in accordance with the canons of realistic narrative based essentially on "coherence and readability". We will then see how, without displaying it, the novelist indulges in the destabilization of this reading contract by proceeding to the intertwining of fiction and reality. Finally, it will be demonstrated how the dynamics of the narrative lead, paradoxically, to the celebration of a fiction freed from the constraints of the mimetic function.

1. Consistency and readability

It is easy to identify in the novels of El Mostafa Bouignane a certain number of processes which "constitute so many criteria (of) realistic discourse" (Philippe Hamon: 1982: 135). Their presence contributes to the internal coherence and readability of this discourse. I'll pick out the ones that seem the most obvious to me.

Let us first note that Bouignane integrates into the fiction a set of data relating, as required by the "naturalist" approach, to a double work of documentation and observation¹. The novelist has, in fact, read a lot about Fez, his hometown, about its places steeped in history. The impact of his reading is felt especially in *Des Houris et des hommes* (2010) where the hero Si Mo, a false guide to his state, consults a large number of books before embarking on the profession. Titles are then revealed to the reader; they all evoke the glorious past of this flourishing city which once welcomed philosophers and scholars, and whose influence went beyond the borders of the Arab-Muslim world. The precision and meticulousness in the designation and description of places cannot, however, be attributed solely to encyclopaedic knowledge. By the novelist's own admission, the writing of *Des Houris et des hommes* required frequent visits to the district of La Source des Pèlerins, an investigative work that borders on sociological investigation².

The spatial anchoring of fiction in a topography easily identifiable by the reader will therefore naturally be the first criterion for authenticating realistic discourse. In this respect, the theater of action in Bouignane does not vary from one novel to another, it is the city of Fez with familiar landmarks such as the Medina, Jnane Sbil, the Rex cinema; landmarks to which are added, by a contrast effect, disreputable neighborhoods such as La Source des Pèlerins, La Casbah or La Porte de la chance. Exotic, even poetic names to evoke a sordid reality, devoid of poetry. Everything will be said about these places of human decay. Nothing will be hidden. Realism is presented as the assumed claim of a desire to testify, especially against those who enjoy the language of wood and flattering speeches. You have to look reality in the face. With insolence, the novelist reminds the collective conscience of what it pretends to ignore: the existence of no man's land left to their own devices and to the law

² Remarks made by El Mostafa Bouignane during the study day devoted to his novel by the research team «Langue, Texte et Didactique du français» at the ENS de Meknès, on May 20, 2014.

of the fundamentalists. Bringing together the marginalized of society, these neighborhoods constitute a counter-model of the utopian colony dreamed of by many authors of the Age of Enlightenment. Coming from all over, from all regions of Morocco, the inhabitants of these neighborhoods are unable to recreate a unifying bond; no one is there to help them: neither the state nor civil society. Space becomes a factor of dispersion and bewilderment for uprooted people, unable to establish new points of reference.

The second criterion of readability and coherence of realistic discourse relates to the treatment of the temporal component. The novels of El Mostafa Bouignane are all dated. *Des Houris et des hommes* opens with the death of the late Hassan II and ends with the attacks in Madrid on October 11, 2004; *From Fez to Kabul* begins in October 1980 and ends with the entry of the Taliban into the Afghan capital on September 28, 1996. In *La Porte de la chance*, although no dating is offered, the period evoked can be deduced from the reference to the popular Mexican telenovelas during the 2000s. It will be understood, EL Mostafa Bouignane is concerned, as the rest of the realistic aesthetic requires, to integrate History into fiction. His stories are indeed “engaged on a History which, implicitly, doubles (them), illuminates (them), predetermines (them). »(Philippe Hamon, 1982: 136).

It is true that Bouignane's novels rather depict the experience of marginality which excludes any awareness of time and space. Some characters, escaping the fatality of exclusion, nevertheless manage to acquire an eminently historical awareness of themselves and of the other. Thus, Brahim, a young student from the Faculty of Letters of Fez, will be caught up in the war in Afghanistan. Si Mo, the hero of *Des Houris et des hommes*, will lose his only love in the attacks in Madrid: a Spanish woman symbolically named Remedios³. In this sense, we can say that the novelist excels in the art of braiding, in the

same story, the great historical events of recent years and the individual destinies of anti-heroes a priori protected against the upheavals of History. .

Last process of “legibility” of the realistic speech, the character erected in social sign. Realism thus makes audible the marginal voice that has little chance of being listened to elsewhere. Mistreated beings, crushed by fate will thus have a voice in the matter. This is the case of Driss Chafra, the thug of the district of La Source des Pèlerins, who saw, as a child, his mother indulging in the oldest profession in the world. This is the case of Leïla, the beautiful rifaine, daughter of a violent and alcoholic father, who becomes the lover of a drug trafficker and finds herself with a child in her arms, before coming to settle in Fez. . Often told in a humorous tone, the story of these shattered lives hides, basically, tragedies that emerged from anonymity thanks to the courageous choice of realism. Although the systematic association of realistic aesthetics with “trivial” subjects is disputed by Ian Watt, it must be recognized that certain Moroccan novelists of the new generation base the legitimacy of their practice, among other things, on the assumed integration of triviality in the romantic universe. They claim this primary realism which aims to rehabilitate marginal speech, that of mobsters, prostitutes and ordinary people condemned to silence and submission.

The legibility of the real, facilitated by the processes that we have just listed, does not, however, prevent the novelist from playing on a fundamental principle of realistic aesthetics, that of transparency. Realism is based, in fact, on a narrative device that neutralizes the reader’s ability to judge, inviting him to take fiction for reality. The proposed reading contract is then based on what Riffaterre calls «the referential illusion» (Michael Riffaterre, 1982: 91). To maintain this illusion, it is imperative to avoid anything that disturbs the reader’s adherence to the fictional. Now, with El Mostafa Bouignane, everything is done precisely to destabilize this adherence without the author, moreover, resorting to the declared subversion of established codes, as

³ The reference to the Remedios de Cent ans de solitude is not lost on the reader.

do other novelists. Everything is done gently, everything is part of the narrative itself.

2. Unrealized realism

This destabilization is fuelled, essentially, by the systematic interweaving of reality and fiction. The process is simple: it is a matter of embedding in the framework narrative a set of situations that invite us to reflect on the modes of representation of reality. Therefore, what is forbidden to the reader, namely the questioning of the principle of equivalence between reality and fiction, will be allowed to the characters. In other words, the initial reading contract, which closes the debate on the status of the novel, is juxtaposed with a second contract open to all possible interpretations.

This insistent and recurrent questioning of the different modes of representation of the real leads to three possible positions in front of the manifestations of the fictional. The first is to see reality through fiction. For some characters, indeed, following a soap, watching a film is a form of sublimation of the real. Through a mechanism of compensation, through a kind of primary identification, they recreate their daily existence by reinventing the beauty and lyricism of which the world is devoid. This is the case of the children of Bab Ezzhar, who spend as much time in movie theatres as they do in the streets of the neighborhood, and it is also the case of women who, for no reason in the world, would not miss an episode of Dallas or Mexican films that they love. Note that the need for fiction is felt rather in the beings most weakened by precariousness and marginalization.

The second attitude, more perceptive, dares to address the delicate question of mimesis, it reflects on the complex relationships between fiction and reality. In *La Porte de la chance*, the naiveté of childhood contributes to the clarity and at the same time to the depth of reflection. The children of Bab Ezzhar, although fascinated by the mimetic power of cinematic fiction, nevertheless

seek to delineate the boundaries of the fictional field.

'It's just cinema,' said Little Old, the intellectual of the group. 'And doesn't it matter to her husband to see another actor grope his wife?' asked Nems. 'Surely nothing. Actors are used to this kind of thing,' replied Little Old. 'So he's not a man,' replied Qar'ouch' (*La Porte de la chance*, 2006: 26).

The stakes are high: which grid to apply to an artistic product and how to judge fictional characters? Is art a reproduction or a representation of reality?

To this disconcerting question, some receivers, who deny fiction all autonomy, have a simple answer: art and reality are one. Hence, moral judgements that Qar'ouch delivers only a foretaste. These judgments take on tragic proportions with Houcine, the twin brother of Si Mo, the narrator of *Des Houris* and men and Brahim, the hero of *De Fez in Kabul*, both fatherless. Let us examine here the logic of the story that dedicates the paternal figure to a significant absence, placing the two characters under the guidance of fundamentalist mentors. All things considered, these mentors, omnipresent and dominating, can be seen as surrogate fathers embodying the principle of order and authority for beings to whom society offers no viable and solid value system. Having internalized the protective mechanisms of an omnipotent superego, Houcine and Brahim try, by a kind of destructive mimicry, to regulate in their turn the symbolic economy of images and words. One erects «an autodafé» to all his brother's books, tears the Aleph of Borges (*Des Houris et des hommes*: 55), while the other finds no excuse for the adulterous lover of *The Woman next to Truffaut*, who commits suicide after killing her lover. Commenting with Siham, a young student he is in love with, the tragic end of the film, Brahim has this remark: "What do you want, it is the fate of adulterous couples, not to mention the punishment that awaits them in the other world." (*De Fès à Kaboul*, 2013: 46). Such an attitude, such an amalgam have always been at

the origin of the censorship of fiction, considered as a factor of depravity and moral loss. Let us recall the attitude of the Church towards the theatre and the novel. When we give in to «the referential illusion», we no longer do the. The stakes are high: which grid to apply to an artistic product and how to judge fictional characters? Is art a reproduction or a representation of reality? To this disconcerting question, some receivers, who deny fiction all autonomy, have a simple answer: art and reality are one. Hence, moral judgements that Qar'ouch delivers only a foretaste. These judgments take on tragic proportions with Houcine, the twin brother of Si Mo, the narrator of *Des Houris and men and Brahim*, the hero of *De Fez in Kabul*, both fatherless. Let us examine here the logic of the story that dedicates the paternal figure to a significant absence, placing the two characters under the guidance of fundamentalist mentors. All things considered, these mentors, omnipresent and dominating, can be seen as surrogate fathers embodying the principle of order and authority for beings to whom society offers no viable and solid value system. Having internalized the protective mechanisms of an omnipotent superego, Houcine and Brahim try, by a kind of destructive mimicry, to regulate in their turn the symbolic economy of images and words. One erects «an autodafé» to all his brother's books, tears the *Aleph* of Borges, while the other finds no excuse for the adulterous lover of *The Woman next to Truffaut*, who commits suicide after killing her lover. Commenting with Siham, a young student he is in love with, the tragic end of the film, Brahim has this remark: "What do you want, it is the fate of adulterous couples, not to mention the punishment that awaits them in the other world." Such an attitude, such an amalgam have always been at the origin of the censorship of fiction, considered as a factor of depravity and moral loss. Let us recall the attitude of the Church towards the theatre and the novel. When we give in to «the referential illusion», we no longer do the.

Let's recap. If the framework narrative forbids the reader to question the principle of

equivalence between reality and fiction, the narrative dynamic keeps the debate open. No. The question of the representation of the world by fiction is not clear-cut. It is discussed, turned upside down. A trend is then emerging, which leads to the liberation of art and fiction from their purely imitative function. So here we are faced with a realism that paradoxically calls for the surpassing of realistic aesthetics.

3. Moving beyond realistic aesthetics

Thus, El Mostafa Bouignane's Romanesque work highlights the limits of the purely referential function of fiction and art. When we bend strictly to the law of truth, fiction loses its charm and the narrator loses its audience. The mother of Abu Khalid, the master of thought of the fundamentalist group of *Houris and men*, knows this well. She spends the whole day faithfully recounting her years of youth, without changing any detail so that everyone eventually gets tired of her story. That is why, despite her seventy years, "she was joyfully climbing ... sixty steps" in search of a possible listener (*Des Houris et des hommes*, 2010: 59). Variety in narration presupposes more imagination, more freedom in relation to the truth, it therefore requires the possibility of «lying».

So there must be a part of lying in all truth, as La Fontaine would say. Bab Ezzhar's veterans take the first opportunity to tell the children of the neighbourhood "their heroic outfit in Uncle Ho's country." (*La Porte de la chance*, 2006: 23). The reaction of the audience is edifying: the kids had heard this epic so many times that "they sometimes reminded Ba So-and-so that he was a corporal during the war and not a sergeant, and Ba Machin that, in such and such an ambush, he had not killed thirteen enemy soldiers but only three." (idem). These epic extravagances can, of course, be blamed on possible memory failures. Still, the children remind the narrators here of a serious breach of the autobiographical pact: the failure to respect the principle of sincerity, which does not prevent them from continuing their cooperation, accepting these little lies without which even a life

story cannot pass. In short, it is through the constant alteration of truth that the pleasure of making or consuming fictions is perpetuated. Elsewhere, the overcoming of a narrow vision of realism requires the enhancement of the dialogical power of romanesque creation. Making or reading fictions means entering into communication/communion with other voices, other imaginaries. To tell, whether we like it or not, is to exceed the limits of space and time. One thus understands why, in *Des Houris et des hommes*, all the acts and gestures of the hero, although they are purely Moroccan, are relayed almost systematically by a set of intertextual references: the narrator quotes, in turn, his favorite readings: Néruda, Borges, Kundera, creators for whom the relationship to reality is not self-evident. Is it a simple display of knowledge? Why want to make a «realistic» novel a web of quotations? Why opt for an aesthetic of mixing, of *galimafrée*, to take a word dear to Montaigne? El Mostafa Bouignane seems deliberately to want to offload the narrative of its purely mimetic function. Art thus attains universality and expresses the dreams, desires and fears of everyone, in different idioms, certainly, but easily accessible to those who know how to listen to and understand them.

The novelist does not stop there. Another step will be taken in overcoming realistic aesthetics, and the reader is, this time, directly involved. Given the sometimes strange turn of events, the latter cannot help but seek the end of the story by trying to understand whether the facts told are invented or inspired, as we often see in the cinema, from real facts. Trying to play this game is not easy. The glaring implausibility of certain episodes, in which the dehumanization of beings is revealed, can lead to confusion and comfort us in the certainty that it is a pure product of the imagination: a woman accused of debauchery and assaulted with vitriol (*Des Houris et des hommes*, 2010:27), a mobster killed barbarically for blasphemy, a young student from Fez who finds himself, deep down in Afghanistan, involved in a war that is not his. Yet all this is true⁴.

In other words, to create an effect of derealization, the novelist does not need to give free rein to an unbridled imagination, no. In the marginalized neighbourhoods of Fez, reality far exceeds fiction. Therefore, we are witnessing the diversion of a rhetorical place that participates, in principle, in the readability and coherence of the realistic narrative: *anacephalus*. In the oratory discourse, *anacephalus* is a part of discourse in which the essential ideas are summarised. It has the same function in the narrative (Georges Molinié, 1992: 47). where it represents a kind of focus, a reminder that summarizes what happened in order to facilitate the reading of the sequel. This rhetorical place obviously allows the narrator to find himself in the narrative frame. Now, in *De Fès in Kabul*, this narrative process, used several times, intervenes rather to confuse the reader, inviting him to measure the unlikely gap between the initial situation and the final situation: Brahim contemplated the sky where a crescent moon had appeared, as fine as a nail clipping. He looked for the North Star, saw it and thought of the thousands of kilometres that separated him from Morocco. What was he like? What had happened there? Since he had set foot in Afghanistan, he had not heard anything. He thought of the Casbah, its neighborhood, its atmosphere, the children who played noisily in the alleys, the beautiful summer evenings during which the women sat on the threshold of their homes to take the cool and do the chat, the aroma of spices and mint tea floating in the air (*De Fès à Kaboul*, 2013: 104). More picked up, this other development produces the same effect:

He recalled his life in Morocco, the years spent in the mountains at war with the Russians, then the peaceful ones lived in the small village of Dash, Mariam and Abdallah, and his travels with the opium caravan (idem: 124). Under what circumstances did Brahim move from the Casbah to the Afghan capital? By what chance, this fundamentalist convinced of the beginning of the novel, became a drug dealer? This incredible journey, worthy of a Voltairian tale, is nevertheless true. What else to say about these

young Parisians, Londoners who abandon friends and families to engage in jihad far from their lands? Faced with the hallucinatory revelations presented by the media on this subject, the Brahim case seems derisive.

A deduction is necessary. Balzac or Zola realism is no longer adapted to apprehend the new reality of our society. A new perspective should be forged that no longer takes into account the categorisations consecrated by novelists and philosophers. We live in a world where landmarks are constantly shifting, where the boundary between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, the plausible and the implausible is so tenuous that violence, terror and barbarism are trivialized, if not normalized. To fully understand what is happening, we must get rid of primary realism and integrate, in its world of belief, what was, not long ago, pure and simple imagination.

Conclusion

Ultimately, in the trilogy, we are witnessing a significant change of perspective: instead of focusing on the reality it is supposed to reproduce, the novelist is focusing on the status and issues of fiction. The reason for this move is quite simple. El Mostafa Bouignane understood that “we are above all fabulators” and that fiction is as much about the psychological construction of the person as it is about the collective and political dimension. The best way to question society is, therefore, to define the positioning of each person in front of fiction. An observation is necessary. The worst scenario imaginable would be to banish fiction and fiction makers from the city. Bouignane certainly thinks here of Fahrenheit 451 by F. Truffaut. This disaster scenario is taking place in Kabul, but there is no guarantee that it will not happen again elsewhere, especially in the marginalized areas of Fez, which have become a remote suburb of the Afghan capital. Morality of the story: the Moroccan novelist lives a double precariousness, the first is specific to the literary field in constitution and it was well highlighted by Khalid Zekri in *Fictions du réel*⁵, the second is

rather external to that-This, and it is clearly highlighted in the trilogy, lies in the problematic negotiation of the right to fabulation against all those who try to regulate, to regulate the consumption of symbolic goods. The novelist thus stages his own destiny, I am tempted to say his own «paratopia »⁶. Like the veterans of Bab Ezzhar, he would like to perpetuate, worth it, the pleasure of telling fictions, that is, to combine lies and truth with impunity.

Notes:

1. Cf. Agata Sadkowska-Fidala, “Digestion and indigestion: relationship between the document and the novel by Zola and Huysmans,” *Fabula/ Les colloques, Ce que le document fait à la littérature (1860-1940)*, URL:http://w.w.w.w.fabula.org/colloques/document_1752.php
2. Remarks made by El Mostafa Bouignane during the study day devoted to his novel by the research team «Langue, Texte et Didactique du français» at the ENS de Meknès, on May 20, 2014.
3. The reference to the Remedios de Cent ans de solitude is not lost on the reader.
4. Bouignane is obviously inspired by various facts reported in various Moroccan daily newspapers.
5. Khalid Zekri, *Fictions du réel. Modernité romanesque et écriture du réel au Maroc, 1999-2006*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006.
6. Paratopia, according to D. Maingueneau, refers to the enunciative process by which the literary text defines the conditions for the emergence and legitimation of one's own word. This process is the result of the interaction of factors as diverse as the choice of gender, the configuration of the literary field, ideological positioning... *Le Contexte de l'œuvre littéraire. Enonciation, auteur et société*, Paris, Dunod, 1993.

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