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PAUL SMAİL’S CASA, LA CASA: A CRITICAL TRANSLATION

by

JAMES KILPATRICK

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE

Bernard Aresu, Professor, Chair
French Studies

Michel A. Char, Associate Professor
French Studies

Deborah Hart, Associate Professor
French Studies

Elias Bongmbo, Associate Professor
Religious Studies

Houston, Texas

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ABSTRACT

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James Kilpatrick

This work examines principles and theories of literary translation such as literal and non-literal fidelity to the original writing, translational transparency and visibility, and the concepts of “foreignization” and “domestication” in a translated text. Conclusions drawn here are used as a basis to perform a critical evaluation of Smile, the 2000 version of Paul Smaiî’s Vivre me tue. A comparative analysis of the French novel to the English discusses some of the problematic areas of this translation and endeavors to provide alternative translations that would prove more accurate and effective. Subsequent chapters of the dissertation consider the cultural and linguistic difficulties inherent in the Casa, la casa translation and present the ways in which these difficulties were resolved.

Round-Trip Barbès, the translation of Casa, la casa, attempts to remain faithful to the original both literally and literarily – to render the strict and full meaning of the author’s words while striving to maintain in English the author’s style of writing. The translation includes extensive notes offering insight into the socio-cultural and political environment of contemporary France as well as the various news events that, in many ways, shape the narrative. Annotations also signal to the reader the numerous occurrences of intertextual citation and allusion that Smaiî’s work incorporates.
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Introduction

In Vivre me tue,\(^1\) the first work of Paul Smaïl’s autobiographical trilogy, the narrator/protagonist contemplates a voyage to his ancestral homeland of Morocco. Such a quest, he believes, will allow him to resolve those coming-of-age questionings that each individual encounters when confronted with a world in which the certitudes and golden rules of childhood seem wholly absent or with scant latter-day application. Smaïl, in Vivre me tue, is unable to reconcile his youthful ideals (and the self-image which these ideals have informed) with the much harsher actualities of his Parisian adulthood. In Casa, la casa,\(^2\) Smaïl’s subsequent work, this reconciliation is achieved – and is achieved with a very great measure of success. It is here, in Casa, that the narrator comes home; returns, in effect, to Paris – his point of departure. This return, however, can only be interpreted as an arrival. For Smaïl, his aller-retour\(^3\) behind him, has reached the understanding that will enable him to more deftly navigate the endless vicissitudes of daily existence.

Many of the dramatized incidents contained in Vivre me tue are meant to be construed as inherently Beur. These incidents serve foremost to highlight the personal, socio-cultural and religious tensions experienced by the Franco-Maghribian living amidst a people adhering to a credence of some pure, innate Frenchness. And yes, on one level, this first work can be read as the inability of those of French souche to accept the alterity perceived in the immigrants of North African origin and the French-born children of these latter.

\(^1\) Paul Smail, Vivre me tue (Paris: Editions Balland, 1997).
\(^3\) Paris-Casablanca-Paris.
Yet the case, as Smaïl makes clear in his second work, is much more complex. Quite often thematic elements of the _Vivre me tue_ text reappear in _Casa, la casa_. Nevertheless, in this second coming, these elements have taken on a broader and more vast significance. Paul Smaïl, the author, narrator, and protagonist of _Vivre me tue_ has ventured beyond the more familiar francophone accounts of ethnic bipolarities to present, in _Casa, la Casa_, a universe which is uniquely his own. And moreover, in doing so, he has composed a story within which everyman may see himself. The Smaïl of _Vivre me tue_ – a jobless and, as-yet, unpublished “jeune beur, bac plus cinq…eh, oui …littérature comparée…” undergoes, in _Casa, la casa_, a personal and literary solidification; an unequivocally confident self-discovery which sees him back in the markedly multi-cultured neighborhood of his birth. Most significantly, it is here, in the Paris of Barbès, that Smaïl triumphantly celebrates, with his family and a cast of many-hued friends, his newly gained status of “French writer – Like Proust, Mama! Like Balzac, like Stendhal, like Voltaire….”

The final paragraphs of _Vivre me tue_ prepare the reader for _Casa, la casa_. Smaïl, in the penultimate sentence of this first work, fastens his seat belt for an imminent departure to Casablanca. Just as his literary hero Ishmael, the young, self-seeking narrator of Herman Melville’s _Moby Dick_, Smaïl, with pilot Capt. Ben Achab, sets out. It is in Morocco that Smaïl has hoped to find the answers as to the who, how and why of his existence. Yet what he finds – as the reader subsequently learns in _Casa, la casa_ – is

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5 _Vivre me tue_, p 11.
6 _Casa la casa_, p. 21; _Round-Trip Barbès_, p. 135. _Vivre me tue_ was well received by the public and critics; the first edition was released during the author’s sojourn in Morocco.
that those there, if they know to consider these selfsame questions, are denied the liberty
to do so.

Repatriated in the initial chapters of Casa, la casa, Smaïl once again strolls the
Boulevard Ornano, a primary artery of his beloved Barbès. He proclaims, at present, that
les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu'on a perdus. In chapter after chapter of this second
work the protagonist affirms that life back home no longer seems such a deadly affair.
Smaïl has lived in other worlds, and understands that in those cultures representative of
his ancestral homeland, those freedoms he most fervently cherishes are not an option, are
in fact, prohibited. The author frequently reiterates that the republican ideals of his native
land are yet to be fully attained; and Casa, la casa poignantly recounts many of the social
realities of present-day France that point to the innumerable inequalities existing in
French society. But, as critic Maati Kabbal remarks, Smail’s work most resoundingly
inspires hope.

Smaïl has gained the knowledge that for him there need be no more take-offs in
search of other, different tomorrows. In Casa, la casa Smaïl comes to understand that he
had to leave Barbès in order to arrive. And now, with his journey behind him, he may
begin anew: “Real life is here…. I’m from Barbès.”

Round-Trip Barbès, my translation of Smaïl’s second work, involved many
stages. First came an investigation of translation itself. A discussion of this investigation

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7 Casa, la casa, p. 32.
française”), p. V. 147
– how one goes about bringing into English the word and idea of an original work as well as the stylistic originality of the author – makes up the initial chapter of the dissertation. Included here is also a comparative analysis of passages from Smaïl’s *Vivre me tue* and its translation, *Smile*.\(^{10}\) This analysis details some of the various theoretical concerns and also some of the many difficulties encountered in literary translation. Subsequent chapters provide an overview of the numerous problematic aspects of the *Casa, la casa* translation and present diverse methods by which I have attempted to resolve these challenges.

*Round-Trip Barbès* allows the reader to determine whether these endeavors have proved successful.

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On Translating Literature

Literature in translation offers a rich interdisciplinary perspective on language, cultural values, societal relationships, and communication. Meticulously examining the process of translation in order to compare the original text to its second-language counterpart allows us to note those ways in which languages, source and target, are used. Such scrutiny often reveals the modifications in linguistic structure that successful translation typically requires, helping us to identify the options and servitudes\textsuperscript{11} present in the languages involved and, of course, permitting an intimate insight into the myriad decisions the translator must make. The comparison also brings into better focus the cultural and socio-linguistic levels on which language functions.

Numerous theorists have evaluated the process of translation and have formulated terminologies to describe the grammatical, syntactical, and semantic changes that take place when words and ideas are expressed in different idioms. They have also attempted to establish criteria by which to determine a translation’s fidelity to the original text. While these theorists often differ on the terms and standards used, most recognize that, at its most basic, translation inevitably necessitates the alteration of word sequence and grammatical form. They are also aware that in the target-language rendering of any literary text some form of linguistic distortion occurs. Alas, all too frequently, authorial

stylistic peculiarities, source-language nuance and specific (mono-)cultural references are among the first elements to be sacrificed.\textsuperscript{12}

Attempts to retain these essentials – i.e., the textual components which, in many ways, “make” a work of literature – while providing to the target-language reader a semantically accurate text does indeed demand uncommon skill. One accepts that the translator possesses adequate fluency in both languages. But has he or she the requisite aptitude to effectively integrate the many components of language (phonology, mimesis, semantic, etc.) that continually come into play? Considering some of the capabilities a translator must command, Clifford Landers puts forth these: “appreciation of tone, style, flexibility, inventiveness, knowledge of the source-language culture, the ability to glean meaning from ambiguity, an ear for sonority and rhythm...”\textsuperscript{13} And this list is by no means exhaustive.

Many admirable renderings of foreign language works exist. Conversely, in others, scholars and the general public alike frequently encounter misunderstanding, misstatement, awkward paraphrase, abusive literalism, arbitrary addition, inexplicable omission and countless other faults on the part of the translator. And, to be sure, they are often quick to question such erroneous transmission. Furthermore, contemporary theorists – and readers – may also be critical of translations that, to them, appear unduly westernized or Anglo-Americanized. Current preference is for a strategy of translation that safeguards the foreignness of the original; that, rather than “domesticating” the first-

\textsuperscript{12} In other branches of translation (technical, scientific, business, etc.) the informational content makes its way from source to target language irrespective of considerations of style; but as Walter Benjamin has so fittingly observed, “…linguistic creation [literature...] is that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter.” (Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” in \textit{Illuminations}, trans., Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p. 75.

language author by bringing him or her into the realm of the target-language culture would, instead, "send the reader abroad." This practice has been termed by its proponents as "foreignization," as it is a deliberate attempt to resist a "too smooth" (i.e., "domesticated") target-language rendering. Those translators who adhere to this strategy insist upon overt textual acknowledgements – lexical, syntactic and, at times, semantic – which point up the foreign origin of the source-language text and thus purposely elect to reproduce in the target rendering the discursive order of the source language in a manner that would have it read as somewhat odd or "foreign" to the target-language ear. To these "resistance theorists," domestisized translations bespeak a severe attenuation or eradication of the primary-culture residual matter – those sensuous and mellifluous lees which permit the second-language reader to discern and savor the innate alterity embodied in the first cru. The lexis of the domesticated text becomes the medium that takes precedence over the import, and the language of the translation becomes in its own, often limited, guise the arbiter of ambiguities perceived in the original. Thus lexicological conundrums, willful ambivalence, deliberate polysemy, semiotic idiosyncrasies and, indeed, an entire array of interpretive options are eliminated as they are sheathed and fixed in a pattern of second-culture homogeneity that can but very inadequately signal to the reader the genius of the original page. Although the domesticated work may be regarded as superior or extremely fine in its own right, is it, one may ask, a superior translation?

Umberto Eco, a highly regarded philosopher as well as linguist is one of the few present-day theorists whose opinions diverge from those of the resistance theorists. Eco

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maintains that although literary reproduction is a derivative activity, the translator must be allowed the freedom to express the original in a style and idiom that more readily promote its reception by the target audience. He argues that:

...translation is rightfully target oriented. A source-oriented translation must do everything possible to make the B-language reader understand what the author has thought or said or thought to have said in language A...

Eco's argument, which is somewhat representative of a more traditional – and assuredly more commercial – translational practice, contends that it is "language B" (that of the target) which is the privileged medium. It is the second language that must resolve by way of its own linguistic prerogatives and semiotic codes the polymorphic logic of the primary text. This bilingual reprocessing which takes place in the A-to-B transmission of "problematic" textual components serves then to minimize cultural disorientation on the part of the target-language reader. The target-language version is thus typically considered, to quote yet another renowned translator, to be of the utmost worth as it reads (and frequently sells) well in the langue de destination – even though, or perhaps because, it is shows "no signs of having been conceived and written in a foreign tongue."

Such deference to B-language values is, as noted, far from universal; and its adversaries predate, by far, that school of resistance theory of whom Lawrence Venuti is perhaps the most vocal. Indeed, Mathew Arnold, poet and one of the most celebrated

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critics of English-language translations of the Iliad regretfully notes that Homer is no longer Homer once the (target-language) reader is " lulled into the illusion that he is reading an original work," - a work, Arnold woefully adds, "of an English hand." 17 And, remarks Alain Robbe-Grillet, as for Madame Bovary, "il suffit de changer l'ordonnance des mots... pour qu'il ne reste plus rien de Flaubert." 18 The protagonist himself, in Smaïl's Vivre me tue, refers to the vapid Giono and Smith translation of Melville's Moby Dick. 19 Due to the (perceived) exigencies of the target language audience(s), domesticating translational methods are predisposed to rewrite the original in order to provide the receptor situational elements "relevant within the context of his own culture." 20 Admittedly a Herculean task as neither the Hellenistic exploits of Hector and Achilles, nor the mundane pursuits of a Yonville housewife, nor the "marvels of blubber" as viewed from aboard the Pequod is apt to mirror the cultural context of the target reader.

From its earliest beginnings, the western tradition in translation has been a cultivated positing of meaningful flow: the endeavor to produce a work "that is more 'clear,' more 'elegant,' more 'fluent,' more 'pure' than the original." 21 Lawrence Venuti has compiled a history of translation in which he decries what he terms the invisibility of the translator and the ethnocentric homogeneity that may result from "invisible

19 Paul Smaïl, Vivre me tue, roman (Paris: Balland, 1997), p. 82.
translation.” The plain-spoken views of Norman R. Shapiro, critically acclaimed translator of numerous French classics, serve as the work’s opening epigraph:

I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass…noticed when there are little imperfections – scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn’t be any.  

Venuti vehemently disagrees and proposes a bold, new, free mode of translation that employs calculated interventions in an overt attempt to stage, for the reader, an alien reading experience. To promote such an experience, Venuti recommends that the “committed” translator liberally experiment with archaism, slang, and literary allusion; that he or she make use of inverted syntactic constructions and the incorporation of “clichés and colloquialisms unconvincingly” to call attention to the autonomy of the translation. These declarations are somewhat reminiscent of Victor Hugo’s “Tordre le cou” doctrine; yet assuredly Hugo was not suggesting that such violence be the task of the translator. Extinguishing the life and spirit of the original in order to deliver a revolutionized version in the target-language would seem as inappropriate as domesticating the foreign. Although the “foreignized” product may be regarded as superior or extremely fine in its own right, is it, one may ask, a superior translation?

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22 Venuti defines “invisibility” as a translational method that employs grammar, syntax and a lexis that the target-language reader would imperceptibly read as natural to the target-language.

23 The Translator’s Invisibility, p. 1. (Mr. Shapiro was awarded the American Translators Association Outstanding Translation of the Year in 1992; his works have also been highly praised by poet-translators Richard Wilbur and Paul Auster.)

Of course, it is understood that the criteria for determining a successfully translated work should comprise more than an enjoyable read of easy prose and a pleasant hour’s sit – a good book “underneath the Bough / A Jug of Wine…Paradise enow”\textsuperscript{25} so to speak. And to this end, Walter Benjamin, in his seminal essay discussing the role of the modern translator, affirms “…it is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language…”\textsuperscript{26} This observation fittingly refutes the obscurantist, ethnocentric adherents of a rigorously domesticated output. As Benjamin states, “translation does not undertake to serve the [target-language] reader.”\textsuperscript{27} In other words, the source text is not to be recompounded and culturally recoiled so that it better meet the expectations of the second-language receptor. But neither does Benjamin’s statement confer credibility upon the resistance model of translation. A translation should not deliberately strive to signal itself as a translation; should not be an awkward, oblique or parodic simulacrum of the original. The intention of translation is not to provoke the reader to rethink his/her strategies of reading. In short, literature in translation should not be a trial for the reader. Moreover, incorporation of linguistic aberrations and the implementation of the incomprehensibly strange in an endeavor to foreground the “otherness” of the foreign work is in itself a manifestation of ethnocentric condescension. Dissonant signalization of the “otherness of the other” when such crude gesticulations form no part of the original work is but servile adherence to one of the more fashionably extreme canons of translational ideology. The resistive and mannered pointing-up-of-the-foreign in translation does little more than produce “target texts that are an unnatural hybrid of


\textsuperscript{26} Benjamin, p. 79.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 72.
target language and source text... texts that leave the reader unsettled." Commenting on one of his own "translations," Venuti notes that the interpretive visibility which he has been able to bring into play:

...breaks the realist illusion of the narrative, interrupting the reader's participation in the characters' drama and calling attention to the moment in which the reading is being done. And when this moment is brought to mind, the reader comes to realize that the text is ...but an English translation.

The hallmark of good literature? Or a hijacking of the original. Assuredly, even unskewed by contrived "foreignizing" devices, a work in which Fosca, the heroine, elopes with Georgio, a Tuscan army officer, would intimate the possibility of foreign provenance to the English-language reader. Maria Tymoczko, writing in Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice, concurs: "When a literary work is intended for an audience that shares the culture of the text... the audience can be counted on to recognize the allusions and to have the requisite cultural background." More explicitly she states that "the literary status of the text per se" (i.e., those features that are perceived as 'literary' in the source-text) is compromised "when such a text is also full of specialized or unfamiliar words, unusual grammar and other linguistic anomalies....", anomalies, which, it should be emphasized, were not intended to be perceived as such by the reader of the source-text. Of course, by way of the platitudes Venuti chooses as pretext for his

29 Scandals of Translation, p.18.
30 Maria Tymoczko, "Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation" in Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice, eds. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 28-29. The author clearly notes that Western Europe, the United States and Canada possess this "shared culture."
practices ("...to redress the global hegemony of English,"/ "...to interrogate American cultural and political values..."31) one recognizes – to bring into play one of Venuti’s own repeated archaism – his “agenda.” Gross deviation from the source text – experimenting with lexical shifts, syntactic reallocations, arbitrary insertion of allusion, etc. – which can only be justified as a volition to construe otherness – wrongs the source-language author and deceives the target-language reader. De-synthesisization of linguistic cotextuality disrupts and destroys what Antoine Berman refers to as the “networks of subtextual meaning”:

The literary work contains a hidden dimension, an “underlying text [in which] certain signifiers correspond and link up... These underlying chains constitute one aspect of the rhythm and signifying process of the text.32

In the terms of theorist Itamar Evaen-Zohar, adequate translation is “translation which realizes in the target language the textual relationships that exist in the source text with no breach of its own [basic] linguistic system.”33 Nineteenth-century linguist and statesman Wilhelm von Humboldt expresses in words more elegant, but no less true, much the same idea: “…where foreignness appears as such, and more than likely even obscures the foreign, the translator betrays his inadequacy.”34

31 Scandals of Translation. p. 23.
The competent translator recognizes that his work does not dictate the imposition of "native garb onto the alien form." Yet he or she comprehends – just as his/her readers undoubtedly will – that a functionally proportioned, if not altogether harmonious, textual negotiation must take place so that the source-language message be accurately received by the target audience. While a word-for-word rendering is, of course, impossible, adhesion to the source-text’s linguistic flow (whether this be highly formal, conventional, sub-standard, breached and/or incoherent) establishes the translation’s adequacy in relation to the original. Nevertheless, every language contains "son partage notionel spécifique" – socio-cultural linguistic or semantic particularities that render certain terms untranslatable, no matter the context. Hence, translation, of necessity, entails a degree of cross-pollination in which both source- and target-language usage norms undergo some form of modification.

There exists an inherent strangeness in every word, no matter the language; and no matter the language, the writer's capacity to release and exploit this strangeness is to some extent, a measure of his genius. The strange, at times unruly and often rebellious, lexis of the original goes far beyond the mere transmission of information; and these incidences of non-ordinary, evocative, inventive, perhaps coded expression demand equal treatment in translation. Thus, to render it so, the translator must be able to restructure and expand his own modes of communication – "in order to match what the original is saying." Meaning, register, style, just as perfumes, colors and sounds – should ideally

correspond in both languages: “The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [Intention] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original.” 38

That “echo” resounds with such frequency in Benjamin’s “Task” is highly illuminating. For Echo, abiding as she does in the forest of symbol, can only (re)call Narcissus. Echo and Narcissus: Sound and Image; or, in the more imperfect realm of translation (with its “scratches and bubbles”), the resonating strains of the still-captive nymph and the in-between-line flicker of the reflected self. In Freudian terms, Narcissism is an arrested stage of psychological development. Ovid’s tale, however, goes on… The reflection of self in a pool of clear water stirred wonder; first, a desire to possess (in its more innocent sense). Then, realizing his reflection to be but image, his self-love, therefore, never to be requited, Narcissus enters the woods and calls to the trees. And is answered. Likewise, translation, by its very nature, is a fluid negotiation between self and other. Canons of good reason would maintain that the task of the translator is not one of provoking instances of reader depersonalization by making him extra-ordinarily aware of the word as word – thus blocking his participation in the construction of the text. On the contrary, it is in rendering the text accessible to the target-reader; i.e., allowing the self to be reflected in that text, which permits the echo of the other to be heard. “Echo,” in this way, is experienced not in some fixed, circumscribed, forever alien form, but as alien likeness. The fact that language is imbued with properties which make possible an echo-image dialogue implies that adroit translational mediation may very well produce an un-estranged foreign: a foreign that is

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38 Benjamin, p. 76.
at home in the target-language rendering. Still, for practitioners and theorists alike, the questions remain; the classical polarities, unchanged.

George Steiner in his 1975 monumental work, *After Babel*, foresees the possibility of a happy medium. A good translation, he suggests, edges "its own language toward that of the original...so as to make it at home in the speech of the translator and his readers." 39 The source-target transfiguration should neither be the annihilation of the other-cultural space by replacing the foreign with the familiar; nor should it be the presentation of the foreign by way of a confused assemblage of incongruencies. Zealous domestication denies all notion of a collective humanity — a humanity able to reach beyond borders and linguistic barriers. 40 Conversely, radical "foreignization" implies multiple cultures that can share no common ground. Successful literary translation should represent a fluid intercultural act: "...il y a de l'humain dans les livres..." 41 states the protagonist of *Vivre me tue*, something, to reiterate Steiner, that is universal — the resounding flicker, and echo brought to light.

Robert de Beaugrande, in his *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translating* renews Steiner’s proposal of positive compromise:

If a translation is to be “generated” by the original, this process can be neither an imposition of source-language-specific patterns onto the text nor the use of conventional goal-language deviations. It must, rather, consist of a dynamic interaction in which the operations (grammatical and syntactical) applied to the source text are reinterpreted within the frame-

39 Steiner, p. 266.
40 Ibid., p. 257.
41 *Vivre me tue*, p. 99.
work of the goal language...\(^{42}\)

In the ‘reinterpretation’ of the source-language text proposed above, Beaugrande notably restricts translational “operations” to the domain of grammar and syntax (and, of course, lexis). What should be readily understood is that source-language meaning is to be left intact. Translation should not encompass semantic reinterpretation. The translator’s first duty is to the original text. An illuminative paraphrasing of Rimbaud equates literary creation with hallowed act; the translator then, as voleur de feu: “Si ce qu’il rapporte de ‘là-bas’ a forme, il donne forme; si c’est informe, il donne de l’informe.”\(^{43}\) Translation is not transformation, but adequate transmittal. It is hence vital that the translator, as a latter-day Prometheus, aptly “choose a text matching his sensibility”;\(^{44}\) a text that corresponds with his or her aesthetic and ethical credos. For no language exists in an unmediated “raw state.” The word is never innocent, and even the most purely ostensive of, the most seemingly neutral of terms is embedded in linguistic particularity – “in an intricate mould of cultural-historical habit.”\(^{45}\) As poet and translator Robert Bly has remarked:

\[\text{…when a work from another culture contradicts our assumptions, we very often are led to blur its point… We feel ourselves drawn here into areas in which we do not feel confident… repelled by ideas that we cannot accept. If we are unable to accept them, we resist them,}\]

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\(^{44}\) Steiner, p. 264.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., p. 240.
perhaps doing a poor job translating them.\textsuperscript{46}

*Engagement* on the part of the translator should neither disengage nor misguide the reader. Social, political and religious causes are the writer’s, and only the writer’s, to take up: The translator translates – ideally a work with which he or she shares what George Steiner has baptized “elective affinity.”\textsuperscript{47} Thus it is through the careful selection of the text that he or she is assuaged of any conscious volition to step beyond the role of translator to wield the banner of ideological activism (or to take on the demiurgic mantle of authorship). Hereby, translation as a “critical act… creating doubt, posing questions to its readers” is a preoccupation in which the principled translator does not indulge: “….recontextualizing the ideology of the original!”\textsuperscript{48} is a consideration of which he or she has no call to take up. Ultimately, literary translations should be “ideological representations of the underlying source cultures of those literary works.”\textsuperscript{49}

Linguistic and cultural differences will always preclude the possibility of producing any ‘pure’ equivalent of the source text. This impossibility, however, should not suggest that there are no absolutes, right or wrong, in the field of translation. Respect for both the source text and its author and for the target text and its readers as well, will ensure that the skillful and responsible translator make every endeavor – as ‘original reader,’ as interpreter and as target-text producer – \textsuperscript{50} to re-present the original to the target reader with that degree of transparency contained in the original. Quite frequently


\textsuperscript{47} Steiner, p. 398.


\textsuperscript{49} Tymoczko, p. 37.

this all-encompassing “respect” may tempt the translator to enhance the target-language reading by way of aesthetic adjustments, the results of which do not find their parallel in the original. Stylistic “up-grades,” however much deemed necessary, should not be sought at the expense of accurate translation; the text must be presented as it is, “freckles and all.”

Ennoblement, i.e., those alterations perceived by the translator to improve upon the author, is very much frowned upon. Rewritten, as opposed to translated, rhetoric presumes a “language of choice,” a select, cultivated form of speech that privileges the linguistic norms of the target culture. Ethnocentrism in literary translation effaces or, at the very least, blurs the diverse registers of discourse present in the original work. An outstanding and amusing example of this practice is Scott Moncrieff’s noble turn-of-phrase that renders the Proustien “mondes” as “heavenly bodies.”

Un homme qui dort tient autour de lui le fil des heures, l’ordre des années et des mondes.

Certainly a graceful intervention, but one that expands and distorts the sense of the French phrase. As Henri Meschonic insists, in works of prose as well as in poetry, where the original is “marked,” the translator carries over such marking in the target text: the translator “ne doit créer des écarts entre la langue poétique que lorsqu’il y a écart dans

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Any proposed revisions, however, would upset the now classic status of
the Moncrieff work.

One manner in which some translators choose to avoid the ennobling of the
source text is through standardization. This translational mode may be viewed as a
"middle ground"; i.e., a level of discourse that attempts to bypass "ethnocentric elitism"
while, at the same time, steering clear of the popular or highly informal. Obviously,
standardization can render the translated work pallid and ineffective. Often this practice
"rationalizes" the text by means of "disambiguating" the polysemic, and it also tends to
favor the more general of like substantives – a cover-all-bases approach, one might say.55
Ironically, standardization occurs more frequently in poetry and in those prose works that
contain highly lyrical elements – the very works in which word-music is most expected,
where son and sens are indissolubly linked.56 Charles Baudelaire’s "Correspondances"
has suffered extreme standardization by various English-language translators; but
nowhere is the result so off-key as in Robert Bly’s "Intimate Associations":

Les parfums, les couleurs, et les sons se répondent.
Odors and colors and sounds all mean – each other.57

The "parfums/odors" switch is highly questionable, as is Bly’s choice of title. In fact,
one would almost wonder if, by chance, the American poet (mis)took Baudelaire’s
"parfums" to be a euphemism. By way of the translation’s missing commas, the

55 Vinay and Darbelnet, p. 173.
56 Genette citing Paul Valery, p. 294.
appended dash and the additional "and," Bly's version reads as a metric ditty reminiscent of the American standard "Lions and tigers and bears – Oh my!" The novel is no less rhythmic than poetry, and its lexis, too, is chosen for the tone, sound and rhythm as well as connotative content. Certainly these features color the message and, therefore, should correspond. The standardization of the source text, as demonstrated, can considerably affect the intended message of the original.\footnote{Berman, "Trials of the Foreign," p. 292.}

Popularization of discourse is often the means by which the translator seeks to integrate the vernacular of the original (its idiomacies, dialects, slang, etc.) into the target-text. Vernacular usage lends that aspect of "local color" to the literary work. Thus, its employ may be essential in order to evoke the source setting realistically and to convey the source message adequately. To the American reader, a collocation such as "Eat them vittles!" – if not facetiously spoken – immediately marks the educational level, social class, and provenance of the speaker. The popular "life-on-the-Mississippi" dialect employed by Mark Twain reflects the under-educated, marginalized existence of his stories' protagonists. In these works, the vernacular, as much as the ideas they express, serves to carry the author's message to his/her readers. That the source text makes use of popular idiom(s) is not just a matter of style: The popular vernacular is a device that more forcefully draws out thematic elements of the story. It thereby becomes vital that something which convincingly echoes the source-text idiom be inherent in the translation as well. "If ordinary means were used... the reader might well miss the point and force the message into a conventional framework."\footnote{Robert de Beaugrande, p. 63.} The distortion that results when vulgate fails to beget vulgate is highly pronounced in the source-to-target comparison of the
speech found in the Mathieu Kassovitz film, La Haine – “the stark story of three youths living in a poor area of Paris and of the violence and aggression that characterizes… their environment.”

“… je lui aurais mis une balle... BAAAAAAP!”  
“If Hugo hadn’t been there, I’d have shot him!”

The “Tu parles pas comme ça!” of the French reads “Talk nicely!” It is almost as if Huck, Tom and Jim had been made to speak proper, clear, drawing-room English while floating down the Mississippi on a make-shift raft. The speech of the Kassovitz characters, so carefully developed by the scriptwriter, no longer mirrors the disorder of the youths’ backgrounds; those vocal features meant to underscore class, ethnicity, age… (and anger!) are, in English, subdued or altogether absent.

Indeed, by their very nature – their socio-geographic and circumstantial specificity, “popular” speaking patterns are particularly difficult to reproduce. Gregory Rambassa, elaborating on the varied linguistic tenors that the translator must attempt to carry over into the target-text, addresses the problems of source-language dialectical popularism:

Another aspect of a deep knowledge of one’s own language is a thoroughgoing familiarity with local expression and idiom… In many cases, this closeness to regional expression makes translation difficult, sometimes impossible when it comes to preserving the flavor of the original.  

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61 Rambassa, p. 10.
A thorough comprehension of the linguistic continuum – the diverse categories of register – from the most formal to the most vulgar is, of course, highly desirable. However, as Ritva Leppihalme, the author of Cultural Bumps, points out, "Knowing the source and target languages and cultures is not enough, the translator must also work out the correspondences and equivalences between them." In turn, this linguistic environment may acquire dimensions approaching those of a "fully-fledged persona." Inordinate change of linguistic registers (when these do not match those of the original work) modifies the reader’s perception of the setting and the characters therein and, in effect, may dramatically alter his understanding of the source-text culture. The translation, logically speaking, is therefore no longer true to the original – no longer a translation.

Adequate translation many times necessitates clarification of points exterior to the text itself. An author assumes that his readers possess the requisite socio-cultural information needed to "process" the text. Admittedly, it is not infrequent that the target-language reader encounters culturally-specific allusions that may be the only factors present that make the source-language text comprehensible to the source-language reader himself. Clifford Landers in his practical guide for translators, Mona Baker in her translator’s handbook, and Hatim and Mason in Discourse and the Translator all propose strategies of explicatory intervention that enable the target-language reader to feel more

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62 Leppihalme, p. 20.
at home in the source-language culture. As seen below, these techniques range from the quasi-imperceptible to the highly invasive and, in the case of Baker's *In Other Words*, suggest a somewhat incomplete representation of the original text.

1) Paratextual explanatory devices such as foot- or endnotes, glossaries, introductions, etc., are in certain works acceptable. Landers concedes that such notes "convey the maximum amount of information and thereby uphold scholarly standards of objectivity and comprehensiveness while affording others the opportunity to verify the work at hand." The disadvantages, one may very well surmise: destruction of the mimetic effect; disruption of the stylistic and lexical flow; and the interruption of novelistic sequencing.

2) Interpolation, Hatim defends - when brief and to the point - as a "clearly allowable interference." Landers elaborates: "If it is done carefully and with consideration for the rhythmic flow of language, interpolation can be undetectable." One major advantage of the procedure is that after its initial employ, it allows the translator to use the source-language term which is more precise and appropriately "foreignizing."

3) Omission - a tactic, states Mona Baker, "that might sound rather drastic..." but "is advisable as the advantages of producing a smooth, readable translation clearly outweigh the value of rendering a particular meaning accurately in a given context." Landers, on the contrary, stipulates that this option should not necessitate cutting out the portion of the work that presents difficulties. "Deleting any part of the original text is the equivalent of unconditional surrender, an admission that a certain word, phrase,

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64 Landers, p. 93.
66 Landers, p. 94-95.
or idea is beyond the translator’s ability to render. Rather what is omitted is the explanation, leaving the reader to his own devises. 68

“Nothing which the Muses have touched can be carried over into another tongue without loss”69 – a conclusion with which no one could sensibly disagree. Hence, such methods as those enumerated above are used by translators worldwide in an effort to “cut” those losses, to (a)bridge cultural divides and better orchestrate true textual signification. As for those solutions offered in the third category, the italicized option is, of course, the only one valid. In this, translators of such varying positions as Clifford Landers (pragmatist and, like Eco, a translator who privileges the target-language reader) and Antoine Berman (the socio-cultural precursor of Venuti’s resistance theories) are here in accord. Berman goes so far as to suggest that such problematic items be left in the language of the original rather than undergo the censorship proposed by Ms. Baker.70 The unresolved lexico-semantic rift between languages A and B invites the intuitive reader to perform a restitution of “all that is lost in the passage of one language to another,” permitting the articulation “of that which no language is fully able to express.”71 This type of “omission” thereby leaves open the

68 Landers, p. 95. (Italics mine)
69 Dante, cited by Steiner, p. 241.
interstice of “pure language” actualization, as it refuses to concretize the situational particularisms of either the writer or the translator. Perhaps it is in such instances that the target matter approaches what Benjamin has termed the *intentio* of linguistic creation.\(^{72}\)

The open-ended opacity of verbal constructions – the ineffable, unsoundable, weighty impasto of the non-full syntagm makes the literary text a veritable *mille-feuilles*. The associative values of a single word are boundless; and when words are coupled, this boundlessness expands. Thus any one, stable, fixed meaning can never be had. The reader of literature in translation, therefore, will make, must make, assumptions based on context in a manner very similar to that in which he or she “interprets” texts written in his own language. As has been frequently stated, reading in itself is an act of translation, an act whereby the reader seeks to “recover what is meant in a text from the whole range of possible meanings – from the meaning potential to which the members of a culture have access in their language.”\(^{73}\) The word is a polyphonic, imagist scripting – the individual unit itself, an abeyance whose aperture is governed only by the limits of one’s experience and informed imagination. As the translator’s rendering of the word will indubitably inform the target-language reading, it is imperative that he possess a highly adequate awareness of the “meaning potential” that the target-language reader will assign to the translated text. Translation that is not cautiously and consistently monitored may be deprived of its dynamic aspect

\(^{72}\) Benjamin, p. 79.

\(^{73}\) Hatim and Mason, *Discourse*, p. 10.
when the translator has restricted or multiplied the reader’s range of responses; Beaugrande elaborates:

The situation becomes still worse when the translator’s reactions are either purely subjective, or else erroneous, that is, ignoring, misrepresenting, or distorting the signals in the text.  

In the works of Paul Smaïl there are incidences in which the source-language text, because of the specific, at times cryptic, socio-cultural vocabulary and allusions, is almost incomprehensible to the source-language reader. The “signals” necessary for full understanding are often elusive; and it is not uncommon that the source-language reader, in French, puzzle over the neologic constructions and the Maghrebian “regionalisms” with which Smaïl’s text is interspersed. *Vivre me tue* is a “fictional autobiography”: Paul Smaïl presenting himself to his readers. The work in its entirety, therefore, may be perceived as a form of dialogue. The narrator’s idiolect is distinctively young, urban and educated. The speech patterns of the work’s characters are also distinct, one from another – so much so that the reader effortlessly envisions each individual speaker by his mode of expression. Paul, a highly educated and extremely frustrated Beur,  

recounts his story in very varied registers, from the pedantic and lyric to the popularly profane. In addition, one cannot help but note a profusion of argotic elements in which English is notably less abundant. Nevertheless, if characters in

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74 Robert de Beaugrande, p. 30.
75 Beur, a French national born in France but whose ancestry is North African.
the original work speak the particular dialect of their class, educational level, social and/or geographic environment, the translator must endeavor to render, with all possible verisimilitude, the linguistic equivalent in the target language – if the target text is to respect the integrity of the original.

Translation theorists Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet were particularly concerned with the inherent differences between languages and the requirements of one language that would dictate a precise syntactical structure in the target rendering. These requirements, which Vinay and Darbelnet have termed “servitudes,” are different from the “options” a translator has – for options permit personal choice and allow for contemporary lexical usage to influence the translated work. Antoine Berman and Lawrence Venuti have focused upon just such options, judging translators’ choices for their maintenance of culture, vernacular speech, idioms, rhyme and rhythm, as well as what Berman has designated the “underlying networks of signification.” 76 Both Berman and Venuti consider the ethics of translation as a basis for evaluation of the target-language rendering and caution against the “deforming tendencies” of many translators who smooth over ambiguities with unnecessary clarifications and erase the different forms and registers of language that very often coexist in the original text. In Berman’s words, the translator must consistently strive to avert the systematic negation of the foreign in the source-language work by:

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...a scrupulous respect for the text, even in its
“faults” and “obscurities,” and the refusal to
modify, embellish, and amend it, in particular
there where it shocks the contemporary sensibilities.\textsuperscript{77}

Paul Smaïl’s \textit{Vivre me tue} was translated into English by Simon Pleasance and
Fronza Woods, with the assistance of Janine Dupont. In April of 2000, the novel was
released as \textit{Smile} by Serpent’s Tail Books of London. The examination of passages from
the two works, \textit{Vivre me tue} and \textit{Smile}, respectively, illustrate the complex relationship –
or, in some cases, lack thereof – that exists between an original text and its translation. A
reader having read \textit{Vivre me tue} in both the French and English would undoubtedly
recognize it as the same work. Nevertheless, he could not fail to observe that much of the
urban intensity and linguistic vigor found in the original have been somewhat muted,
standardized or rearranged – this perhaps to reflect the translators’ understanding of
present-day British and/or Anglophone sensibilities.

The source-language paragraphs below are followed by the corresponding passage
from the published English-language edition. Numbered elements are analyzed for
lexical and stylistic structure as well as semantic equivalence. The analysis is in
particular based upon the standards and methodologies proposed by Jean-Paul Vinay and
Jean Darbelnet, Clifford Landers, Antoine Berman, Robert de Beaugrande, Basil Hatim,
and Lawrence Venuti as the pertinence of their views is here especially well
demonstrated.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{77} Antoine Berman, \textit{The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany}, p. 131.}
J'ai commencé la boxe à treize ans. J'étais en troisième à Jacques-Decour et, à chaque interclasse, à chaque interclasse, je me faisais tabasser. Et à la sortie, je me faisais taxer. Tout y passait! ma casquette, mon blouson, mon sac à dos... Et arrivé a la maison, je devais encore subir un engueulo de mon père, qui ne voulait pas croire que j'avais tenté de me défendre, et les youyou de Maman, qui ne comprenait pas pourquoi son fils! son fils! le plus jeune de la classe! le premier de la classe! se faisait régulièrement casser la gueule par des caïds.

Pourquoi? Mais parce que j'étais le plus jeune, justement, et que j'avais les meilleures notes. Parce que les filles m'aimaient bien. Parce que je bouquinais tout le temps. Parce que je ne me sentais pas déshonoré de répondre quand un prof interrogait la classe. Parce que le prof de français a lu un jour à toute la classe ma rédac, en la donnant comme modèle. Parce que, comme mon père, j'avais à cœur de parler comme il faut. De dire, par exemple: "'c'est ce dont j'ai peur..' Et pas: 'c'est ce que j'ai peur...'"

J'avais peur, oui. Je vivais dans une peur continue. Sur le chemin du bahut, dès que j'apercevais la cime des arbres du square d'Anvers – les frondaisons, comme je l'avais écrit dans ma rédac – "ouah, putain, les frondaisons, l'enculé!" –, mes tripes se contractaient, ma bouche se séchait, j'étais en sueur. J'avalais une gorgée de l'élixir que me donnait ma tante Zaïa, un sirop fait maison qui me constipait pour trois ou quatre jours. J'avais le ventre dur comme pierre et les genoux en coton. Je les voyais massés sur le trottoir de l'avenue Trudaine, qui m'attendaient pour me charrier, pour me fritter.
Les Francaouis de souche me caguaient parce qu’ils me jugeaient un peu trop sidi, les Sidis parce qu’ils me jugeaient un peu trop francaoui, les Chalalas parce que je n’étais ni chalala ni vraiment sidi ni tout à fait francaoui, les Blackos parce que j’étais white à leurs yeux, les Abdouls et les Niaqs, pour se faire bien voir des Blackos, des Sidis et des Francaouis... Quand je vois au journal télévisé un reportage sur les Hutus et les Tutsis, je revois la cour Jacques-Decour. Et le premier qui viendra m’alourdir avec l’antiracisme des jeunes, je lui balancerai un jab du gauche dans la chétron – je peux maintenant, je sais, et il se trouve que je suis gaucher! L’antiracisme des jeunes!

Le pire était le harcèlement, les coups en vache, les coups en lousedé, les coups de vice pas vu pas pris, les coups de briquette dans le dos, les coups de cutter dans ma doudoune et les cacahuètes sur la nuque, en passant. Et les gums collés sur mon siège, et le tagage de mon sac, et le sempiternel ‘Enculé!’

English Text, Smile (Pages 14 – 15)

“I started boxing (1) at thirteen. I was in my third year (2) at the Jacques-Decour high school (3) and during every break, every single one, (4) I got beaten up. (5) And when school was over, (6) they’d steal things off me. (7) Everything went! My cap, my jacket, my backpack... And when I got home, I’d get an awful scolding (8) from my father, who refused to believe that I’d dared (9) to stand up for myself, and my mum would sob, (10) because she couldn’t understand why her so – her son! youngest in the class! top of the form! (11) – was forever being beaten up (12) by the big shots. (13)
“Why? Because I was the youngest, (14) and I got the highest marks. Because girls liked me. Because I was a bookworm. (15) Because I didn’t feel it was a disgrace to answer when the teacher asked the class a question. (16) Because one day the French teacher read my essay (17) out to the whole class, using it as a model. Because, like my father, I thought it was important (18) to talk properly. To say, for example: ‘It’s that which I’m afraid of...’ And not: ‘It’s that what I’m afraid of...’ (19)

“I was afraid, sure. (20) I lived in a state of constant fear. On the way to school, (21) as soon as I saw the tops of the trees in the Square d’Anvers – the foliage, as I’d put it in my compostion – ‘Yo, motherfucker, (22) the foliage, my ass!’ (23) – my gut would shrink, my mouth would go dry, and I was sweating. I’d swallow a mouthful of the special concoction my aunt Zaia made for me to drink: (24) homemade syrup that would make me constipated for three or four days. My stomach was as hard as a rock and my knees turned to jelly. (25) I’d see a whole gang of them on the sidewalk of the Avenue Trudaine, just waiting to get at me and give me a sharp kick on the butt. (26) The trueblood born-’n’-raised Frenchies (27) would rib me because they’d decided I was too much of a sidi by half, the sidis would rag me because they reckoned I was too much of a Frenchie by half, the pieds-noirs* would go for me (28) because I was really neither a sidi nor exactly a Frenchie, the Blackos because in their eyes I was white, the Arabs and the Vietnamese (29) to get on the good side of the Blackos, the sidis and the Frenchies...

Whenever I see a report on the TV news about the Hutus and the Tutsis, the school yard

* Colonial French born in Algeria
at Jacques-Decour high comes back to me. (30) And the first person who comes on at me about how antiracist the young are, (31) I’ll let him have a left jab to the kisser. (32) I can pack a good punch now, I know that much, and it just so happens I’m a southpaw! (33) Kids are color-blind, yeah, right! (34)

“The worst thing was the harassment, the underhand tricks, blows below the belt, the slights behind your back, the sly blows – it can’t hurt if nobody knows – burning my back with a lighter, slashing my anorak with a blade, (35) and flicks on the back of my neck. And the gum stuck on my seat and covering my bag with graffiti, (36) and the endless ‘Asshole!’ ” (37)

Comparative Analysis Of Texts

(1) *la boxe*: boxing

The French article and noun have become a gerund in the English. Linguistic theorists have generally categorized such a change as an intra-system shift.\(^{78}\) The translation is here considered to be literal as both terms, source and target, function as substantives; hence, neither grammatical nor semantic change occurs.

(2) *en troisième*: in my third year

I believe this to be an error on the part of Pleasance, et. al., who have opted for a literal rendering without taking into account cultural particularities which

differentiate French and English school systems. In Britain the third year of high school typically represents the year before the final year and does not correspond with the narrator’s stated age of thirteen. In France, school years are counted backward from the terminale, or last year (the year of graduation), and then continue by première, seconde, etc., thereby making troisième the level of fourteen and fifteen year olds. The English-language equivalent to the narrator’s troisième would then more likely be the second year. In the US educational system “in eighth grade” would correspond to the French “en troisième.”

(3) à Jacques-Decour: at the Jacques-Decour high school

In the French, the name of the school, age and grade-level of the student (all of which are contained in the sentence) more than adequately serve to inform the reader that this is neither primary school nor university. In the translation, however, the statement was perceived to be ambiguous. Such a perception is here erroneous but does raise a fundamental question in the practice of translating. Should ambiguities be left to stand? “Quand il y a obscurité, laisser obscurité. Traduire, c’est faire confiance à l’auteur.”79 In this instance, it is clear that the addition of “high school” is but empty expansion.

One notes also the imposition of the definite article “the,” as if to bridge some perceived gap in the French construction. The intrusive “the,” however, serves no purpose other than to break the energy and flow of the original in this fast-paced

listing of school-year trials. Rhythm, as the reader here perceives, is not restricted
to poetry.

(4) à chaque interclasse, à chaque interclasse: every single one

Vinay and Darbelnet point out that French typically uses repetition for emphasis,
while English has more options. The translators have evidently concluded that
such repetition is not a servitude imposing a pre-established discursive order in
the target language and is, therefore, uncalled for. Nevertheless, the English
rendering underplays the distinctive characteristic features of Smail’s speech
patternings. This pattern of repetition, one notes, is consistently employed not
only in the passage cited above, but throughout the novel. In addition, the
decision to omit the repetition neutralizes one of the primary modes by which the
speaker manifests his agitation. Here, in this second sentence already present is
what Berman has termed a deterioration of the networks of signification.

(5) je me faisais tabasser: I got beaten up

The translation employs a much more conventional phrase to replace the
colloquial French expression, resulting in what Berman has classified as a loss of
the vernacular.80 Here one perceives an unwarranted shift of the narrative voice:
unwarranted and illogical, as the sociolect of the French represents that of the
inner-city high school. Smaïl, revisualizing his childhood traumas, purposely
chooses a semantically forceful means by which to convey his message. In the

English, this force has been diminished as a result of the standardization to which the translators resort.

(6) à la sortie: when school was over

Above is an example of the French being more precise than is the English, which is content with a relatively elliptical expression. The “where” and “when” is left unspecified; the image, unfocused, less vivid. A to-the-letter translation – “at the exit” – is here not an attractive option; however, the “way out” collocation that is, in Britain synonymous with “exit,” would serve to designate time and place (“on the way out”) as well as to bring the “ganged-up ‘them’” into sharper focus.

(7) je me faisais taxer: they’d steal things off me

Here again the translators have opted for a more conventional, and unequivalent, rendering. The above French syntagm contains a verb that may very well signify “to steal.” However, the verb “taxer” here goes further, connoting a sense of punishment, of a payment due. The narrator (for a number of reasons made clear below) speaks as if he fully understands that he is being made to pay a penalty to his aggressors. The French reader also makes the inference: Having crossed implicit social-scholastic boundaries, the narrator-transgressor must come up with the fee demanded. In the English translation, this far from insignificant semantic facet is somewhat muddled. Here, Lander’s reiterated advice to the beginning translator is apropos: “… [the text] must be carefully parsed for what I call landmine words, those that in their apparent innocuousness hold concealed
dangers..." The danger here, the powerful connotative potentiality of this seemingly "innocuous" five letter infinitive.

It is often in substituting standard, everyday speech with a more animated and inventive argotic parlance that social groups are able to draw the line of demarcation by which they set themselves apart from traditional society; such language usage also enables one group to distinguish itself from other "sub-sets" of social groupings. Here again the translators have substantially augmented the lexical tenor of Småi’s original phraseology and, in effect, have removed the speaker from his ordinary school-day environment. Alterations such as this one ultimately change the tone of the entire text. In turn, it is not difficult to understand that persistent modification erases much of the author’s originality, and, in addition, skews the reader’s perception of the work’s characters. The enunciation above is, in the original, to the point, and its colloquial nature highlights, to a great degree, the source reader’s identification with the narrative persona.

(8) *encore subir un engueulo*: get an awful scolding

This illustrates yet another example of Berman’s loss of vernacular, with the dynamic quotient of the French phrase undergoing a watering-down to standardized BBC-English. The transformation of the argotic apocope "*engueulo*" into “awful scolding” seems quaint and old-fashioned and certainly strikes one as a poor attempt to evoke the emphatically-phrased anguish of the

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81 Landers, p. 133.
source-language monologue. Especially pertinent here are several remarks of Walter Benjamin included in his definition of a translator’s task. First, “Fidelity in the translation of individual words can almost never fully reproduce the meaning they have in the original.” Granted, but Benjamin goes on to offer this advice:

...The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge.82

Ideally, the team of Smile translators would have found that point to coincide more fully with the usage of a much more visually stimulative turn of phrase. An idiomatic “get another chewing out” both recaptures the “gueule” of “engueulo” as well as the severity of the scolding. Moreover, if one does attempt to perform the return which Benjamin recommends — “to the primal elements of language itself” — he will find that both “gueule” and “chew” stem from the same Indo-European root: /gʷel-/.

(9) j’avais tenté: I’d dared

There is no justification apparent for the highly nuanced “tenter” to have been replaced by the more semantically fixed “dared.” Perhaps this is an incidence of

82 Benjamin, pp. 78, 81.
compensation by which the translators hope to amend, by way of this monosemic swoop, some of the more mildly rendered target-language locutions found above and below.

(10) *et les youyous de Maman*: and my mum would sob

Here may be perceived a severe devaluation of signifying networks, loss of vernacular and what language theorists such as Lawrence Venuti have termed linguistic domestication. The transformation of grammatical elements (independent clause for the objective phrase) mutes the rhetorical rhythm found in the original. As has been stated, rhyme, word-repetition, syntactic parallelisms, anasemic assonance— all are constants, essential to the Smaillian text. In the source language, Papa’s *engueulos* and Mama’s *youyous* are employed as anaphoric, and very direct, objects that act upon the passive protagonist. Through such usage, the author is able to more aptly reinforce the image of Paul as misunderstood victim, one who suffers both at school and at home.

The ethnic “*youyous*” of the original has been discarded only to be replaced by a banal English non-equivalent. Furthermore, the Anglicized “mum” greatly contributes to the degradation of the foreign element, privileging as it does a highly Westernized/British dialect. This is unfortunate, and all the more so as “*youyous*,” with its undeniable onomatopoeic properties, close visual kinship to both “yodels” and “boohoos” and none-too-subtle echoes of “ululations,” could have been quite easily borrowed into English, thereby recapturing the orality of
the “foreign” vernacular. Such a coinage would very effectively allow the North African flavor found in the French-language text to remain intact, all the while being readily comprehended by the target-language audience. The use of borrowings, i.e., a foreign word employed as such in a translation, is often frowned upon by translators. It is sometimes viewed as a manner of italicization that would isolate the term from the context and is thereby construed to be an exploitation of the exotic Other.83 Here where the Other is Moroccan-born Maman in her Barbès deux pièce, the translators, in a blatant act of literary ventriloquism, have situated this Other smack dab in the middle of a Brixton walk-up. The French text and Parisian local have been annexed to a middle-class milieu of the next-door nation. In cases such as this, it is evident that borrowings promote the safeguarding of both the savor and sense of the original and enable the translator to avoid overly domesticizing Anglo-centric references.

(11) le plus jeune de la classe! le premier de la classe!: youngest in the class! top of the form!

The substitution of the Anglicism, “top of the form,” makes impossible the double employ of superlative forms as well as the rimes royales intentionally used in the original [classe/classe]. Moreover, by this sophomoric attempt of ennoblement, the translators have disallowed the willful rhymed repetition of the first and last lines of the chapter’s opening paragraph. What was undoubtedly deemed to be an error of frequency on the part of the author has been “rectified” by Pleasance, et. al. “The translator should respect the energy and the pace of the wording...” and,

of course, the word itself.\textsuperscript{84} "Classe," reiterated four times in the space of five sentences, has in "class" its perfect English-language equivalent. "Language," as Venuti stresses, "is never simply an instrument of communication... [but] a collective force, or assemblage of forms that constitute a semiotic regime." The homogeneous semiotic regiment deployed by Smaïl has been "heterogeneicised"\textsuperscript{85} and for this reason makes invisible the structural intentions apparent in the original.

\textit{(12) casser la gueule}: get beaten up

Here another rather aggressive expression of French slang is not carried through into the translation. An idiomatic "get my ass kicked" would be more in keeping with the tone of the original. Yet the translators have instead fallen back onto the somewhat tired verbal convention. (See point 5 above.)

\textit{(13) les caïds}: the big shots

The loss of the vernacular here is two-fold – a double-edged degradation of the polysemic "caïds." The target language substitution strips the French of its Arabo-Islamic associative value. (In North African usage, a caïd is a government administrative official working in the area of law enforcement.) Furthermore, the suggestion of terrorizing – and rival – gang leaders that is present in the French is somewhat difficult to come by in the English. "Big shots" lacks the strong quotient of aggressivity with which "caïds" is imbued. The target-language idiom

\textsuperscript{84} André Markowitz, p.24.
\textsuperscript{85} Venuti, \textit{Scandals}, p. 18.
implies a unified stratum of the more popular and probably more well-to-do elite. This is, of course, contextually not the case as the various gang leaders, too, come from distinctively different, although marginalized populations, be it socio-economic and/or ethnic. Notably, this difference is not only highlighted in this chapter but throughout the story.

(14) *j'étais le plus jeune, justement*: I was the youngest

In the French original, the adverb “justement” modifies the preceding explicatory phrase, emphasizing that Paul’s age is a primary “justification” for his victimization – “I was the youngest, that was just it.” The English version omits this explanation. Otherwise, this is a literal rendering, although one may decry the noticeably strong, Anglicized “marks” for the French “notes” which completes the sentence.

(15) *je bouquinais tout le temps*: I was a bookworm

As there is no concise English equivalency to the verbal colloquialism “bouquinais,” the translators have had little option but to alter the syntactic and grammatical structure of the sentence in their endeavor to find a satisfactory target-language replacement. The choice of “bookworm,” however, strikes the reader as dated – almost archaic – and certainly ill-suited to the character of the protagonist. “I always had my head in a book,” or better, “I was always reading” are both viable alternatives. These expressions are more closely matched to the idiolect of the speaker. Attenuation of the source-language colloquialism is at
times unavoidable. Nevertheless, here an attempt should have been made to maintain the tenor of the narration, rather than falling back on an obsolete wording that is absent in the original utterance.

(16) *quand un prof interrogeait la classe*: when the teacher asked the class a question

In the translation, the indefinite "un prof" becomes "the teacher," demonstrating what Vinay and Darbelnet describe as the English-language preference for the concrete. Interestingly, with the use of "interrogeait," this same sentence exemplifies the succinctness of the French phraseology, "interroger" including both the idea of "to question" and "to answer." The translation, in the above context, cannot make use of the English cognate. Nevertheless, the target-language rendering is here quite good. The alliteration and assonance heighten the pace – and drama – of the student/teacher rapport. Noted is the lack of a corresponding colloquial equivalent for "prof"; when used as a noun, "teach" would never take the indefinite article, nor, can it be qualified as is "prof" in the citation that follows.

(17) *le prof de français a lu un jour ma rédac*: one day the French teacher read my essay

There is a change of word order here that allows the English version to read more naturally. The use of "essay" for a truncated "rédaction" seems a bit formal. However, the narrator’s linguistic versatility (his affinity for switching among codes and registers) and his love-of-language in and for itself are primary motifs of this passage. It could be suggested that the British translators, by varying their
selections of conventional vocabulary, are alerting the reader that this is indeed an important theme. When the French “rédac” is used a second time, the English translation emphasizes its own versatility in opting to differ: “composition,” admittedly a more adequate rendering of the original term. The ennobling operation performed on the familiar “rédac” does not, however, correspond in tone: The French teacher could very well have read Paul’s “paper.”

(18) à cœur: important

In the above context, “important” is not an adequate equivalent for the adverbial “à cœur.” Certainly “important” is weak in comparison; and certainly so when the aforementioned love-of-language in many ways defines the writer-protagonist and ultimately furnishes answers to his existential questionings. (His love of words, of literature and of writing is a primary theme of the novel; these passions, in turn, convince the protagonist that he will be “a writer and nothing but.”86) In this instance, “...like my father, speaking properly was something I took “to heart,” would be more in accord with the speaker’s sentiments. Considering the context, a literal wording would function quite well, and such a rendering would also be the emotive equivalent of the French.

(19) ce dont j’ai peur: that what I’m afraid of

Here is a literal translation, perhaps abusively so, which contains an ironic twist. The French phrase in question is, in fact, a grammatical structure that causes difficulties for many native speakers and is precisely the type of locution that

86 Vivre me tue, p. 14.
would distinguish a serious student (e.g., Paul as portrayed in the novel) from others. Translated verbatim into English, the phrase loses much of its socio-cultural impact: First, because the English version of the faultily constructed sentence is much less common than its source-language counterpart; and secondly, because that version selected to illustrate proper English is itself faulty. It would seem that the translators did not carry the point to its grammatically perfect conclusion. Indeed, the correct phrase in the mouth of a speaker such as Paul would be “that of which I’m afraid.” In the case at hand it may be definitively stated that the literal translation is inadequate.

Language that is self-referential, that discusses its own grammatical structure, can but seldom be carried over into the target sphere without a substantial degree of semantic impairment. An English-English idiomatic equivalency would better serve to emphasize Paul’s adherence to good grammar. The more plausible solution here would have been a sentence employing the objective-case pronoun “whom.” The usage of this pronoun entails a structure similar to that of “ce dont” in French and, in addition, has the reputation (particularly among the general high school population) of being used by more “fussy” or formal speakers – precisely those who take perfectly proper usage to heart. Such an equivalency would more readily and more logically convey to the target-language reader the reasons Paul’s speaking patterns were systematically and unvaryingly mocked by his classmates.

(20) *oui*: sure
Here is an example of Vinay and Darbelnet’s concept of option where one might assume a servitude. In this case one can very well imagine the translator asking himself, “How would the speaker affirm such an admission if speaking in English?” What results is a more natural target-language voice that wholly corresponds to the youthful tone of the original.

(21) bahut: school

English offers no fitting slang for the French familiar “bahut.” Loss of the vernacular here is inevitable, as the standard term must be used.

(22) ouah, putain: yo, motherfucker

“Ouah” is an exclamation of surprise or here dismay, not an noun of address. Whereas “putain” is considered in the above context a familiar interjection (in this specific usage, one expressing exasperation), the translators have opted for the unquestionably more vulgar F-word locution. An incongruence of perhaps greater significance is that the French term is the reaction of Paul’s classmates’ to his “model” composition and the literary turns employed therein (“frondaisons”/“foliage”). In the English work “motherfucker” is applied to Paul and, in turn, weakens and much modifies the connotations of the epithet that follows in the French (23 below), an epithet reserved uniquely for Paul, and one that is reiterated throughout the work.

(23) l’enculé: my ass
The forceful source-language insult, although exceedingly vulgar, is more or less a standard one; its US equivalent, in standard usage, "asshole." In this incidence, however, the source-language noun's intention aims much further. "Enculé," in the Jacques-Decour context, is to be taken as an ethnic, quasi-religious denunciation: a verbal lapidation that underscores Paul's perceived "betrayal" of his North African roots. The model classroom behavior demonstrated by the protagonist, his stated affinity for "good French" and the somewhat flowery phrases of his compositions – all confer in a way that singles Paul out for the role of "teacher's pet." For his Maghrebian cousins, such conduct equates with effete submission to the institutional objectives of the French authority. In the eyes of Tariq and other gang members, Paul has given in. Yet this Beur variation on the "oreo factor" carries much wider socio-cultural signification. Azouz Begag in an article discussing speech as "the expression of virility" (among socially disadvantaged African and North African youth) fittingly observes:

"...En classe, comme dans son quartier, le jeune gagne à se tenir à distance d'une trop bonne maîtrise et bon usage de ces codes institutionels, s'il tient à ne pas se retrouver marginalisé dans son propre groupe. D'un point de vue psychologique, le "parler comme un pédé" ou avec des manières prêtes à faire rire, comme s'il offusquait la 'virilité' ambiante."

"Enculé," citing the socio-linguist Philippe Ernotte, is a term Freudianly fraught with implication and more particularly so among "une immigration pour qui ces choses-là sont rédhibitoires." The protagonist himself is wholly aware of the implication of the insult; and he himself expounds upon the polysemic proprieties of the utterance: "...leur peur obsessionnelle de passer pour des pédés! des enculés! La virilité est la seul sujet dont ils ne seissent pas...La virilité et la religion..."^{89}

In Arabo-Islamic tradition, passivity in male-male sexual relations is a mortal abomination, a taboo of the highest order. Thus, it is with obvious intent that the author makes use of this very term to dramatically emphasize Paul’s social ostracism, further pointing up his marginalization even amongst the marginalized. Whereas the French epithet is functional, the English translation, "my ass," is but a mere dialectal reflex suggesting little more than a vexed "oh boy, there he goes again!" A much closer rendering would have been "faggot" (US) or the British "poof."

Astoundingly, this very same misreading (and far from accurate rendering) occurs again in the first paragraphs of a later chapter. In the French, the terminology of points 22 and 23 above is reinserted verbatim into the text. Smaïl intratextualizes Smaïl; below, the 27-year old protagonist mimics the French-Comp. stylizations of Paul, the 13-year old eighth grader:

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^{89} Vivre me tug, pp. 41-42.
Le ciel était très bleu et des oiseaux chantaient
dans les frondaisons ('ouah putain, les frondaisons, l'enculé!')

The translation this time responds with "'Wow, mofo, foliage, conceited prick! Asshole!'" — a rather burlesque response that incorporates anachronisms from the 60's, 90's obscenities, clichéd collocations and standard vulgarities. The protagonist, as stated, has reverted to his even-tenored idiolectal repertoire. Thus for the target-language reader, Smaïl's intertextualizations, if discernible, are rendered functionally irrelevant. Linguistic theorist Basim Hatim in a detailed analysis of dialogue in translation further elaborates:

"...contrary to popular beliefs [ideolects] are not peripheral. They are in fact systematic, and their use is crucial for making sense of both the character and the plot."^92

Thus, in an autobiographical work where character and plot go hand in hand, the preservation of idiolectal usage is doubly important.

(24) l'élixir que me donnait ma tante Zaïa: the special concoction my aunt Zaïa made for me to drink

The translation raises questions of choice and also embodies Berman's concept of expansion — empty explication that unshapes the rhythm of the original, "an

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^90 Vivre me tue, p. 175.
^91 Smile, p. 140.
^92 Basil Hatim and Ian Mason. The Translator, pp. 103 -104. Italics mine.
overtranslation which flattens the source-language voice.”\textsuperscript{93} It is unclear why the translators chose to replace “élixir” with “special concoction” as the former with its associative value of strength-enhancement would have functioned equally well, if not better in this context. Also questionable is the tacked-on “for me to drink.” As all schools of translation insist, the translator must resist adding words if such words are not required for clarity. In the case above, the sentence is no less clear without the addition; and were “elixir” employed in the translation, the adjective-phrase “for me to drink” would surely strike the reader as redundant. All the more so as Zaïa’s elixir is qualified as “syrup” in both the French and English texts.

(25) \textit{les genoux en cotton}: my knees turned to jelly

The idiom-for-idiom substitution that takes place above would no doubt be condemned by resistance theorists as an ethnocentric “attack upon the discourse of the foreign work.”\textsuperscript{94} Theorists Vinay and Darbelnet, however, recommend such a practice, stressing that it is especially useful in translating idioms and proverbs.\textsuperscript{95} Although the source-language image is sacrificed, the meaning remains intact. A to-the-letter translation would here make for oddity, an effect unintended in the original. Nevertheless, “my knees like jelly” (as opposed to “turned to”) would more closely agree with the grammatical structure of the French while maintaining the desired level of idiomacy.

\textsuperscript{93} Berman, “Trials of the Foreign,” p. 290.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., p. 295.
\textsuperscript{95} Vinay and Darbelnet, p. 269.
(26) *m'attendaient pour me charrier, pour me fritter:* just waiting to get at me and give me a sharp kick on the butt

Here again one notes a substantial alteration in vernacular usage. The implications of the French infinitives do not truly correspond to those of the English—"charrier" signifying to taunt or to tease, and the familiar "fritter" more suggestive of picking a fight (even the actual coming to blows). "A sharp kick in the butt," while perhaps a fluid phrase of a bygone age, respects neither source-language meaning nor target-language expectations; and it is also far removed from the idiolect of the speaker.

Lawrence Venuti, the chief advocate of "foreignizing" a translation, promulgates the usage of highly identifiable and forceful target-language slang as the appropriate method in which to render similarly argotic elements found in the original. In addition, he adds, this technique more readily signals to the reader that he is reading a translation of a work from a foreign culture. Assuredly, markers such as Jacques-Decour, Square d’Anvers and Zaïa above and the various setting-specific ethnic labels that follow would serve to signal at least some degree of foreign provenance. UNESCO’s Guidelines for Translators, while not encouraging visible target-language divergence from the original, suggests that the translator attempt to utilize expressions that do not aggressively signal "translation" but those that at the same time are consistent with the registers of the target-language sociolect.97

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96 Venuti, *Scandals*, p. 17.
(27) *Les Francaouis de souche*: The true born-'n'-raised Frenchies

The elongated and somewhat tongue-'n'-cheek target-text rendering of the phrase lacks the force and vulgarity of the original. "Francaouis" recalls "couilles," "couillons," etc., whereas the English only serves to amuse.\(^{98}\) Furthermore, this lexical hybridity signals Paul's own awareness of his marginal position – marginal among the marginalized. Yet at the same time, the source-text reader realizes that the usage of the term is *au deuxième degré.* Paul is mimicking the tough-guy, "F-the-French" sociolect of the "Sidis," "Chalalas," "Abdouls," "Blacks," etc., while implicitly expressing a desire to be considered as French; not French per se, but neither as the perennial outsider with no tribe to call his own.

(28) *me caguaient*: would rib me; would rag me; would go for me

Translators and translation theorists have often spoken of the target-language text's tendency to be longer; i.e., wordier than that of the source. Here this observation is very much in evidence. The French argotic scatology, "caguaient," (to defecate upon) unabashedly evokes the manner by which the six racial and/or ethnic groups listed in the source language manifest their scorn of the protagonist. The translation here again destroys the linguistic patternings and implied parallelism of the original text. It does, however, through a series of alliterative embellishments, create patternings of its own. Nevertheless, these latter non-equivalents fail to reproduce that verbal animosity seen in the French. And once

\(^{98}\) *Comment tu t'chatches!*: Dictionnaire du français contemporain des cités, s.v. "frankaoui," "franchcouille."
again, this strategy brings to the fore the question of creativity (versus “recreating creatively”) in translation. Is it the role of the translator?

(29) les Sidis..., les Chalalas..., les Blackos..., les Abdoulss..., les Niaqs: the sidis..., the pieds-noirs..., the Blackos..., the Arabs..., the Vietnamese

An attentive reading of the sentences in question above reveals a marked divergence on the semantic level. Of these five racial and/or ethnic groups specified by the protagonist in the French, only one has been correctly rendered into English.

a) sidis (uncapitalized in the English), derived from the Arabic seignior or sir, is in familiar French usage a pejorative term for Franco-Maghrebians and is used as such, italicized, in the translation. Yet where a note of explanation would be welcome for this foreign-language item, none is offered.

b) Chalalas in contemporary usage is defined as a young, ethnically Jewish male or female whose “look” is that of the Paris Sentier district, a commercial zone often thought of as being predominantly Jewish. However, in an incomprehensively gross act of negligence, the English translation has replaced this representation of Jewish ethnicity with “pieds-noirs.” Moreover, the latter term, in French and italicized in the English text, is footnoted with the explanatory phrase: “Colonial French born in Algeria.” Chalala is in no way synonymous with pieds-noir. Furthermore, as Algeria lost its colonial status in 1962, the youngest pieds-noirs student at the High School could be no less than thirty-five years old at the

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time of the Vivre me tue publication).

c) *Abdouls* in the source-language cultural context should be rendered as "Turks." It is conceivable, of course, that no readily available ethnic-slang term springs to the mind of the target-language translators. In such a case it would be indisputably more appropriate to employ the standard noun. Failing to do so erases an entire ethnicity. The "*Abdouls"*/"Arabs" switch is one that also begs the question, "To whom does "*sidis"" refer.

d) *Niaqs*, as used by the author here, takes in Chinese, Taiwanese, Koreans and others of East Asian origin. Clearly, Vietnamese does not.

Indeed, the overall tone of the paragraph is one of domestication, one which markedly brings the setting home to the British reader. The vocabulary, phraseology and numerous ethnic epithets of the original have been standardized, altered or omitted. Whereas Smaïl has marshaled one ethnic code word after another in order to form a forcefully stylized "listing," the translators have distorted and broken the coherence of the passage by inattention and disregard for its underlying uniformity and meaning. This paragraph and its emphatic enumeration of ethnicities also serve to reflect the difficulties with which the educational system in France and French society as a whole are undergoing in striving to promote a pluralistic, and united, culture.

Under the republican model, ethnic origin is deemed unacceptable as a basis for organization... or for conferring
rights, recognition, or entitlements by public authorities.  

The author has gone to great lengths to divide and subdivide the student population of the Jacques-Decour campus in order to emphasize the perceived breakdown of the larger French culture into disparate groupings of ethnic entities. The translators, with their regroupings and omissions, have downsized the text as well as underplayed the urgency of the situation.

(30) *je revois la cour à Jacques-Decour*: the school yard at Jacques-Decour high comes back to me  

Admittedly the echo effect of the Smail "*cour/Decour*" cannot be duplicated in English. However, a repetition of "see" in the independent clause would have preserved in the translated sentence the syntactic parallelism and interior polyphony of the French. In this case, one assumes the "comes back to me" is utilized to anticipate the "comes on at me" of the following line. This is a good example – and one that succeeds – of producing a target-language compensatory reverberation of Smaïl’s stylistic predilections.

Contrarily, the "high" which qualifies Jacques-Decour is unjustifiable. It is a superfluous attempt at clarification, and one that interrupts the rhythmic stream of Paul’s schoolboy memories. (See point 3 above.)

(31) *avec l’antiracisme des jeunes*: about how antiracist the young are

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The translation, although shifting from adjective to noun in the prepositional phrase, attempts to provide a semantically literal equivalency. However, what strikes the target-language reader is the modulation of speech registers. It is essential that the translator determine to which segment of the register-continuum a speaker’s utterances belong, and then to translate accordingly. Here, where the twenty-seven-year-old speaker is “going on and on” about the ethnic slights and slurs of his school years, the high-toned “young” would seem facetious, and thus very much out of place. Quoting Jorge Luis Borges, “…we understand this to be a literal translation, but hardly feel it to be a true one.” 101 The phrase, and more specifically, “des jeunes,” must be considered in context; and in such context it is evident that “kids” or even the more mid-range “youth” would resonate with greater authenticity.

(32) *un jab du gauche dans la chetron*: a left jab to the kisser

The translators have found a literally equivalent phraseology that very satisfactorily “packs the punch” of the original. The “jab” of the French has been effectively “borrowed back” to the target text. The easily visualized “chetron,” the back formation of the familiar *tronche* (“head” or “face”), is nicely conveyed by the colloquial “kisser.” And furthermore, both terms, “chetron” and “kisser,” have equivalent use-values in their respective languages as both are somewhat dated, but still commonly heard colloquialisms.

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(33) *Je suis gaucher!*: I'm a southpaw!

Here the paronymous resonance of “gauche” (32 above) and “gaucher” of the original has been removed – the network of subtextual signifiers again diluted. Also evident is the grammatical transformation and switch in register. An adjective of standard usage in the French becomes a noun in the translation. Moreover, this noun, when employed in English, is normally restricted to the sports (baseball) arena. Albeit SMAİL is a boxer and “jab” is the subject in question, “southpaw” is inappropriate and reads as an overly overt play for cuteness.

Culturally speaking, the translators have failed to sematically exploit “left” in the manner as does the author. Paul SMAİL, “a young Arab man in Paris,” is aware of the significance of the left hand in the Islamic context. As a matter of fact, any Parisian familiar with Beur culture would be aware of the significance, and not only within the Beur population. As Azouz Begag has observed:

...de plus en plus de jeunes de toutes origines jurent en utilisant le mot “ouallah” (“devant Allah!”) et mettent la main droite sur le cœur après avoir salué quelqu'un.

Interestingly, both words, the French “gauche” and the English “left,” are derived from the same Germanic dialectical source – the root signifying “weak,”

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102 Webster's Third New International Dictionary, s.v. “southpaw.”
103 Smile, quoted from the English-language blurb.
“vacillating,” and/or “off-center.” Even in ordinary usage, “left” still retains a trace of its historically sinister implication, a left-handed compliment, for example. For a Muslim, however, the use of the left hand (in hand-shaking, in eating, in writing, etc.) is taboo. Under the entry “Hand,” in J. E. Cirlot’s A Dictionary of Symbols, is noted: “…the right side corresponding to the rational, the conscious, the logical, and the virile; the left representing the converse.” Hence, “gaucher” echoes “enculé,” again underscoring Paul’s social stigmatization. Yet the enunciation, so proudly articulated in the French, goes, in the French, much further. It allows the now young adult protagonist to (re)affirm his droit à la différence – his Republican “right to signify” – while, at the same time, emphasizing his belief in the insignificance of difference. By overlooking the plurisignation of the predicate adjective “gaucher,” and, consequently, employing “southpaw,” the translators have somewhat blunted the linguistic dexterity of the phrase. In the target text, Smail’s left-handedness has become a mere attribute whereas in the socio-cultural context of the paragraph, it connotes a fundamental characteristic of his selfhood.

(34) l’antiracisme des jeunes: kids are color-blind, yeah, right

Voilà! When the French phrase reappears, the translators, this time, very aptly render it into contextually appropriate English. As stated above (point 31), a literal translation would have resulted in a stilted, inauthentic voice.

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105 Surat 56: 9-42; Surat 90:20 and others, The Koran.
(35) *les coups en vache, les coups en loucedé, les coups de vice pas vu pas pris, les coups de briquet dans le dos, les coups de cutter* ...: the underhand tricks, blows below the belt, the slights behind your back, the sly blows – it can’t hurt if nobody knows – burning my back with a lighter, slashing...

At first glance, the most salient feature of the French paragraph’s internal dynamics is the rhetorical repetition of “coups.” The five “blows,” resounding one after the other, serve as a verbal sound track that in turn drives home all the more powerfully the image of the young victim’s bashings. The English version is somewhat weaker; it also contains a number of questionable translation practices and interpretations. After the initial “The worst thing was,” the paragraph is clumsy and, moreover, contradictory. One perceives here that the translators felt the spat-out expressions of the original could be meaningfully replaced by a variety of English clichés (below the belt, behind the back, etc.) rather than truer equivalents. The rhythmic “coups” of the source language is in accord with the sociolect of a sometimes violent urban school; its usage is specific to the setting as well as to the characters. The English substitutes pat phrases of a generic type – phrases that could refer to other things and other situations. The French reads with much more vigor and is highly “customized” and, of course, more consistent. In the translation much less of the narrative voice comes across, making the conventional language used seem much less that of the narrator.

One also notices that “coups de briquet dans le dos” is not synonymous with “burning my back with a lighter.” “It can’t hurt if nobody knows” (“sees” in the French) – but as everyone knows, “un coup de briquet dans le dos” is in reality a
blow with the lighter being used as a weapon much as brass knuckles might be used to strike the victim on the spinal column; i.e., a sharp jab with the hard plastic of the lighter placed to cause searing pain. One can imagine this coup being carried out so that it appears the aggressor intends to give the victim a chummy pat on the back. The protagonist is referring to blows no one knows about or sees; flames and the resulting scorches would assuredly be more easily visible than a pat on the back with a concealed weapon.

The reader, in addition, can not help but note the disparate mix of nouns and adverbs in the listing of student crimes: “burning... slashing... and flicks,” followed by “gum... and covering.” This is grammatically poor English. Although one can imagine Paul’s enemies speaking in such a way, he would not. (J’avais à cœur de parler comme il faut.) That is precisely why he is continually bullied, as the passage has made clear two paragraphs above.

(36) le tagage de mon sac: covering my bag with graffiti

Perhaps here “marking up my bag’ would have been a better equivalent. “Tagage,” albeit a type of graffiti, carries the implication that Paul’s bag is “tagged” or marked with words and symbols that specifically refer to him and marked in a way in which the signification of the tagging would be readily understood by all.

(37) le sempiternel ‘Enculé!’: the endless ‘Asshole!’

“Enculé,” as demonstrated, carries much more weight than the translation’s “asshole,” which, by comparison, almost seems amicable. One also wonders, since the translators have already used “motherfucker” to replace “enculé” two paragraphs up, why it has now been changed. The repetition is certainly important and, in fact, the text points this out. The protagonists tells us, in this very utterance, that it is “semipiternel” – another contradiction in the translation, an impoverishment, both quantitative and qualitative, a weakening of signifying networks… and, given the context, perhaps even an incidence of ennoblement.

The preceding passage offers but a preliminary view of the original text and the translation, but it is sufficient to enable the reader to perceive some of the questionable tendencies established in the English work. Among the more obvious discrepancies noted in Smile is a clear move away from the foreign of the original toward a much more domesticated rendering. A sizable selection of lexical items chosen to “flavor” the source text – words and expressions deliberately sought out by the author to convey “the foreign” inherent in the French work – have been, in the translation, replaced with rather neutral, mono-cultural words or unfelicitous Anglicisms. The situation the novel describes is decidedly French: The trials faced by a young Frenchman of North African parentage in finding his place (and a job) in a country still struggling to integrate “the other” within. The geography of Paris remains intact; Rue Ordener, Place de la République, le RER, Barbès, life sexshow – all is there, en français, in the English text. Thus, any divergence between setting and language becomes more striking. The
disparity is unique to the translation. In *Smile*, the accord between lexis and local of the original does not always find its match. In all evidence, Smaïl, in *Vivre me tue*, has gone to great lengths to find "le mot juste" – often, the popular, street-wise parlance of urban Parisian youth; and just as often, "le bon usage" practiced by writers such as Balzac and Proust. When the translation fails to find the appropriate wording, the autobiographical voice suffers. His language reads as a sort of English, broken up at frequent, but irregular, intervals with pat phrases and faulty phraseology. Regrettably, it is in this manner that Paul Smaïl is transformed into *Smile*.

The English text persistently makes use of a variety of idioms that strike the reader, if not obsolete, quaint. Such usage is not in accord with the French-language portrayal of the protagonist, nor does it reflect the speaking patterns of those around him. This would suggest that the translators' familiarity with both modern dialectal French and the *modes de vie* of certain sectors of the French population is inadequate. The translator must attempt to bridge the gaps of language, setting and lifestyle, in order to make the actuality of the foreign more real to the outsider – inviting him/her in to an-other textual space. The rhythm, style, and vocabulary of the source-text are very much attuned to the wide range of speech registers that the title, an oxymoronic twist of phrase, evokes. Giving a young, somewhat-marginalized French urban hero an idiolect that the reader would more logically attribute to a conservative, middle-class, forty-something Englishman while keeping the protagonist in his eclectic Parisian neighborhood decreases both reader empathy and interest. Whereas *Vivre me tue* is constructed as a disordered series of diary entries – intimate, amusing, touching, angry – the translation reads flat, monotone, leaving the reader unsure of Paul's sincerity. In the English text, Paul appears
to be more of an outsider commenting on his life, rather than the person actually (re)living it.

The colloquialisms and slang of the English language are, arguably, fewer, and they see less frequent usage than do those of the French; and seldom do the English terms available correspond in register or use value. Whereas an educated speaker of French in an informal context may elect to employ familiar or even argotic expressions, the English offerings of a correlative sociolect are scant. Paul’s usage of “prof” (point 16), does not find its adequacy in either “prof” or “teach” although both items exist as substantives in English. With what word would English translate “mec”? or “meuf”? – “Dude,” “cat”; “babe,” “chic,” “ho” – none is appropriate. Likewise, equivalent ethnic epithets and code words, because of the specificity of the setting, are also less numerous. Vivre me tue seemingly – and seamlessly – incorporates the complete lexicon of everyday slurs for those of North African origin: “arbi,” “bicot,” “bougoule,” “craoui,” “rat,” “sidi,” “melon,” “nardinè,” “naf,” etc. The English, due in part to dissimilar socio-cultural and historical circumstances, responds with a very mixed bag: “rat,” “nig-nog,” “darkie,” “A-rab,” “wog.” Here is a panoptic view of British immigrant trends: “Nig-nog,” “darkie” and “wog” are, in Britain, applied to a variety of darker-skinned peoples (East Asians, Africans, Jamaicans, etc.); and “rat” is, of course, in English, neither racially nor ethnically defined.109

When considering off-color expressions of aggressivity, however, English is more than able to meet its match. Pleasance, Woods and Dupont could perhaps have better weighed the options at hand. Phraseology such as “get an awful scolding,” “a sharp kick in the butt,” or “southpaw,” tend to recontextualize” the reader’s perception of Paul. The

109 Vivre me tue, p.12; Smile, p. 2.
ideolectal restraint and somewhat insipid wording applied to the French philippic substantially reduce the distance between the narrative voice of the Smile protagonist and the ornate prose of his compositions; i.e., the reader may very well conclude that a character who writes his compositions "Smaïl style" would tend to speak as "Smile" does. The more mild-mannered English rendering, in effect, makes pallid the vigor of the French and, in turn, the target-language reader's depiction of Paul. In almost every instance cited, the French : English lexico-semantic charge has been inverted.

"Putain" in translation confirms the rule. This ubiquitous, almost standard Gallic vulgarity, at virtually each occurrence, becomes, in English, the much more forceful – and forcefully obscene – "motherfucker." However, the French interjection has evolved from its primary signification to be so commonly used today that the effect is little more than that of a phatic utterance. Albeit the English obscenity has also undergone attenuation, its emotive charge remains much greater than does "putain" for the French reader. Moreover, translated as such, this English "equivalency" is out of context (point 22). In addition, it seems very unlikely that those speakers who so frequently resort to "motherfucker" would, in the next breath, employ such charming locutions as "bookworm," "they reckoned...." "my specs, please," "it was ages since....", and other outmoded formulations which are to be found throughout the British publication.

Smile perhaps too readily reconfigures the linguistic patternings and sociocultural environment of the source text. Paradoxically, the transpiciously domestized translation was produced in adhering to the tenets of foreignization. Pleasance, et. al., very adequately "create sociolects striated with various registers and styles" striations

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110 Smile, p. 1. Outmoded and grammatically incorrect. (See point 18 above.)
unparalleled in the French. Indeed, in “inventing a collective assemblage that questions the seeming unity of standard English,” the translation resists what the French expresses very naturally. The result is a hybrid text that neither reflects nor echoes the “harmonious incoherence” of the original narration. *Smile* is that “uncompleted metamorphosis” which consistently signals its errancy from the source while continuously manifesting its distance from the target.

Perhaps the most curious of translational breaches takes place at *Smile*, page one, line one, word one (and two). With a knowing wink at his readers, the *Vivre me tue* protagonist opens his narrative, “Appelez-moi Smaïl.” The English opts for “You can call me Smaïl.” One of the most striking phrases of English literature has been made smoother – or perhaps foreignized? – for the target reader. The translators, heeding neither Smaïl nor Melville, distance the reader from both the *Vivre me tue* hero and the resounding motifs of the work. Whereas *Moby Dick*’s protagonist Ishmael (in Arabic, “Smaïl”) as well as the Smaïl, protagonist of *Vivre me tue*, have proffered invitations, the translators’ rendering is cold and condescending; here the protagonist seems to be granting permission. From the opening line, one notes that the tone is wrong. Certainly this intervention is unnecessary and indeed, ironic as the phrase could have been “returned” to English with great effect. Smaïl assuredly knows his Melville. In paragraph two (page one), the reader learns that the protagonist holds a DEA in comparative literature – Specialization: Melville. Thus, one is surprised that the classic response of “Bartleby” has been rewritten and abridged in a later chapter of the English

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111 Venuti, *Scandals of Translation*, p. 11.
text: “I repeated Bartleby’s answer in Melville’s novel [sic]: *I’d rather not.*”\textsuperscript{113} The source-text is more precise: “I would prefer not to.” *Je lui répondais ce que Bartleby répond dans la nouvelle de Melville.*\textsuperscript{114} Commenting on Melville’s world-renowned phrase in *Le Monde Littéraire*, Patrick Kéchichian justly states:

\begin{quote}
*Même si l’on entend mal cette langue, il convient de la dire en anglais, tant les mots sonnent juste:* “I would prefer not to.”\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

In all evidence, Smaïl is of the same opinion. The source-language reader needs no translation; and consequently, none is offered: “I would prefer not to” appears in its original, English-language form in the French text. Such erroneous translation is not only a disservice to Smaïl and his readers, but to Melville as well.

The comparison of the source-text to the translation is indeed revealing. The case above serves to illustrate to what degree the two may vary. The English text frequently misallies its source, liberally including elements that are alien to the foreign and out of place in the target. Semantic signals of the original are ignored, lexical correspondences go unseen, socio-cultural references are altered, registers shuffled at will... “the play of deforming forces”\textsuperscript{116} seems to go unchecked.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{113} *Smile,* p. 65.
\textsuperscript{114} *Vivre me tue,* p. 87.
\textsuperscript{116} Berman, “Trials of the Foreign,” p. 286.
\end{flushleft}
...the task of the translator is surely to work out a strategy that will allow the most insistent and decisive effects [of the original] to resurface in the translated text.\textsuperscript{117}

In the poetry of language, all is effect – "the most insistent and decisive" are often but the linguistic crescendo of the less and less and lesser still. The text – original or translation – is constructed in adhering to the pointillist prescriptive: the single word gains its intensity (or lack thereof) from the many words that surround it; each colors the next and may recast the hue of those above and below. As every page of the translated text comprises hundreds of minor adjustments, it is critical that these adjustments flow in accord with the sound and sense of the original – because these adjustments accrue: improperly monitored, they distort and pervert. A true translation can never be transparent, but it should strive to mirror/echo in corresponding terms what the original has said. Thus, the translator must proceed with the utmost care in order to preserve the intricate networks of textual signification. He listens closely and writes with vigilance in order to re-present these networks as true to form as language permits.

Translation is not an alibi to redress cultural imbalance, nor is it a superimposition of the here upon the there. The goal of translation is to serve the original while acting as the agent of the target culture. To do so adequately does not imply subservience. It rather suggests that the translator possesses both a mastery of the author’s literary intent and a thorough understanding of the possible meanings that the target audience may read into the translated text.

What follows is an overview, detailed when appropriate, of my endeavor to present Paul Smail’s *Casa, la casa* to the American reader. I hope that I have delivered his text, echo and image, breached where breached, with the spirit of the word intact.
On Translating *Casa, la casa*

 Appropriately translating a work from one language into another is no simple undertaking. Therefore, prior to beginning the translation of *Casa, la casa*, I established a number of rules. The most important of these would appear patently obvious: a meticulous reading (and careful re-readings) of the French text. Robert de Beaugrande points out that all too often errors of translation – at times gross misinterpretation – can be ascribed to errors of reading.\(^{118}\) In addition, the ability to comprehend not just what story Paul Smail tells in *Casa, la casa*, but also to be able to identify his narrative style – *how* he tells the story – requires that one possess sufficient familiarity with the author’s other works of “autobiographical fiction”: *Vivre me tue*, the novel which preceded *Casa, la casa*, and *La passion selon moi*, Smaïl’s subsequent publication. As this trilogy recounts the story of the narrator’s life in his Parisian neighborhood and his “return” to Morocco, it immerses the reader in the specific languages of the setting: French and Arabic, and often the inventive interweavings of both. Also to be considered is Paul’s own question:

\[...le français de Barbès et le bon français, le français littéraire, le français des Marocains éduqués...le français de M. Hamel ou le français de Mme Solal, le français de Marcel Proust. Dans quelle langue écrire? (Casa, 60; RTB, 182)\]

\(^{118}\) Robert de Beaugrande devotes chapter three of his *Factors in a Theory of Poetic Translating* to the discussion of the importance of reading in translation, with particular emphasis on page 26.
It is essential that the translator accurately discern the author's linguistic mix; for in his narration, Paul deftly scales the major and minor notes of every conceivable clef. Undeniably, the protagonist is extremely proficient in conveying his sentiments through language. His sentient use thereof runs from the crudely familiar “bjed” to the lyrically assonant “fluide, la nuit, fluide, la vie…” And the translator must respond in kind – "Smooth is this happiness that seizes me so suddenly, so intoxicating, so light…" (Casa, 18; RTB, 142)

The preceding criticism of Smaïl's Vivre me tue signaled the uneven in depiction the persona of the narrative persona. Ideally, a proper translation will not fail to properly record those instances of angst, ire, wit, joy, despair, hope, pain... experienced by the protagonist. Mindful that without great care, the translation could become an inadvertent mélange of registers, ideolects and cultural inconsistencies. Hence, having researched Paul Smaïl and his environment, from his societal bêtes noires to his most revered literary figures, I set about my task of translation.

The methodology put forth by Jean-Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet in their Comparative Stylistics of French and English was especially helpful in reconciling the inherent requirements of the French language with English grammatical usage and syntactic order. Vinay and Darbelnet are primarily concerned with the structural and stylistic differences between the two languages which, at times, prevent literal translations from being clear and meaningful equivalents of the original. Smaïl's writing offers many challenges in this regard. His style is very contemporary, highly unconventional and yet often classic. It reflects a love of language frequently expressed by means of a vast array of rhetorical devices; e.g., anaphora, alliteration, assonance,
rhyme, allusion, metonymy, metaphor, paronomasia (punning) – each of which is
difficult to translate fluently. Smaill’s use of newly coined expressions, of argot and of
wordplay all serve to remind the French reader that even the sounds and spellings of
words are important; that there is humor in the choice of words and that a word may be
selected not only for its meaning or for the image it evokes, but also for its history,
cultural context and socio-political impact. There is vibrancy and verve to the point of
violence in certain passages, and this results from individual word choice just as often as
it does from the contextual situation.

As Vinay and Darbelnet stress in their analysis, a single word is many times too
small a unit to function as a pivotal element in translation; for one word may have a host
of meanings and vastly different connotations as well. In order to ensure accurate
translation, one must consider the larger linguistic unit. A phrase, paragraph, chapter –
the entire text must be sedulously parsed in order that a single word be correctly rendered
in translation. One questionable feature of the Vinay/Darbelnet methodology, however,
is the authors’ somewhat callous disregard for culturally specific allusion. Comparative
Stylistics regularly proposes the substitution of iconic source-language institutions for
target-language “equivalents.” This might be, for instance, replacing “Bellevue” for
“Charenton”; “Nasdaq” for the “CAC 40.” This type of substitution, the authors affirm,
will make the source-language concept more accessible to the target-language reader.
Perhaps the greatest disadvantage of the Vinay/Darbelnet’s Comparative Stylistics is that
it offers few suggestions for the interpretation of dialect, argot, and those non-standard
language features that exemplify inter-lingual adaptability at the semantic, syntactic, and
phono-graphological levels.
Casa, la casa incorporates an extensive and extremely varied assortment of argot and non-standard language usage – some of which is widely recognized and much that is not. As argot, once “mainstreamed,” normally mutates into new, more cryptic forms, the more obscure lexical constructions employed by the author may indicate either their “freshness” on the slang scene, or may represent items so little used that they are unintelligible to a majority of source-text readers. To better comprehend the manner in which Smaïl “deconventionalizes” his phraseology and the ways in which such phraseology reflect the social settings of his work, I spent time in those locales cited in the novels. I sought out and spoke with North African nationals, native speakers of French and many Beurs familiar with both the language of the quartier and the social background which gives rise to it. These interviews aided me in understanding much of the non-standard vernacular found in Smaïl’s narration. The discussions also allowed me to evaluate the extent to which such expression is used; to which group(s) it is specific and, perhaps most importantly for the translation, whether there is an adequate English equivalent.

That French and English greatly differ in their respective linguistic structures is not in question. One point I wished to emphasize in the translation was the differences between the two languages – how they are and have been influenced by history, by circumstances such as immigration, by politics, and by the increasingly disparate ethnic factions that French youth culture englobes. In short, those variations that one language may be exposed to – even enriched by – that the other language has not experienced in the same way or to an equal degree must be considered. For just these very reasons, I realized that only rarely would anything approaching a word-for-word translation be
possible. Nevertheless, I strove to maintain Smaîl’s unique lexis, his original writing patterns and his precise use of idiom and allusion – particularly where references to the culture of post-colonial France came into play. Thus, I would translate literally in those instances when the French meaning and intent would not be altered and would resort to free, but faithful authenticity in attempting to preserve an accurate target-language reading.

When bringing a foreign-language text into English, one might question the reasons the work is of interest to the English-language reader. The answer with regard to Casa, la casa lies in the uncommon settings of the book and the often extraordinary experiences of the protagonist. The autobiographical representation of the protagonist is inextricably intertwined with his position as a son of Moroccan parents living in the predominantly immigrant Parisian neighborhood of Barbès.119 The realities of this situation are, in urban France, not unusual; and, therefore, much more familiar to the French reader than to his/her American counterpart. In France, there is a growing tradition of Beur writing, and some of these voices are now beginning to be heard in the mainstream. Beur history and culture, however, remain obscure to many of the French and have attracted but scant attention in North America. Yet Casa, la casa is, too, a tale of coming-of-age, and one with universal appeal. Moreover, the complex historical and cultural background of the story, as well as the experiences of the narrator living in a culturally mixed setting brings to the fore the conflicting values of liberal, democratic

western societies. An interdisciplinary field such as that of literary translation can also be
an ideal means for a broad-based comparison of cultures and their evolutions.

The North African element of Casa, la casa is combined with the French and the
two often fuse, creating a fascinating portrait of contemporary France. In translating the
text, I consciously determined to retain as many socio-cultural references as possible,
including those words and ideas expressed in Arabic. In this way, the foreign element is
kept intact, and the protagonist’s multicultural story retains its multicultural savor. On
safeguarding the foreign in translation, several of the writings of Antoine Berman and
Lawrence Venuti were helpful. Insistence that the foreign must not be made “quaint” or
even “different” made clear that foreign references be integrated in the most natural
manner possible. Thus the reader finds incorporated – without quotation marks or heavy
reliance on paratextual definitions – many of the terms and concepts that, once
introduced, became commonplace in the protagonist’s English voice, just as they had
been in the French narrative. The author himself defines for his French readers such
terms as “m’louk” and “makhzen” within the text; in the English translation these
definitions remain, bringing the reader closer to the culture of the author.

An additional challenge presented by the novel is the profuse intertextual play
found throughout. Allusions, references and quotations from other literary works, from
the world of politics and that of popular culture appear in both direct and indirect form.
Writers such as Rimbaud, Melville and Stevenson; government officials Jospin,
Chevènements, Chadli; comedians Fellag and Gad Elmaleh; and singer/songwriters such
as Trenet, Faudel, and Herman Humfeld often influence both the author’s original word
choice and tone, and I felt it important to bring these influences, as directly as language
allows, into the English translation as well. Smail is not shy about his literary inspirations (nor, for that matter, about his literary aspirations), but it was at times surprising to see how often the protagonist appropriated the words of others. In the target text, these allusions have been noted, but I did not wish to cite the references in the body of the translation itself. Such notation would have represented an intrusion absent in the original and, moreover, would have interrupted the novelistic sequencing. In the French, one is left with the impression that the narrator so closely associates his life with those of other literary figures that their words come to him as second nature. I decided it imperative that such “doubling” remain in the English text without the intertextual adulteration seen in the Vivre me tue translation.

As one might expect, no single theorist or translator proposed resolutions for the many problematic aspects encountered in attempting to render Casa into English. Earlier theorists such as J. C. Catford have been discredited in large part by subsequent schools of thought; and neither can the oft-cited Vinay and Darbelnet be regarded as ultimate authorities on the subject. Languages and perceptions change; Vinay and Darbelnet’s work does not satisfactorily address the issues of slang and argot, or multiculturalism, and many of their translation procedures now appear dated. Yet the practices of more contemporary theorists such as Lawrence Venuti seem, in some situations, ill-advised. Venuti’s demands that the author’s rights to his work be limited – that translators “work to revise the individualistic concept of authorship”\(^{120}\) – would seem a transgression of artistic boundaries.

Venuti promotes a resistance theory of translation, whereby the reader is to be continually reminded that the work in question is a translation. Venuti advocates that this

\(^{120}\) Venuti, The Translator’s Invisibility, p.311.
be achieved through the use of non-standard syntax and jolting phrases, through ill-suited calques or a semi-literalness that would underscore "the foreign nature" of the original by producing a deliberate dissonance and peculiar locution. In Smâil's writings, the author achieves textual integrality by means of both fluid, consonant phraseology and "non-standard syntax and jolting phrases." To be sure, this unconventional wording is not employed to bewilder the reader, but is, rather, thematically essential to the story told. The unsettling adjustments that Venuti espouses would untowardly disrupt the semantic unity of Casa, la casa; in addition, such a practice could only erase Smâil's own discursive subversions. Therefore, I purposely disregarded the extremes of resistant strategies, so that the English-language reader may experience Smâil, if not first hand, as directly as possible, and without the seditious intervention of the translator. Thus, Round-Trip Barbès reflects the more transparent role of the translator – that method preferred by Cicero, Horace and St. Jerome, in ancient times, and Clifford Landers, Gregory Rambassa and Norman Shapiro (among others) today. Like these, the goal is that the reader discover first and foremost the author's intention as well as his intentional means of expression – not the translator's own imprint.

As research suggests, like literature itself, literary translation is also a highly individual act. Personal emotions, personal word choices, and even personal politics can come into play – and, alas, invariably do. The attempt to avoid target-language individuation thus made critical a strict adherence to three basic principles: consistent revision; persistent inquiry into evolving linguistic trends; and attention to contemporary, historical, and political realities that were thematically essential to the source work.
These principles enable the translator to more efficiently orchestrate the intricacies of language usage. In turn, such orchestration produces not a work of art – that is left to the author – but a frame which presents this art to others without, one hopes, in any way obstructing their view.

There is no room for the random in translation; but the honest translator can not deny introducing something of his personal style into the target work. Minimally significant word preferences – using “no one” rather than “nobody,” for example; or “nevertheless” for “nonetheless”; and regional usage such as “me neither” instead of the more standard “me either” – appear in one translator’s work when another, faced with the same text, may choose differently. The translator encounters enormous choices, but it is the reader’s reactions to these choices that in the end determine the “success” of the translation. If each translator were given the opportunity – or chose to take it – to explicate his decisions, literature in translation would assuredly gain a new appreciation from its readers.

What follows is a discussion of the choices and challenges met in the translation of Paul Smail’s Casa, la casa. The interdisciplinary perspective the translation required is evident on every page. To produce an eloquent English-language text was a process that included many stages – investigation, transformation, and countless revisions. These final decisions were seldom easy, and some, to this day, remain frustrating. Nonetheless, I believe the detailed linguistic and cultural knowledge gained through my work are benefits which will assist me in the multicultural classroom and as well as in future translational endeavors.
The limits of literal translation are considerable – as considerable as the definitions of literal translation are varied. In Casa, la casa, this became evident as early as line one. With which literality do I write? Does I begin with the classic, close fidelity of Moncrieff and Kilmartin – “For a long time I used to go to bed early.” Or does one open with the “down-to-the-comma” rendering of Lydia Davis from In Search of Lost Time: “For a long time, I went to bed early.” My selection of the former, “used-to-go,” stems from the fact that it is the more easily recognized of the two, the first line of the “Overture” of Remembrance of Things Past. And Smail is in all evidence playing to the gallery; here, I believe, “dynamic equivalency” has been attained as the receptor→message equation of the target text parallels that of the original. Meticulous literality, even the overly literal, does have its place as the first phase, if you will, in the translational process. It is invaluable in that it highlights to a great extent those areas in which the two languages differ, thereby alerting the translator that, if a faithful rendering is to be achieved, he must rethink and more than likely considerably repattern the language of the source text.

As with many literary texts, Smail’s work contains lexis, syntactic structures and other linguistic particularities that are remarkable even in the source language. In Casa, la casa, the reader frequently encounters idiomatic eccentricities, colloquial collocations, figurative expressions, elegant turns of phrase – and all of these often combine to create complex, spiraling, clause-laden sentences; sentences, that needless to say, cannot be readily duplicated in the target language. One of the first steps in the long, evolving

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123 Robert Bly, The Eight Stages of Translation, p. 17.
process of translation is to take hold of these unruly structures and bring them into English as faithfully as possible – faithful to the integrity of the original text but, as stipulated, with no unwarranted breach of the target-language linguistic system.

At times, untangling the French involved a relatively simple transposition in order to achieve a more natural English word order and balance, as in this line: “Mais je n'échapperai pas si aisément à la souriante perspicacité de la psychoanalyste.” (Casa, 64; RTB, 186) The “à la”/“from” substitution is obligatory; but this is not the only change necessary. “Souriante perspicacité,” perhaps a striking collocation in the original, is but strikingly laborious in English. Both the pitch and accentuation are unattractive as well. “The perspicacity of the smiling psychoanalyst” presents Paul’s plight more assonantly, while retaining the high register of his vocabulary, that “good French of Madame Solal.”

In another example of French syntax incompatible with that of the English, Smaïl’s hero walks “sous la pluie et le ruissellement des lumières du boulevard...” (Casa, 123; RTB, 240) I like the way the single “sous” joins the two substantives, reinforcing the image of rain and bright Christmas lights filling the air. Smaïl repeats the line, further impressing the image upon the reader. On this same rainy afternoon, lighted letters spelling “Merry Christmas” have fallen like shooting stars onto the pavement, again fusing the images of sparkling rain and liquid light. Alas, in English, one walks in the rain and under lights. Happily, the target language does allow for compensation. Whereas Smaïl writes “La pluie tombe toujours. Et la nuit déjà,” the translation corresponds: “Rain is falling and so is the night.” The simplicity of the phrases and the absence of punctuation poeticize the line for the English reader in a manner that recalls
Smaïl’s, yet in no way is the author’s linguistic patterning tempered. The rainy scene concludes in English as in French – in fact, the translation is a virtual word-for-word rendering. In the French, however, one notes overdone alliteration and end-rhymes that are incongruent with the word-picture evoked; English here marvelously captures the music of silent reminiscence:

*Je continue mon chemin sous les illuminations,*  
*encapuchonné dans du molleton mouillé et mes souvenirs.*

I continue along my way under the Christmas lights, hooded in wet wool and memories.

Many sentences of the original are intrinsically much more complicated than those cited above. To avoid omission or loose paraphrase in recreating faithfully the warmth and commodious wear of Paul’s chambers, the following passage called for extensive reworking:

*Il y a aussi un profound fauteuil avachi comme il faut, où lire.*  
*Mme Solal a épinglé dans le velours grenat élimé du dossier un mouchoir blanc damassé, qu’elle changera de temps à autre.*  
*Et elle renouvellera le bouquet qu’elle a posé sur le guéridon le jour de mon arrivée.*  
*(Casa, p. 58; RTB, p.180)*

Advancing word by word, one must weigh and assess. Syntactically, it is useful to begin as does Smaïl; “broken in just right” corresponds with the lexical register of the French “avanchi comme il faut.” However, “*où lire*” will necessitate expansion: The options are
“for reading,” “where I can read,” or “in which to read.” Only the completion of the passage can determine the most fitting.

The principal difficulties in the second sentence arise from the pairings of concomitant adjectives, the positions thereof, and the modifying clausal rhyme – in brief, all exemplify a syntax alien to English grammatical structure. The first change necessary is elementary: the adjectives will precede the nouns. Yet this in itself does little to make the line read more easily. Another difficulty is the word “épinglé.” Although “épinglé dans” is the equivalent of “pinned to,” English requires that the past participle be followed by its object, “chair.” French, with “le dossier” avoids a repeated mention of “chair,” but the translation can employ no such concise term. Again it becomes necessary to expand in order to express the full idea. In order to avert excessive length and encumbrance, the verbal deployment must also be rethought. In this sentence the two actions specified are the pinning of the handkerchief and the changing of this handkerchief. English syntax generally prefers to proceed in chronological order; here, however, the initial pinning of the handkerchief took place before the protagonist arrived at Madame Solal’s. Therefore, this épinglage will become the secondary action and the first, the time-to-time changing of the antimacassar.

“Et elle renouvellera le bouquet qu’elle a posé sur le guéridon le jour de mon arrivée.” French here has provided Smaïl a fitting synonym for “change.” English cannot do the same. “Replace?” “Renew?” “Freshen?” “Replace” connotes a degree of dissatisfaction; “renew” implies a mere revival of the wilted; and “freshen” suggests a selective, but partial, make-over. In the end I choose “change”; the repetition of the more

124 Vinay and Darbelnet, p. 103.
commonplace “change” also intimates the household routine of Paul’s Casablanca sojourn.

Another source-target divarication is the original’s intermingling of present and future tenses. In English, future usage would read as somewhat irregular, breaking the flow of the descriptive passage, perhaps stymieing the pace of Mme Solal’s habitual practices. Furthermore, the verbs of those sentences that immediately precede and follow this passage are each in the present tense. These concurring factors provide me ample justification to retain the present tense throughout. My translation reads:

There’s also a big armchair, broken in just right, in which to read. Every so often, Madame Solal changes the white damask handkerchief pinned to the threadbare red velvet which covers the back of the chair. And she changes the bouquet that she put on the side table the day I arrived.

These are some of the hindrances typically encountered when translating French into English. As noted, quite often lexical items of the French have no precise English equivalent. “Comme nous passons devant le consulat, elle me fait observer la trace grise que laissent sur le mur les demandeurs adossés là de l’aube au crépuscule.” (Casa, 100; RTB, 219) Evidence of a markedly different lexis, syntax and, of course, socio-cultural climate is here very much apparent. Smaïl makes use of “short-cuts” that do not exist in English. The subordinate conjunction “que” is the first: Its use permits the author to circumvent a series of complex clauses. In the original, it is understood that those leaning against the wall are seeking visas; Smaïl thus simply terms them “demandeurs.” As linguists have often observed, English is more concrete than is French, “calling for
more explicit, precise determinations, for fuller, more cohesive delineations..."125 The translation must employ "visa seekers," and with that the sentence seems already a bit verbose. By eliminating "devant" and determining "elle me fait observer" an option ("she points out"), I begin paring the translation. The participial "adossés," however, will require more thought: It is concise, polyvalent and, too, highly emblematic of a desperate people seeking a way out. ("Ce n'est pas un pays, c'est un bagne... un État totalitaire." 68/189) In order to imbue the substantive "visa seekers" with these same properties, the translation again necessitates expansion. Nevertheless, the rapid cadence of the two ready-made idioms chosen to complete the sentence smoothly disencumbers the English reading. In addition, by way of the expanded – but literal – interpretation of "adossés là," the first-world reader may better comprehend the realities of many third-world states. And this is in keeping with the political intention of the author. The translation would seem to serve the original well: "As we pass the consulate, she points out the gray stains left by visa seekers who lean there, backs to the wall, from dawn to dusk."

French nouns like demandeur above succinctly express that which in English often requires elaborate expansion. This is quite evident in words such as chômeur, sans-papiers, cheminot – all of which occur throughout Casa, la casa. To bypass the lexical ambage that target-language clarification would normally call for, the translator must often realign grammatical givens of the French. "Patronne" is another case in point: "Sa patronne attend qu'elle soit sortie pour répondre." (Casa, 65; RTB, 186) Not wishing to resort to something so awkward as "her female boss," nor the ambiguous "mistress," I opt

125 Philip E. Lewis, "The Measure of Translation Effects," p. 34.
for modulation; i.e., a change in the point of view.\(^{126}\) The subject is no longer "la patronne" but "the servant," and the translation becomes "When the servant leaves, she continues." Such a reading signals the relationship of the two women concerned without the pronominal confusion of a "she waits until she leaves" formulation. "Servant" being equally strong in its designation of position as "patronne," the English reading strives to evade unusual or heavy-handed terminology.

This very Smalian, very French sentence required much thought in order to translate effectively:

\[
\text{Je retrouve devant l'entrée de mon immeuble} \\
\text{la petite agitation nocturne habituelle: bicraves} \\
\text{et camés graves qui se fixent dans la tasse Decaux} \\
\text{dont ils ont bricolé le mécanisme ouvrant la porte} \\
\text{coulissante. (Casa 165; RTB, 276)}
\]

First, the French "retrouver" has no true equivalent in English. Conceivably, one might say "find" or "find again." The former, however, is here ideoelectally out of register and the latter, unnatural, un-English in tone; but Smail provides the solution. The adjective "usual" coupled with "find" renders the concept of repetition which "retrouver" comprises. The appositive which follows the colon is heavily laced with argot: "bicraves," "camés," "graves," "se fixent," "tasse." "Decaux," although not slang, may just as well be for the American reader — the name of the company that maintains the automatic toilets that have become a part of Parisian scenery is essentially jargon that few will understand. The proper-noun metonymy will have to be "translated" in the translation. And then, the syntax: complex substantive locutions, pronominal clauses,

\(^{126}\) Vinay and Darbelnet, p. 36.
adverbial and participial phrases, and a seemingly overabundance of adjectives: "petite," "nocturne," "habituelle," "graves," "Decaux," "coulissante." Smaïl is able to streamline and economize by way of "don't" – the English reproduction, "of which," would be much too formal for the occasion. However, without significant reformulation, the utterance becomes in English a monstrously prolix contrivance.

Ironically, these obstacles ultimately proved less formidable than first readings had foretold. Several rewritings and persistent rewording yielded the following:

Around the automatic toilet in front of my building
I find the usual evening get-together: dealers have
jerry-rigged the mechanism which controls the
sliding door so that junkies can shoot up inside.

Smaïl takes evident pleasure in harsh rhyme and highly familiar dialect. His words and phrases are clearly no mere description of the environing reality; they serve, rather, to "denote the spirit involved."¹²⁷ A notable degree of such "spirit" is to be had by way of the slick city speech and argot of metropolitan Paris that is strewn throughout the text; such usage is often as difficult as poetry when one attempts a translation. The French speaker, in addition, is said to possess a larger and more varied slang vocabulary than does his counterpart in English.¹²⁸ Smaïl’s slang has been conscientiously chosen primarily because it is unfamiliar to a large number of French speakers. Thus the selection serves two purposes. As it is often poorly understood, it, therefore, rings all the

¹²⁷ Rambassa, p. 3.
more true for the outsider – the ordinary French reader. Also it fosters the idea of an “other” language that unifies those speakers perceived as marginalized by society at large.

In recent years “le language des tècis,” as it is sometimes called by contemporary French linguists, has garnered much media attention; dictionaries and panel discussions of the “new French” abound. For the translator, however, the surest “resource” is the native “cité” speaker. For slang must first be “heard” properly if it is to be rendered correctly. In order to translate the often untranslatable, it was, of course, also necessary to study the forms and origins of both French and Anglo-American slang so that – at the very least – an approximate equivalency of the sociolectal register and vernacular variety of the source-language could be achieved.

One quite successful approximation occurs below. Here the newly-moneyed Paul – his Vivre me tue a resounding success – has made a brief return to Paris. In an effort to assuage the shame felt at abandoning his recently widowed mother (“for a dumb cliché”), he will now outfit her in the most expensive boutiques. To himself he thinks:

*Pour ta mère! Fringue ta mère! La manière friquée de la niquer!* (15; 140)

The two initial phrases easily become “For your mother! Dress your mother!” But how to handle this third? “Fuck your mother?” “Motherfucking?” Here “niquer,” the Franco-Maghrebian equivalent of “to fuck,” would allow the possibility of an *NTM-*
type\textsuperscript{129} US equivalent: “motherfucker” or some variation thereof. Smaïl’s wordplay is, however, at once more clever and less obscene. In reverting to the quaintly obsolete “frock,” the translation leads the reader to pause and wonder… and recognize that the gerund – “frocking” – so very much out-of-place, is pointedly signaling itself to be an overtranslation: “Mother-frocking as the way to guild over guilt.” In this way, the wordplay of the translation and the near “guild”/“guilt” homonymy offer the target-language reader essentially the same vulgarity and rhyme contained in the original. Yet, at the same time, the withholding of the more specific information permits responsive reader interaction to resolve any interpretive ambiguity.

Less ambiguous but equally difficult to translate is the great assortment of substantives the author uses to denote “Arab.” The French language, because of the country’s long, historical ties to North Africa, the more recent influx of North Africans into France and the present-day “intégration/intégrisme” polemic, comprises – and makes quite frequent use of – ethnic and politico-religious epithets that do not exist in English: “Arbi,” “beur,” “beurette,” “bicot,” “bougnoule,” “craini,” “fatima,” “fisseux,” “melon,” “nardène,” “Nord-Af,” “rat,” “raton,” “rebeu,” “sidi,” etc. Smaïl employs all of these as well as some of his own: “azizou,” “camaro,” “naa’tif,” “hadjitanes,” etc. The translation, of course, can not match in number, but does corresponds in register (“Arab,” “Beur,” “camal-jock,” “rag-head,” “desert rat,” “sand nigger,”); and corresponds in inventiveness as well (“bad ’rab,” “Meccamofo,” “ISFits”).

\textsuperscript{129} “Nique ta mère”
Such epithets are also used in the lighter passage that follows. Smaïl has playfully put together a potpourri of ethnic designations and dance names. He then ends on a rather stale note of *verlanesquery*:


The English – although unable to accomplish the ‘*pas de ... quoi*’ game – can just as playfully follow suit. The last dance, just as Smaïl’s above, highlights the “hokey” aspect of the interlude.


Admittedly, there are occasions when the translation illustrates what Berman has termed “loss of vernacular.” Paul’s delightful description of the less-than-delightful dinner with Jilali is one instance in which the spirit is not quite the same in English. The French “*il m’a alourdi trois plombes*” (88; 208) succinctly suggests time painfully wasted, using terms that are neither vulgar nor rare. The “hours” slang together with the

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weighty "alourdir" convincingly conveys this notion and also connotes something of the boorishness of Jilali. The translation can only resort to the standard formula: "wasted three hours of my time." Similarly, English has nothing that can match the expressive disdain of the French "putasser." "To prostitute myself" is both cumbersome and pedantic and the target-language rendering can not equal the contemptuous, plosive spit and sibilant hiss of the source-language verb. The option then, by default rather than any plausible choice, is "selling myself."

More daunting still is the search to find an equivalent for those idiolectal transcriptions of which Smaïl makes use. As Itamar Even-Zohar has pointed out, both spelling and pronunciation "may become semiotic carriers for one or another sense." In just this way the narrator's usage of "b'heuheurq" is significant on various levels. The "morphemic core" of the coinage is "berk" and the orthographic variant thereof, "beurk." While the English "puke" reproduces "berk" in both sound and image, it can not duplicate the French-style "Arabization," nor bring out the "beur" within. These phonetically functional properties are readily recognized by the source-text reader. As, there exists no situational equivalence in the target-language culture, no means of orthographical deformation could elicit the response of the original. Alas, in such cases, the translator must accept that the plurality of meanings cannot always be duplicated in the target-text.

When source-text orthographical modulation includes more than a single-word unit, the translation does endeavor to compensate in transcribing the author's semantic intention: "Un pauve beur qui défend les val'heurs h'républicaines!" (49; 172) The

throaty, aspirated /hl/ and various other mispronunciations suggest to the source reader the often illiterate, working-class Arab immigrant of generations past. Here, the “good-'ol-boy,” dialect of working-class, republican America is an apt substitution: “A pore 'ol Beur standin’ up for... the good 'ol republic.” In another instance, Smaïl’s stereotypical phonetic renderings serve to signal the more ominous intégriste ideology which is at present gripping portions of France’s Islamic population. “‘K’hourrection poulitiq’h,’ dis-je à la manière dérisoire de Fellag.” 133 (148; 262) The target text also makes use of “Arab-style” intonations – the heavily articulated /kl/ and the elongated, guttural /lr/: “Korrection Korrrranic.” Employing “Korrranic” whereas the original read “pouliitiq’h,” alerts the reader – in parallel fashion – that the conversation is not one concerning questions of American-style political correctness, but is of a much more fundamental nature.

Interestingly, it was not just Smaïl’s more arduously modified, familiar and/or argotic phrases that demanded “recasting,” a term used by linguist Peter Newmark. 134 As the novel is a first-person narrative, scenes are frequently presented in stream-of-consciousness mode, a free and introspective association in which sentences are left incomplete. Images of horrific violence are relived through nouns and adjectives but with few active verbs. “Et le couvre-feu, les rafles, les hommes les mains en l’air, poussés dans des bus à coups de matraque, sous les crachats...” (22; 147) 135 The sparsity of verbs in this breathless recital more emphatically impresses upon the reader the documented atrocities of those October evenings of 1961. To maintain the grim

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133 Mohammed Saïd Fellag, Algerian-born comedian living in exile in France.
134 Newmark, page 31.
135 The trial of Maurice Papon, chief of police at the time of the killings, began during this period in 1997; his pictures appeared on posters at kiosks and in newspapers throughout France. Viewing a such poster here spurs the narrator’s memories.
effect (and to clarify the antecedent) this listing must be somewhat reordered in the translation: “And then the curfews, the raids, the men with their hands in the air, spat upon, pushed into buses with the blows of nightsticks.” Obviously, ending the sentence with “under the spittle” would be both fatuous and anti-climatic. The more forceful wording and logical repositioning of the verbally graphic “spat upon” aid to preserve that atmosphere the author achieved in French.

Smaïl’s paragraph continues with more non-sentences describing the events of that fall:

*Les soirs de ratonnade, la peur au ventre quand on devinait la masse luisante des cirés noirs au fond du boulevard désert et qu’on se demandait s’il était moins risqué de revenir sur ses pas ou de continuer son chemin. Quand on devait traverser la Seine, qu’on pressait le pas jusqu’à l’autre rive en pensant aux frères noyés du haut de ce pont mais en se retenant de courir pour ne pas se faire remarquer.*

Smaïl’s usage of the indefinite “on” efficiently determines this third-person “other” – the Franco-Algerians then living in and around Paris. Yet at the same time, the reader realizes the protagonist to be expressing his solidarity, his kinship with Papon’s many victims. In order that Smaïl’s personalization of the impersonal “on” affect the English reader in the same way, the translation here makes use of a process Genette refers to as “transvocalization.”¹³⁶ The revisited history of that unforgettable period progresses thus:

The evenings of Arab bashing, the fear in the pit of the stomach when one knew that at the end of

¹³⁶ Genette, p. 292.
the deserted boulevard, a mass of black-clad MP’s was waiting... And one would ask himself whether it would be less risky to turn around or to continue on his way. When you had to cross the Seine, you quickened your pace to reach the other side, but held back from running so as not to attract notice.

Above, “one” becomes the English personal “you” – a “you” which like the French indefinite pronoun encompasses first, second and third persons, both singular and plural.

That Paul’s prose is influenced by his readings is proclaimed on page one. As mentioned, a host of well-known literary phrases have been recycled throughout his work. This predilection for intertextual appropriation is not limited to classic authors. Perhaps it is Apollinaire who best delimits Smaïl’s playfully pleonastic sites of sampling: “...les prospectus les catalogues les affiches qui chantent tout haut/Voilà la poésie ce matin et pour la prose il y a les journaux.”¹³⁷ Fittingly, Smaïl asserts much the same vis-à-vis Rimbaud:

\[ J'aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de portes, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires... \]

(Casa, p. 27)

Nothing is too insignificant to escape the author’s gaze. The proper names – of people, places and things – aid to more colorfully illustrate almost every page and enhance the autobiographical aspects of the protagonist’s environment. Singers and song titles, shops, stores, portrait studios, billboards and business cards... streets, métro stations, government organizations, political and social associations – all emphasize the

contemporary reality of the novel. Where possible these references figure in the translation. The target-text reader need not be intimately familiar with the cultural topography of the Francophone sphere to realize the extent to which Paul is attached (or detached) from the world around him. Therefore, only on those occasions in which the proper name obscures the author’s semantic intention does the target rendering differ from that of the source. Assuredly, the American reader will have no trouble with the French description of night-club security: “...ces Mr Propre moulés dans des Fruit of the Loom.” (105; 224) But the same can not be said for those mentions of the “ANPE,” nor for Diop’s mother’s “allocs” nor for the Smaïlian “sefer” (“SFR”), etc. The majority of target-language readers are unlikely to comprehend the initials of the national unemployment service, nor the truncated “allocations familiales” nor, of course, the author’s own acronym for “Société Française de Radiotéléphonie” – and neither are these significations apparent from the context. Thus, in the translation, “inscrits à l’ANPE,” “toutes ses allocs” and “sefer” become “on unemployment,” “all her welfare checks” and “Nokia” respectively – no real change in meaning, no excess detail necessary. A mere substitution can be both accurate and effective.

Source details (names and/or allusions to cultural icons) give currency and a decidedly up-to-date texture to Smaïl’s work. As the protagonist vehemently complains of the demands that society places on best-selling authors, he slams those television programs on which such authors are obliged to appear. The French reader, of course, recognizes the references: Les Jeux de Vingt Heures, Bouillon de Culture, etc. He no doubt easily pictures the shows’ hosts, the usual guests and the typical questions asked; and understood immediately is that Paul wants no part in this promotional circus of
popular culture. The American reader is at a disadvantage – but concerning the specifics only, not the general antipathy Paul feels. Left out in the translation are the names of the programs as these would be meaningless to the English-language reader. Indisputably, “Games at Eight,” “Culture Stew” and the like would be unnecessary domestication of the source-language references. The manner in which the context is presented enables the reader of the Round-Trip Barbès translation to envision this kind of program much better for himself.

Other references call for different solutions, as in the case of “Ce qu’on appelle le service après-vente, dans l’édition comme chez Darty.” (44; 168) Again, the French reader easily recognizes the much-vaulted after-sales service of Darty, a major electrical appliance retailer; but the store name would be meaningless in the translation. Peter Newmark has stated:

> The better the translator understands the referential meaning, the more easily he can ‘transfer’ it to language and the larger the numbers of linguistic variations he can use.\(^{138}\)

This is largely true; yet in the example cited, “Darty,” the options of the translator are restricted even though the referential meaning is clear. Unlike the earlier TV listings, “Darty” is a functionally relevant component of the sentence – the proper name completes the thought. Just as above, name-for-name substitution is impermissible, and here for two reasons: first, because it would inevitably mean bringing in an “outside” cultural reference that could only be out of place; and second, because Darty is indeed

\(^{138}\) Newmark, page 134.
well-known and well-respected for the topic at hand – after-sales service. Any other store name would not have the intended effect. In order to safeguard the meaning, the translation reads: “There’s what’s called after-sales service in publishing, just like in retailing.” The gerundial balance of “publishing” and “retailing” provides the English reader an analogy equivalent to that found in the original with neither undue distortion nor domestication.

The target-language reader is by no means deprived of proper-name usage. In fact, the translation can easily compensates for any loss sustained. “Il leur faut une cause par saison. Comme pour le prêt-à-p’…” (51; 174) The writer gives the translator an opportunity to introduce a proper name, Smail style: “They’ve got to have a cause per season. Just like Dior…” The prêt-à-porter allusion is maintained; the name “Dior,” famous and French; the line thus retains its original savor. In another instance Paul mocks a television actress: “…une riche blondasse aux cils koholés à la truelle.” (84; 203) The translation, in substituting a drugstore brand make-up, clarifies “koholés,” presents much the same picture: “…a rich blonde floozy who applies her Maybeline with a trowel.” The pejorative suffix “asse” (“blondasse”) calls for the amplification of “blonde”; hence the addition of “floozy.”

Often the author’s style reveals a fondness for wordplay. Recreating this play challenges the translator’s multi-cultural awareness and linguistic ingenuity. First, the contextual function of the French must be determined; next, the question arises as to whether a correlative usage exists in English. Also problematic is that after lengthy deliberation, wordplay ceases to amuse, since it ordinarily requires rapid consumption, seldom lingered over. Yet duplicating the wordy wit of the original is a ponderous
process, whether this wit be sophisticated or, as in many incidences, quite banal. And too, as seen, Smaïl’s playful turns of phrase frequently incorporate more than one language as well as a wide variety of registers therein.

Consider the title of the novel, for example. As the protagonist admits, Casa, la casa is first and foremost a paronomastic paradox, and one that melds irony and (dis)illusion – two of Paul’s prevailing sentiments. Like Vivre me tue, Smaïl’s second title also contains an oxymoronic twist. The “Casa” that is Casablanca is not, after all, “casa,” the home to which the hero had sought to return. One may argue that this title is not necessarily more meaningful in French than it would be in English, and, therefore, retaining it in translation would achieve the same effect. Nevertheless, the more insightful target-language title better echoes both the protagonist’s experiences and his acute sense of linguistic perspicacity. Round-Trip Barbès evokes the duality of Paul’s nature and of his voyage. Although his trip is not literally to Barbès and back again, it is his departure from the old neighborhood that ultimately allows him to see it anew, almost as a visitor discovering it for the first time. Paul remarks that he had to leave Barbès in order to arrive. Thus his trip, both the literal journey and the psychological quest of self is complete, has come full circle. Tellingly, the author reveals as much by way of an habile juxtaposition, a juxtaposition that is intereposodic, interlingual, and intertextually intersemiotic:

*Ce moment miraculeux: boulevard Barbès...*  
*“Les vrais paradis sont les paradis qu’on a perdu.”*  
(Casa, last words of chapter 4, p. 32; RTB, 156)

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139 However, English speakers do not refer to Casablanca as /kaza/. Nor does English, unlike French, possess words formed from this same Latin base (e.g., “caser,” “case,” “casanier,” etc.).
Et c'est l'Orchestre National de Barbès qui joue lorsque j'arrive... et qui joue Salam! Je suis accueilli en mansour: cris, vivats, youyous... Joie. (Casa, first words chapter 5, p. 33; RTB, 157)

In a subsequent chapter, Paul again comments on this chronic Casa/casa echolalia: "Casa, la casa! Ce n'était qu'un jeu de mots. Je suis parti sur un jeu de mots." (63; 185) The wordplay, untranslatable, must, however, be brought into the English. The exasperatingly sardonic "Home Sweet Home" drives home this overwhelming sense of deception, this "connerie éclatante," the ridiculous notion that "Casa" could ever be "casa." By replacing the French jeu de mots with the English cliché, the translation highlights those words used in the original – highlights their very meaninglessness: "Home Sweet Home! It's just a silly cliché. I'd packed up and left for a dumb cliché."

Another transfer of wordplay from French to English occurs here: "Tu t'étais cassé? On allait te casser!" (50; 173) Smaïl, with the familiarly employed "casser," furnishes the rhetorical question and its homophonic response. The translation closely approximates the impact of the original with the double employ of the US-slang "ass": "So you hauled ass out of there? Well, they'd have your ass!"

Smaïl finds situations for wordplay no matter how serious the scene at hand – such wordplay, in fact, may serve to foreground essential thematic elements of the narration. Over couscous one evening Moh, Sami, Diop and Paul (Algerian, Jewish, African and Beur, respectively) discuss Islamic fundamentalism and the restricted rights of women inscribed in Sharia law. Paul notes that the wine they are drinking is a
"graves." The denomination is not gratuitous; it sets up a wordplay whereby one of the diners reacts to the somber subject of conversation with the exclamation, "Graves!" (148; 261) In standard usage this signifies "serious" or "grave"; in slang, the adverbial "beaucoup," "a whole lot." This seemingly simple pun challenges the translator to find an equivalent. The literal translation of "grave" ("grave") would miss the point, the register and the subtlety. However, a generic rendering of the allusion will permit a pun on the resulting formulation. In classifying the wine as simply a "red," an appellation perhaps unfamiliar to the English reader is removed; a reasoned modification of the French participial "buvant" makes way for the target-language "downing" (in this very casual situation — "entre hommes" / "dans un coucous de la rue des Poissonniers" not at all inappropriate). The translation now reads, "...downing a bottle of red...," and the remark that follows reactuates the verb to punctuate the topic at hand — the oppression of women: "Down with it!"

In another passage Paul displays his scorn for contemporary "social-lite" and social-intellectual activists; the setting, a benefit for Algeria: "Très classe... Un tiers mondiste, un tiers mondain, un tiers immonde!" (51; 174) French lexis and Smail’s lexical amalgamations signify that between the worldly and the wicked there is little else but the exploited third-world. Co-opting this third is just a question of syllabic affixation. There can be no literal translation; but the resounding "one-third" and the resonating and alliterative /w/ combine to connote the French depiction of the frivolously fashionable and fashionably dispicable guests: "Really chic... One-third wired, one-third wicked, one-third world." It is especially in situations like the above that the translator realizes the aptness of Rambassa’s remark: "As we are not writing our own material, we are still
unsure whether or not the word we have used is the best one, either for meaning or for sound or for ever so many reasons." Here the translation does stive to maintain the reiterative assonance, the wordplay, the bitter sarcasm and, of primary importance, the signification of Smaïl’s observation – that nothing will benefit Algeria until one is able to freely address the underlying issue of religion.

More mundane realities also incorporate cleverly effective wordplay, as in the case of the strike of railway workers in which Paul’s father takes part.

“Papa est toujours au piquet?” demandait Daniel, indigné de ce que notre père soit puni pour une faute qu’il ne pouvait pas avoir commise… (171; 282)

“Is Papa still being picketed on?” asked Daniel, indignant that our father should be punished for something he couldn’t have done….

Daniel, Paul’s little brother, reveals his confusion. His question links the picket line to a common schoolroom punishment – that of having a misbehaving child stand in the corner (“mettre un enfant au piquet”). English does not have the same homonymous references. Yet the translation intimates Daniel’s age and little-boy befuddlement by “confusing” two target-language concepts that share a similar root: that of the picket line and the condition of being picked on – this latter, a situation children generally know well. Daniel’s “picketed on” echoes the French and adequately conveys the child’s sense of concern for his father’s situation.

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140 Rambassa, p. 7.
While innovative, indeed inventive, wordplay adds dimension to Smail’s narrative, the author also very skillfully makes use of more formal elements of style. Tone, mood, flow – that atmosphere so realistically evoked in Casa, la casa must be recreated for the target-language reader. Smail’s writing demonstrates an exceptional sensibility for sound and image. His prose contains many of the attributes of verse: metrical patterning, elegant cadence, elaborate rhythm, ornate assonance, smooth alliteration and musical rhyme. The opening pages of the novel hint at the extent of the translator’s task. On page one, the author restructures Melville: “le crachin de novembre,” as he says, “recited from memory.” This becomes in translation “the dismal drizzle of November” – also loosely based on lines from Moby Dick. (12; 137) For Paul, this allusion – Ishmael recounting “the spleen” of days passed on land¹⁴¹ – brings back more memories; this time, those “Splendors of Morocco” of which had been built his hopes for a better life on distant shores.

Clair-obscur d’une rue couverte jonchée de tapis,
ombre légère des palmes qui éventent un mur en
pisé rose, vent des sables, indigo du ciel, fantasia,
souk, erg, cédrarie, oasis, minaret sous la lune, nièges
de l’Atlas, remparts où se brise l’Atlantique… (26; 150)

The chiaroscuro of a covered street strewn with rugs, soft shadow of palm fronds fanning a wall of pink adobe, wind from the sands, indigo sky… fantasia, souk, erg, forest of cedar, oasis, moonlit minaret, snowcapped peaks of the Atlas, ramparts where break Atlantic waves…

¹⁴¹ Herman Melville, Moby Dick, p. 1.
The painterly "chiaroscuro" introduces a stream of post-card views, the faraway worlds of a lyrical paradise. The sentence continues with poetic images of *Al Maghreb* – a bountiful land of unmatched beauty. The translation makes copious use of many of the author's stylized wordings. Phrases spill over with alliteration and assonance: streets strewn with rugs; soft shadow, moonlit minarets…. Colors fuse: light/dark, white, pink, violet, lush greenery, indigo and Atlantic blue… The airs are fragrant: palms, spices, scented woods, desert winds, ocean breezes… All is warmth and richness – richness, calm and leisure as envisaged by a would-be voyager, a voyager perhaps best described by Baudelaire, "joyeux de fuir une patrie infâme."¹⁴² As may be noted, the translation on rare occasion departs from the original, but these departures are in syntax more than in any other perceptible measure.

1) "Cédraie" necessitates expansion; and clearly, "forest of cedar" is preferable to "cedar grove" (although this latter would have been, in syllable count, more approximate).

2) The adverbial "sous la lune" has been replaced by "moonlit," the adjective + noun construction more readily conveying to the English reader the impression sought in the French.

3) A literal "snows of the Atlas" would be somewhat imprecise, and certainly for the reader unfamiliar with North African geography. "Snowcapped peaks" clarifies the image all the while retaining the poetized cartography of the original.

4) The subject-verb inversion of the concluding phrase ("where break Atlantic waves") parallels the French usage and is congruent with the overall tone of the descriptive flow. The addition of "waves" is, in English, required for a better "concretization" of

the image.

“Erg,” omitted in an earlier draft (chiefly for its very “ergness”), has been reincorporated; “erg,” from the Arabic “areg,” designates a vast area of rolling dunes. The translation, then, as does the original, uses a loan-word to further facilitate “une rencontre avec un autre imaginaire.” As linguiste Marie Treps elaborates, “La motivation profonde de l’emprunt est d’ordre poétique… une langue rêvée.”

Paul’s pristine remembrances of childhood are often contradicted by the more ordinary realities experienced abroad; and perhaps nowhere more poignantly nor with more simplicity than in a closing scene from his Moroccan sojourn:

Voilà tout. De retour à Gueliz, je la fuxe d’une télé-boutique. Telsat, International & Télécopie, le kiosque est à un carrefour sur la route de Casablanca. Accroupi devant, un petit berger en haillons, pieds nus, garde trois chèvres qui broutent l’herbe entre les plaques de ciment. C’est le Maroc, Daniel! C’est le monde. Il n’est pas tel que nous l’avions imaginé. (146; 260)

“Gueliz” is the modern sprawl of ancient Marrakech; the phonic quality of the word recalls that of the author’s much used “guedé,” the verlanesque apocope of “dégueulé.” This latter well articulates the reader’s response to the above depiction of Morocco, a Morocco painfully ravaged by the woes of globalization. The use of the ampersand also

143 Treps, Marie. “Le français, langue d’accueil.” La Gazette de la Presse Francophone, August 2003, no. 112.
would seem to be deliberate, emphasizing the irony of the “international telex-boutique” located in a no-man’s-land: neither Marrakech nor Casablanca, but somewhere on the road to. Perhaps “the global hegemony of English”\textsuperscript{144} makes it the perfect language in which to render Smail’s paragraph; certainly Gueliz is no more attractive in the target-language than it is in the French.

And that’s that. Back in Gueliz, I fax it from \textit{Telsat, International & Telecopy}, a kiosk on a corner of the highway to Casablanca. Crouched in front of it, a little shepherd, barefoot and in rags, watches over three goats nibbling the grass that grows between the cement slabs. This is Morocco, Daniel! This is the world. Our world. It’s not quite the way we had imagined it.

“Kiosk on the corner of the highway to Casablanca” – the long expanse of nothingness is emphasized by the delayed alliterative /\textit{k}/ of Casablanca. The vaguely unpleasant assonance of “crouched” continues the kiosk/corner alliteration. And then enter the little shepherd… “barefoot and in rags.” That the syntactic order of the adjective and adjective-phrase appositives is reversed in translation is stylistically significant. It permits a natural, unadorned reading that heightens the plaintive nature of the scene. “In rags and barefoot” (or “in rags, barefoot”) – to again cite Jorge Luis Borges – would be considered “a literal translation but hardly a true one.”\textsuperscript{145} The French “brouter” is normally rendered “to graze” but here again, the translator must proceed with caution. “Nibble” is the appropriate equivalent in that its use averts too rich an alliterative turn: “Three goats grazing on grass that grows…” In addition, “grazing” would connote a

\textsuperscript{144} Venuti, \textit{Scandals of Translation}, p. 23.

\textsuperscript{145} Borges, p. 67.
sufficiency of grass which is clearly not the case. Like the no-doubt malnourished shepherd boy, the goats, too, must glean through the urban rubble in order to survive. “Morocco, Daniel! It’s not quite the way we had imagined it.” Touchingly ironic also is the manner in which this, the chapter’s end, parallels that of the earlier-seen “Splendors of Morocco” – the postcard pictures Paul and his brother had tacked to their bunk beds back on Rue Ordener.

Disillusion and the forever-lost splendor of time gone by infuse the very description of Paul’s Casablanca lodgings:

À l’intérieur, les boiseries moississent, les carrelages se dessertissent, des ventilateurs poussif brassent en vain au plafond toute cette tristesse moite. (57; 180)

This poetry can be preserved in the English:

Inside, the woodwork molds, tiles are loose or missing, and dusty ceiling fans uselessly stir so much damp sadness.

The cadence of the repeated /s/ evokes the gentle whisper of the colonial ventilation. Here the translation should attempt to recreate the melancholic atmosphere of the original. The collocation “damp sadness” wistfully echoes that of the French; and the assonant rheme of the sentence seems to close out any possibility of even a seasonal renewal. Casablanca: decrepitude and ruin; what might have been, just as that which was, can be nevermore. Of note also is the echo of dialogue and décor – word images
that both explain and imply the fractured lives and put-away dreams of those living in the North African kingdom:

\[ Cassés, tous les gens bien que je rencontre à Casa le sont plus ou moins. \]

\[ Casablanca est construite sur une faille... \] (109, 112)

“Broken – the decent people that I meet in Casa all are, more or less.” “Casablanca is built on a fault line…” (227, 229) But for Paul, there is an escape: the celebrated return to the mother country; his round-trip, complete; Barbès regained:

All at once a bit of New York, a dab of Africa and a little of Third-Republic France... Parisian gray and checkered Tati pink... (27; 151)

The world is his... and home again, is presented as such: “\textit{Barbès est une teuf.}” Barbès, a moveable feast, non-stop and full of life. Fittingly, the story closes in a medley of verse, an extravagant mix of mediums and languages: Rimbaud, “Casablanca,” Rachid Taha’s “\textit{Ya Rayah}” and, in the French of Charles Trenet, “\textit{Douce France}.”

Assuredly, a work such as \textit{Casa, la casa} demands a somewhat conservative approach in translation, i.e., a method that more readily permits the rich exoticism and linguistic diversity of the original to be perceived and justly appreciated in the target-language rendering. The reader of \textit{Round-Trip Barbès} will recognize from those elements inherent in the narration that he is reading a work in translation. I saw no need to point out or exaggerate the literary and cultural divide by translational implementation
of stylized contrivances or "foreignized" target-language grammar and syntax. Literature in translation may serve to draw attention to cultural differences; yet at the same time it proves that language is not a barrier to multi-cultural understanding – that literature does indeed transcend linguistic borders.
Selected Passages of Casa, la casa in Translation

Although it is interesting to follow a translator’s personal experience with a text and the decisions made in the course of the translation, scholars, in particular, may be more appreciative of the insights into the linguistic differences hereby brought into focus. Indeed, few other situations offer such a detailed look at language use across cultures: The literary translation reveals the fascinating, changing face of language that is perhaps best seen when the two texts – the original and its translation – are closely compared. For this reason, I have included below passages of Casa, la casa (in the French) followed by the English translation. Again, I chose to follow the analytical format used by Vinay and Darbelnet – that model seen earlier in my critique of the published translation of Vivre me tue. The advantage of the Vinay and Darbelnet model is that it permits the reader to look more easily at smaller units of translation (grammatical elements, syntactic groupings, individual word choice, etc.), while retaining full cognizance of the passage as a contextual whole. Thus, the reader is better able to evaluate the translation’s fidelity to the message, style and tone of the original’s transmittal.

The paragraphs chosen here demonstrate that, albeit in some instances a literal translation would have been technically possible, it would have necessitated inordinate sacrifice of mood, disruption of pace and, over the course of the entire chapter, would unduly distort the reader’s perception of the original. Here Peter Newmark’s maxim regarding the relation of word to idea is especially pertinent: “Normally, one translates
ideas, on which words act as constraints." The translator should not be obsessively concerned with the word at the expense of the thought contained therein.

The overriding atmosphere of this chapter is one of frustration and rage. To set this tone, the narration consists of choppy – often incomplete – sentences, frequent outbursts and invectives, sharp accusations, heated condemnations. Clearly these are not the carefully constructed phrases of a reasoned, calm individual, but a first-person panoramic, at once meticulous and all-encompassing: This is Paul, bitterly reliving the day-to-day torments of both Morocco and Paris. The analysis that follows the texts attempts to show that the resulting English translation serves the author’s intent, maintains his style and respects his original tone.

**French Text: Casa la casa** (pp. 117-120)

*Coup d’oeil à l’écran. Je relis les dernières lignes d’un chapitre précédent:*

*Mlle Khadija:*

-- Vous avez de la chance, vous avez les mots, vous.

*Et Diop:*

-- Tu devrais reprendre la boxe.

*Diop a raison. Ecrire ne me suffit pas. Je n’ai pas épuisé ma colère contre Jilali, les mots n’y pourront rien. Je dois retourner chez Monsieur Luis. Eh bien, puisque je suis libre de mon temps, j’y vais! Je bourre vite au fond de mon sac marin une serviette, mon short, mon survêt… Je claque la porte, je cours au métro.*

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146 Peter Newmark, p. 135.
Berbès-Roch’houa, Place de Clichy, La Fourche... Le trajet que je fis la première fois en chausettes, trainé par mon père – voir pages 30, 31, 32 de Vivre me tue. Avenue de Clichy... L’impasse. L’escalier.

Sueur, sciure, cire, cuir, résine, embroc, je retrouve l’odeur. Et la lumière sale qui tombe, oblique, des vasistas. Et le bruit, les rafales de jabs sur les punching-balls, le sifflement des cordes à sauter, la ferraille rouillée des casiers au vestiaire... Mais personne ne semble avoir remarqué l’absence de l’auteur pendant six mois. Monsieur Luis se contente de dire:

--Hiens! he revoilà. H’as séché.

Et je comprends seulement au bout de quelques secondes qu’il ne commentait pas ma disparition mais le fait que j’ai maigri au soleil de Casablanca, que je me suis asséché. J’étais mi-lourd amateur, me voici passé dans la catégorie moyen-amateur: moins de 75 kg.

Quant à Farid:

--Salut, taha!

Gamal:

--Salut, taha!

Taouif:

--Salut, taha!

Juste une frite de deux doigts dans la paume, et basta. Rien à branler, ce qu’il peut glander du gland, le Paulou, s’il a du gaz ou pas, ce qu’il fout de la main que je pisse... Oualou!
Chacun pour soi, au temps pour moi. Des questions? Aucune. Aucune curiosité. Je n'aurai pas à leur cacher quoi que ce soit, je n'aurai pas à improviser, éduer ou mentir. Mais, quoi! cette indifférence ne devrait pas me déplaire. Elle a du bon, aussi. Avec eux, aucun effort à faire pour garder mon quant-à-moi. Souvent, au Maroc, je me suis dit que je ne supporterais jamais de vivre à la marocaine, constamment sous le regard des autres, en proie à leur attention, à leur sollicitude. A la fin, ce regard sur moi et cet excès de prévenances me rendait fou. Je pensais: si la liberté est au prix de l'indifférence, je préfère l'indifférence. Cette gentillesse un peu collante des gens m'était devenue intolérable. A Marrakech, au milieu de la Médina, je me suis mis à aboyer, hargneux comme un roquet de petit blanc francaoui:

--Vos salamalecs... Putain! Foutez-moi la paix!

Oui, moi. Honte à moi.

J'aurais préféré l'indifférence? Ici, je suis comblé: je pars, je reviens six mois plus tard... "Salut, taha!" Point.

Je ne me fais pas bander les mains, j'enfile des mitaines en cuir et je choisis le bag le plus lourd de la salle – l'Everlast, qui est plus lourd que moi. Je le bourre mentalement de tous mes sujets de rage: la rumeur, l'attachée de presse qui m'a chié dessus, les bouffons qui m'accusent d'avoir un petit nègre, les baveux racistes... Le dégueulesse qui a titré un papier sur moi. Les pépins du melon... Et l'autre: Au bon beur! L'éditeur qui a répondu à Sami que mon bouquin était trop intelligent pour avoir été écrit par un beur... La haine! Mais aussi, en vrac, le Makhzen, le roi du Maroc, Nous... Les Amis... Les pourris à la Jilali Ammour... Ceux qui se font douze plaques au noir avec dix. Les marabouts des Poissonniers, qui abusent de la crédulité des femmes
comme Zaïa... Les dealers de La Chapelle, qui fourguent des doses gratos à des gosses de quinze ans pour les accrocher... Les massacreurs en Algérie... Les religieux, leurs complices, qui peuvent condamner à mort un écrivain pour un mot de trop mais n'ont jamais trouvé un mot pour condamner les massacres, comme le dit si bien Moh... Les Fondamentalistes... Le Front national, les cafetiers des bleds autour d'Aix-en-Provence... Le patronat... Les plans sociaux... Les directeurs des ressources humaines... Le CAC 40... Cette pub atroce qui j'ai vue dans le métro, en venant: Tout le monde peut devenir cyberman, cliquez ici! Tout le monde, oui!


**English Text:** *Round-Trip Barbès* (pp. 235 -237)

A glance at the screen. I reread the last lines of an earlier chapter:

*Mademoiselle Khadija: You’re fortunate. You have a way with words.* (1)

*And Diop: You should start boxing again.*

Diop’s right. Writing isn’t enough. I haven’t exhausted my rage against Jilali. Words don’t do anything. (2) I’ve got to go back (3) to Mr. Luis’s. No problem – (4) and
since my time is my own, I go. I quickly shove a towel, shorts and sweats into my duffle bag... (5) I slam the door – run to the métro. (6)

Barbès-Rochechouart, (7) Place de Clichy, La Fourche... The first time I took this route I was in my socks, dragged by my father – see pages 30, 31, 32 of Life Kills Me. Avenue de Clichy... The back alley. The stairs.

Sweat, sawdust, wax, leather, resin, liniment (8) – the familiar odors again. (9) And the dirty light that falls at an angle from the skylight. And the noise, the smacks of jabs on the punching bags, the whistling of the jump ropes, the rusty squeak of the lockers...

However, (10) no one seems to have noticed the six-month absence of the author.

Mr. Luis only says: “Huh! He’z back. ’Chu dried out.”

It takes me a few seconds to understand that he’s not commenting on my disappearance, (11) but the fact that I’d lost weight in the sun of Casablanca – I’ve withered a bit. I was a light heavyweight, now I’ve dropped down to middleweight class: less than 165 pounds.

As for Farid: “Wass’up!” (12)

Gamal: “Wass’up!”

Taouif: “Wass’up!”

Just a quick slap of the palms (13) and basta. They could give a fuck... wouldn’t give a fuck (14) with what’s up or what’s fucked up with Paul Smail. Whaloo!

Every man for himself here and the same goes for me. Any questions? None. No curiosity. I wouldn’t have to hide anything from them; I wouldn’t have to improvise, elude or lie. But damn! (15) Such indifference shouldn’t bother me. It has its good side too. With these guys, it’s no effort to keep up my guard. (16) In Morocco, I’d often tell
myself that I’d never be able to live as a Moroccan, constantly under the eye of others, constant victim of their thoughtfulness, of their attentions. In the end their scrutiny and excessive concern drove me crazy. I thought: If liberty comes at the price of indifference, give me indifference. (17) The rather suffocating kindness of the people there had become intolerable. In the middle of the Medina in Marrakech, (18) I started snapping like the nasty little lapdog of some white-ass French guy. (19)

“Enough of your ever-solicitous salaams, fuck! (20) Leave me the hell alone!” (21)

Yes, that was me. Now I’m ashamed.

Did I say I prefer indifference? (22) Here I’m overwhelmed with it: I leave, I come back six months later... “Wass’up!” Period.

I don’t have my hands taped, I put on the gloves and I choose the heaviest bag (23) in the gym, heavier than I am – the Everlast. I mentally cram it with all the subjects of my rage (24): the rumor, the press agent who spread that shit about me (25), the fools who say I didn’t write the book (26), the racist drivel... The prick who titled his article: “Mutterings of a Maghrebi”... And the other, “Bitching Beur.” The editor who told Sami that the book was too intelligent to have been written by a Beur... Screw them all! (27) But also, while we’re at it, (28) the Makhzen, the King of Morocco... We... The friends... Slime (29) like Jilali Ammour. The scum who scheme ten grand into twelve. Marabouts (30) who abuse the trust of women like Zaïa... La Chapelle dealers who hand out freebies (31) to fifteen-year-old kids to get them hooked... The killers (32) in Algeria... The religious and their accomplices who can sentence a writer to death for the superfluous word but who can’t spare a word to denounce the massacres, as Moh says so well... The Fundamentalists... The National Front, the café owners in the towns around Aix-en-
Provence... Employers... Social policies... Directors of human resources... The stock market (33)... That irritating advertisement that I saw on my way here: *Anyone can be a cyberman! Click here!* Anyone, yeah.

I start punching. One punch, then another. Jabs, left, right, uppercut, uppercut, crossecut, direct, left, left again, jabs, jabs, left, right, left, left, right, left, uppercut, uppercut, uppercut... Le Pen – ‘llah! Hassan II – ‘llah! Jilali Ammour – ‘llah! (34)

**Comparative Analysis of Texts**

(1) *vous avez les mots, vous*: you have a way with words

A literal translation would have been meaningless here. The remarkably simple and slightly clichéd sound of the English phrase corresponds well with the original. By way of the interior alliteration – the lingering /w/ (“way”/“word”) – the English ably compensates for the echoed subject and tonic pronoun of the French. Whereas the procedure usually recommended by Vinay and Darbelnet is to reproduce French tonic emphasis with the auxiliary use of “do” (e.g., “You *do* have a way with words.”),147 such emphasis here would be false, connoting surprise or perhaps even coyness on the part of the speaker (Mlle Khadija).

(2) *les mots n’y pourront rien*: words don’t do anything

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147 Vinay and Darbelnet, p. 342.
Translators and theorists often speak of the English-language tendency to "actualize the referent" – to (re)designate, re-concretize an element and/or statement previously introduced. Above the French adverbial pronoun "y" indicates that Paul is referring to the previous clause of the same sentence: "Je n'ai pas épuisé ma colère." The actual English equivalent would then be "Words won't do anything about it/that." Although Paul explicitly acknowledges that writing can be a remedy for rage, the literal target-language translation would surely read as too "literary" – not at all in Paul's voice at present. Throughout this chapter, the protagonist is expressing annoyance and irritation. Words, he states, can not satisfactorily alleviate his frustrations and so he here brusquely decides that a bout of boxing will. In order to convey this desire for a quick and immediate change of pace, the translation makes use of short, somewhat terse phraseology, eliminating those objects and prepositions which are unnecessary for clarification. In this way the staccato of the original sequence is preserved. Here, the trimming of the French in translation allows the English to respect the rapid cadence of the scene.

(3) Je dois retourner: I've got to go back

The French verb devoir presents several options in English, and although this sentence could have been rendered as "I must go back," or "I need to go back," or "I have to go back," etc., the use of "I've got to go..." is at once more colloquial and, with its gutturally reiterated /g/, is more forcefully expressive of the idiolect

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148 Philip E. Lewis, p. 35.
the speaker here assumes, better reflecting Paul’s new-found resolve to retake control of his situation.

(4) *Eh bien:* No problem

As there is no one, fixed equivalent for this French interjection, the translator once more has various options. In this case, however, “no problem” seems the obvious replacement, given the setting, the speaker’s assessment of his predicament and his calm, yet determined, realization that he, after all, is master of both his time and fate.

(5) *Je bourre vite fait au fond de mon sac marin une serviette, mon short, mon survêtement.* I quickly shove a towel, shorts and sweats into my duffle bag

A syntactic rearrangement is here required. As Vinay and Darbelnet point out, English word order more often represents the actual order of an action, whereas French “goes directly to the goal.”

Structurally then, in French, both the stuffing and the *sac marin* precede the contents. A similar word order would be, if not unnatural, exceptionally maladroit in English. The omission of the possessive adjectives in the translation serves to underscore the quick, almost instinctive actions of the speaker.

In designating his gym bag “*sac marin*” – rather than the more usual “*sac de sport*” – Smaïl unobtrusively continues the nautical motif which runs throughout *Casa, la casa.* (Paul’s rooftop studio is his “cabin”; the studio’s single

149 Vinay and Darbelnet, p 103.
window, a "porthole.") The term "sac marin," however, is to the French reader not nearly so uncommon as is "sea bag" (or even "navy bag") to the reader of Round-Trip Barbès. Employing an incongruency of this order in the English would be disruptive, and could in no way evoke the iconographic richness of the original. "Duffle bag," admittedly a "choix entre une accentuation abusive et une neutralization forcée," must suffice.

(6) *Je claque la porte, je cours au métro:* I slam the door – run to the métro

In the original text, the repetition of the subject in each clause highlights the hurry, the urgency for action which has so suddenly overtaken the protagonist. This same sense of urgency is best recreated in English by avoiding the "I" repetition, which, in turn, provides reason to replace the comma of the French phrase with a dash.

(7) *Barbès-Roch' houa:* Barbès-Rochechouart

The French work demonstrates a form of wordplay of which the author is quite fond. Here, he mimics the accent of poorly educated, working class, first-generation North African immigrants (the majority of whom were, in fact, "Berbers" from the poorer, predominantly rural areas of the Maghreb.) Such a "sociolectical" rendering of the métro-station name loses strength when carried over into English as it represents an overlapping of specifically Francophone linguistic spheres. In this line, the narrator notches off the stops as he hastens

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150 Genette, p. 296.
toward his destination. This, after all, is Paul’s old neighborhood and he effortlessly recites the station names from memory. It would seem counter to this ease and familiarity to ask that the English reader recognize (and comprehend) the “personalized” spelling utilized in the French. Linguist J.C. Catford, in a chapter entitled “The Limits of Translatability,” deems a rendition of this type to be “culturally untranslatable” as that which is functionally relevant for the source-text reader is entirely absent from the target-language culture. Translator Antoine Berman knowledgably adds, “An exoticization that turns the foreign from abroad into the foreign at home winds up merely ridiculing the original.” Albeit negligible, above is a classic example of “cultural untranslability.”

(8) Sueur, sciure, cire, cuir, resine, embroc: sweat, sawdust, wax, leather, resin, liniment

Smaïl very boldly exploits the sounds (and spellings) of the nouns above to pungently evoke the odors of the gym. In addition, the repeated assonance, rhymes and eye-rhymes add to the familiarity Paul feels on his return to this environment. While the English translation is correct, it can not duplicate the original’s phonetic and orthographical patternings.

(9) je retrouve l’odeur: the familiar odors again

The simple addition of the prefix “re” alerts the source-language reader that the protagonist is back in familiar territory. Obviously, this can not be accomplished with the English “refind.” However, together, “familiar” and “again” tell the

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reader that these odors are ones that Paul has known before. In making “odors” the subject of the English phrase (versus the first-person pronoun of the French), the line retains its brevity and, in addition, the sense of suddenly evoked remembrance is enhanced.

(10) *Mais personne ne semble avoir remarqué*: However, no one seems to have noticed

The shift of register ("*Mais"/"However") of the translation makes more emphatic the author’s highly pronounced consternation that his lengthy absence from the gym has provoked so little curiosity. Otherwise, the English is a literal rendering.

(11) *Je comprends seulement au bout de quelques secondes qu’il ne commentait pas ma disparition*: It takes me a few seconds to realize that he’s not commenting on my disappearance

The French sentence is long and rather complex. The translation, while comparatively long, is nevertheless more direct and is also more natural to English word order. As in note 6 above, the French structure attains the goal – in this case, understanding – at the outset. The English, conversely, first calls attention to the time it takes to achieve that understanding. The change in word order is thus chiefly a normalization of target-language syntax and does not result in any significant change in meaning.
(12) *Salut, taha!*\textsuperscript{153} Wass’up!

This deceptively simple salutation presents an unusual challenge. The remarkably brief and impersonal greeting of his former friends and sparring partners has left the protagonist nonplussed. The English greeting must be equally brief, impersonal. The young inner-city boxers speak a modern, unconventional lingo that is not found on all levels of society; it is, nevertheless, up-to-date and flexible. The English formula used corresponds to young speakers in a casual setting. The gym is where Farid, Gamal, Taouif, et. al., come to work out. Literature and the literary are here notably out of place; the author’s presence is of no consequence whatsoever – “*basta.*” The translation makes use of an expression currently popular among the youth of certain social sectors to convey the perceived unity of the group expressed by “*salut taha*” of the original; the more unconventional spelling keeps the tone off-hand and informal. The slurred “wass’up” highlights the total indifference that a more standard – and more clearly enunciated – “What’s up?” would not; and it is this very indifference that Paul finds so disconcerting.

(13) *Juste une frite de deux doigts:* Just a quick slap of the palms

The English vernacular here is adequately suited to the French in both tone and register. Other, more colorful expressions do come to mind; however, most of these would seem out-of-character and sound somewhat outdated: A “high-five” or “gimmie-jive” kind of jargon would have called to mind a scene from the 1970s. Instead, the “quick slap” image conveys the cool attitude of indifference

\textsuperscript{153} A dialectical liaison and assimilation, (“salam” → “saha”), producing “salu ’taha.”
displayed by the work-out regulars without bringing to mind any of the associative, outdated vernacular.

(14) *Rien à branler*...: They could give a fuck...

Scholar Philip Lewis aptly describes the translator’s dilemma in reproducing a paragraph such as the above:

[The author] plays masterfully on the associative, poetic resources of French, generating articulatory structures that a reader of the French can hardly miss. He thus creates...many a problem for the translator. To put it approximately, we might say that the global problem is to determine what to do about anaphoric structures (association of terms via parallel placement in sentences, paragraphs, and so forth), and anasemic formations (association of semes or terms in serial relations often via word play), whether to stress retaining them of to let them lapse...154

One almost feels that with his “*Rien à branler*” tirade the protagonist is taunting his translator, daring him to come up with phrases that match in form, wordplay, semic association and alliteration. Smail’s rant begins with the familiar expression “*rien à branler,*” which, although somewhat crude, is equivalent to “could/couldn’t care less.” Nevertheless, in the passage above, the correlating English would be more aptly rendered “could/couldn’t give a fuck.” The verb “*branler,*” however, also presumes its reflexive form: “*se branler.*” “*Doigts,* “*la paume,*” “*glander du gland*” and then “*ce qu’il fout de la main que je pisse*” – undeniably the author has worked in every available phallic familiarity in order to activate all conceivable semiotic markers that “*branler*” may entail.

154 Philip E. Lewis, pp. 50-51.
English has neither these same references nor reflexes. The translation, therefore, is obliged to achieve this “thematic coherence” and syntactic parallelism by way of the repeated “fuck.” The expression “fucked-up” and its variations provide rhythmic echo and alliteration. Hereby the signification of “s’il a du gaz ou pas” is approximated; and the idea of “is he okay or not?” may then be rendered as “what’s up with him?” – Do they care what’s up/what’s fucked up with him or not? The “what’r’what’r’Whaloo”\textsuperscript{155} assonance that ends the paragraph just as convincingly connotes the cold indifference with which Paul’s presence has been acknowledged.

(15) \textit{Mais quoi!}: But damn!

Interjections such as this one are perhaps the most common source of option for a translator; and here there is certainly a wide array of variations available. Nevertheless, an examination of the context clarifies the author’s intent. In the setting above, Paul is both provoked and bewildered. The English interjection thus needs to capture these sentiments completely and without emphasis.

(16) \textit{garder mon quant-à-moi}: keep up my guard

The author here employs the archaic “moi” form of the compound noun, “quant-à-soi.” In addition, he has altered the “fixéness” of the locution (“\textit{rester sur son quant-à-soi}”), substituting “\textit{rester}” for “\textit{garder}.” In doing so, he plays on the plurality of the substantive’s semantic thrusts. As noted, the coolness of the

\textsuperscript{155} \textit{nothing}
setting necessitates this "chacun-pour-soi" defense. With the turn of phrase above, Smail shrewdly remarks upon the ease of keeping his cool his distance, his own (ac)counts; and, in continuing the terminology of the ring, "keeping up his guard." These same significations should just as easily be read into the English translation.

(17) je préfere encore l'indifference: give me indifference

Here the translation conserves not only the content of the original utterance and reports this content in a manner which is more meaningful for the American reader. In fact, it would almost seem that the author is providing the translator compensation for shortcomings observed elsewhere. Smaïl's "price of liberty" serves as the perfect set up for the famed Patrick Henry liberty/death rejoinder: "or give me..." indifference. Thus the translation provides the kind of historic allusion in which the author delights, even if the French does not offer the same. Moreover, rendering the line as such is in complete congruence with the mood of the speaker as he despairingly ponders the extremes of social interaction.

(18) A Marrakech, au milieu de la Médina: In Marrakech, in the middle of the Medina

A word-for-word translation is appropriate and, furthermore, preserves, verbatim, the alliterative qualities of Smaïl's own phrase.

(19) je me suis mis à aboyer, hargneux comme un roquet de petit blanc francaoui: I started snapping like the nasty little lapdog of some white-ass French guy
The English reverts to the vernacular in a measure equal to that of the French. The position of the adjective ("nasty"), immediately preceding the noun, gives the line a more natural English word order. A perhaps more conventional encountered translation of *aboyer* — "to bark" or "to howl" — seems contextually weak. "Snapping," on the other hand, connotes the shrill ill-temper of both a "nasty little lapdog" and, at this point, the protagonist in the midst of the buzzing market-place in Marrakech. "Francaoui" also posed some difficulties. The somewhat vulgar "francaoui" calls for something harsher, something pejorative. Using "some" and "white- ass" as modifiers may resolve the problem. This is an example of a situation where several changes — verbal modification, word order, adjective expansion, etc. — must come into play so as to provide an accurate reading of a passage in which many of the source-language terms have no true target-language equivalent.

(20) *Vos salamalecs...Putain!: Enough of your ever-solicitous salaams, fuck!*

There is no doubt that the long historical ties between France, North Africa and the Muslim Middle East have given rise to the familiar "salamalecs" employed above. The onomatopoeic rendition of the standard Islamic greeting "Salâm alaîk" (Peace be upon you"/"Shalom") that is repeated and impressed upon friends, associates, etc., has no fitting equivalent in English. Indeed, in French its use is somewhat offensive as *salamalecs* are considered annoying and, for the most part, meaningless; and all the more so if, as is the case here, the motivation is to persuade the recipient to purchase a carpet, a bit of copperware or perhaps
some hashish. For the English linguistic lack and the “regional specificity” of the French, an Arabic substantive is called for in the Round-Trip translation. Thus, “salaams” appears in the Arabic. The term, however, must be clarified in order that the English-language reader understand the reasons Paul finds such solicitation so upsetting. “Your over-the-top salaams,” “Your syrupy salaams,” “Your insincere salaams” – none of these has the resonance of authenticity needed. “Your fucking salaams” sounds much more authentic but falls short as to meaning; the alliterative “solicitous” does not. Although it may initially appear excessively formal, it – perhaps all the better for this very formality – signifies the overly polite, overly dramatic and exasperatingly lengthy demonstrations of everyday “brotherhood.” The abundant sibilance of the modified borrowing, “solicitous salaams,” hopefully compensates for the deprecating nature of the familiar French term and, too, add that necessary measure of “snap.”

(21) Foutez-moi la paix!: Leave me the hell alone!

Here, another strong interjection in the French text. This time Paul’s sense of desperation is even more pronounced. The angry plead of the source text would be misinterpreted by the typical English rebuke, “Fuck off!” This latter, in the instance cited, is overly strong and would suggest a “Paul in control of the situation,” when in fact the protagonist is bemoaning his being virtually at the mercy of others, unable to do anything for himself – unable, even, to be simply left in peace.
(22) *J’aurais préféré l’indifférence?*: Did I say I prefer indifference?

The speaker transforms the sentence into an informal question. While the same intonation pattern exists in English, it is relatively weak — and even more so in a written text. Forming the question with “did” is less ambiguous and more forcefully points up the rhetorical nature of Paul’s statement. The tense, for a number of reasons, has also been changed. First, using the present tense links this line to the earlier one — that one containing Paul’s “Patrick-Henry” declaration. There, the French text used the present tense; here, the past of the conditional in order to emphasize the irony of the repetition. In the target text, this is unnecessary and cumbersome as well. The simple question echoes the earlier declaration and should underscore the circumstantial contrasts of the response that follows.

(23) *Je choisi le bag le plus lourd*: I choose the heaviest bag

French boxers more commonly speak of *le sac de boxe*, not “*le bag*.” Therefore, Smail’s choice of term presents a problem for the translator. The protagonist is again using his own *français* and, thus, the translator confronts a situation that can not be duplicated in the target language. By using the standard term, “bag,” in English, the “strangeness” of the foreign-language term of the French has been removed; conversely, inserting the source-language “*sac*” into the English would not produce the same effect and, in all probability, would be construed as an instance of poor editing on the part of the translator.
(24) *Je le bourre mentalement de tous mes sujets de rages*: I mentally cram it with all the subjects of my rage

The English "shove" used to render "bourre" earlier (see point # 6) there soundly captures the vigor and speed with which the protagonist prepared his departure. General expectation would suggest that the verb be translated the same here. The employ of "cram" at this point, however, more signals the overwhelming surge of "everyday" provocations that have so incensed the protagonist here. That "cram" so very pointedly – almost Lichtenstein-like – picks up "Whaam!," "Bam!," (as well as "slam," "ram" and "damn") presents this uncontainable rage by even more visual means.

(25) *qui m'a chié dessus*: who spread that shit about me

Unlike French and other Latin languages, English does not use the source-language scatological terms in the sense employed above. Whereas "the press agent who insulted me" unquestionably lacks the vigor and vulgarity of the original, harsher interpretations such as "dissed," "slammed," or "trashed" seem almost "codified" i.e., marginalized amongst English speakers in a way in which "*chier dessus*" is not among the French. The translation incorporates the same scatological reference but rephrases it in a manner more befitting the semantic expectations of the target-text reader.

(26) *Les bouffons qui m'accusent d'avoir un petit nègre*: the fools who say I didn't write the book
Without a doubt, French culture is not so “advanced” in matters that concern political correctness. In a society in which “tête de nègre” is still commonly used in referring to chocolate-meringue pastries, Smaïl’s object of “avoir” is, here, to be read as more or less standard French. The target term “ghostwriter,” limited as it is to the sphere of publishing, would seem almost derisory – too literary – in the context above. Admittedly, the source language is much more forceful and assuredly more derogatory. The English could perhaps be written “the buffoons who accuse me of having someone else write my book” – but such a reading is woefully weak when compared to the original. By adopting the grammatically negative – “that I didn’t write the book” – the translation maintains Smaïl’s tone of vehemence. However, eliminated is his angry “accuse.” A possible “who accuse me of not writing the book myself” would be unsatisfactorily long and overly complex for the situation; such wayward wordiness can not here be justified.

“Bouffons” in French is wonderful for its vocative spitting and its comically contemptuous punch; nevertheless, “buffoon” in English is too rare and playful of a noun – certainly amusing, but hardly insulting. “Fools” contains both the fricative /ʃ/ and the drawn-out /u/ of the original, and, more importantly, has lost none of its loathsome “qualities.” In this way, it very nearly mirrors the author’s own selection.

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(27) *La haine!*: Screw them all!

No literal translation is possible for this “*djeun*” interjection – an expression so new, writer Erik Orsenna has remarked, that it has not yet made its way into French dictionaries.\(^{157}\) Although the definite article is used to modify the noun, the reader realizes this “hatred” is directed at the large but undefined number of people and conventions that the protagonist finds so vile. The general but emphatic “Screw them all!” adequately spells out this ire both in principle and in practice. The English-language expression, while certainly not new, is neither neutral nor dated and is in conformance with the speaker’s idiolect.

(28) *en vrac*: while we’re at it

Smail’s word choice here is standard French, yet of a variety that can not be conveniently replicated in the translation. The author’s “*en vrac,*” denotes both “a loose assortment of items” and “items that are identical (or so very similar) they can be grouped as a whole.” Thus the usage is literal as well as figurative – another manifestation of authorial vernacular which is highly suited to the context. There is no single term in English that contains the “dissimilar similarities” of the plurisigniant “*en vrac.*” Nevertheless, “while we’re at it” closely parallels Smaïl’s tone and appropriately denotes his intended meaning.

(29) *Les pourris à la Jilali*: Slime like Jilali

This line required a grammatical shift. “*Pourris*” is the nominalization of “rotten”; but “rotten” functions less well as a noun in English, and, alas, there is

no existing paronym which would here be satisfactory. Thus, the search for the synonym; because “scum” so adequately (and so alliteratively) commences the succeeding sentence, the translation makes use of “slime” here. Like “rotten,” “slime” is concise, connotes disgust and, furthermore, intimates the contents of the line that follows, aptly implying, as it does, those “slimy dealings” that so annoy Paul (“scum who scheme…”). In the French text, the rhythm and rhyme of the “pourris à la Jilali” phrase operates to more boldly underscore the similar nature of the two substantives. Of course, in English, the phonic echo and tuneful twist can not be reproduced in like fashion. All the same, words like “slime”, “sleaze,” “scum” and “scheme” are not only assonant associates, but, in addition, readily call to mind the ignoble traits of Jilali Ammour. The grouping of these words presents Jilali just as he is pictured in the French, and, at the same time, permits the English reader to revel in a bit of Smail-style wordplay.

(30) Les marabouts des Poissonniers: marabouts

Smail’s Casa is replete with references to specific places (streets, métro stations, etc.); undeniably such references contribute to the reader’s perception of the novel’s setting, enabling him/her to more knowledgeably situate the action. Such references also serve to reinforce the Barbès-as-home-turf motif. For these reasons, Round-Trip Barbès – much more often than not – retains proper names in the translation. The more general condemnation of marabouts contained above is, however, not subtractive. The retention of the place name in English would have needlessly dilutied Smail’s outburst of wrath.
(31) *des doses gratos*: freebies

Here is an example of Smaïl’s syllabic rhymes that must be sacrificed in the English. Although the alliterative echo of the phrase can not be preserved, some of its familiarity is retained through the use of the English-language slang “freebies.”

(32) *Les massacreurs en Algérie*: The killers in Algeria

Unlike French, the English language possesses no standard noun to designate one who massacres.\(^{158}\) A murderer is one who murders; an assassin assassinates. There is no true cognate that can adequately qualify the perpetrators of the ongoing slaughter to which Paul is making reference. The target language is reduced to employing a verb that lacks the brutal and bloody impact of the Algerian reality. “Killers,” however, perhaps – chiefly for its understatement – does draw attention to the here-to-fore ignored internecine atrocities of Islamic Algeria.

(33) *Le CAC 40*: The stock market

As noted in example 33 above, Smaïl makes frequent use of proper French names – in this case the specific name of the French C.A.C. market index. His precision here may not be based on a strict desire to use the official term; in French a more general “la bourse” would be too vague in this context. In the English, “the CAC” would be, of course, unacceptable foreignization of the text. Conversely,

\(^{158}\) “Massacre” is generally considered to by substandard usage. *Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “massacre.”
the US equivalent “Nasdaq” (or “Dow Jones”) would read as an outlandish – and incongruent – form of domestication. For the target-language audience, the more general “stock-market” seems the appropriate translation.


As seen in point 25, the author here again reverts to an Anglicism, but above, one that is regularly employed in this context in French. Also of note is the preponderance of left-handed hits, another time underscoring Smaïl’s difference, underscoring, too, his many differences with his imaginary targets. Singled out in particular in this, the chapter’s concluding phrase are Le Pen, Hassan II and Jilali Ammour – figures which for Smaïl are highly representative of oppression, corruption or both. The percussive “‘llah” expelled by the boxer after each of these three final blows may be literally interpreted as “Allah.” Smaïl thus emphatically strikes out at the aforementioned persons/characters in the name of Allah. Once again the author’s views on difference/indifferentism are powerfully expressed in this stylized, interlinguistic attack. The protagonist’s “‘llah!” rhythmically punctuates the English in like manner. The interjection, italicized as in the French, was introduced/explicated in an earlier chapter.

The cathartic punches permit the protagonist to leave the gym on a happy note. “Je suis ressorti, le cœur plus léger, heureusement fatigué, et j’ai commencé à marcher d’un bon pas…” is the sentence with which the succeeding chapter

159 As discussed, Smaïl’s theme of left-handedness is highly significant; this trait is overtly signaled to the reader at various points in Vivre me tue, in Casa, la casa and in Smaïl’s subsequent work as well.
begins. The bout of boxing has paid off; Smaïl has regained control. Now he can return to the writing of his narrative – back to his Barbès garret.

That translation should necessitate so many transformative operations would seem contradictory in nature. It is quite ironic that such extensive “processing” is needed to bring the source text to the target reader. Nevertheless, it is evident that languages are such that, in order to convey equivalent meaning, the message of one must undergo substantial linguistic reconfiguration in the other. The line-by-line comparative analysis above serves to demonstrate that, even though the translator must often depart from a strict adherence to the grammar, lexis and syntax of the original, it is possible to remain faithful to the author’s intent.

Writing in the French newspaper, Libération, Philippe Lançon describes the author of Casa, la casa this way:

Il crie, bouge, insulte, attaque, mord l’oreille, donne des coups hauts et bas... Il agresse le monde de la répétition, politiciens, auteurs, critiques, télé-troncs, démagogues de tous acabit. Il se venge des éditeurs qui le rejettent et qu’il énerve. L’encre lui monte à la tête et accélère son rythme verbal.¹⁶⁰

Indeed, this portrayal applies to the novel’s hero as well. The Round-Trip extract analyzed emphatically actuates these very characteristics. Having read both Lançon’s

critique and Smaïl’s Casa, the reader will undoubtedly note the similarities – and so, I hope, will the reader of the translation. In bringing the words of the protagonist into English, I have tried to adhere to that portrait contained in the original. I have made no attempt to render him more sympathetic, more eloquent, and, above all, more “foreign.” My goal was that his English read not as a foreigner would speak, but as Smaïl himself speaks in French. The translation that follows provides the opportunity to see whether this may be achieved.
Paul Smaïl

CASA, LA CASA

roman

Round-Trip Barbès

A Novel

(translated by James Kilpatrick)
The south brought back the unhappy events of my childhood, the summers’ sadness and despair...

Arthur Rimbaud*

*All translations my own unless otherwise noted.
For a long time I used to go to bed early. But last year, working as night watchman, there were entire months when I didn’t sleep before dawn, in order to write *Life Kills Me*. What I live, I write; what I write, I live. The last chapter of my book saw me taking off – No! saw the hero of the novel taking off – for Morocco. *I* left for Morocco only when the book was finished. I was, on paper, just a few weeks ahead of that call to another life, to adventure, to the return to the country of my ancestors. And yet I knew, on paper – just as I knew in my heart – that there would be no miracle. There can be no return to a place one has never been. For us, there is no Promised Land. I was without illusions. I had guessed I was making a mistake, but I also knew that it must be done; it was written. It was written! I was in that moody state, the state of my double, my brother,¹⁶² Ishmael, from the first page of *Moby Dick*... It’s my thing for lifting the spirits, for shaking off the doldrums. Whenever a bitter grimness sets my mouth, when my humor is a damp, dismal November, when I find myself seeking rest in funeral parlors and following the procession to the grave – it is then I tell myself that it’s high time to take to the sea... I’m reciting more or less from memory here. I don’t have Melville’s book at hand; I’ve just come back and haven’t had time to unpack the boxes put away this summer before leaving for Casablanca.

Back from Casa, back home... back to square one in the dismal drizzle of November. I didn’t find the white whale, and I didn’t find myself either. I found no peace there, nor even the relief for which I was searching. I know nothing more about

myself – or so very little it seems – and I almost lost myself. Lost myself in melancholy as one gets lost in the labyrinth of the *medinas*\(^{163}\) or the sands of the desert. It was only a mirage.

Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve just landed at Paris Orly. Please keep your seatbelts fastened....

Return to the mother country! Return of the prodigal son! I’d left as a Beur author, my manuscript fought over by several publishers; I come home a French writer. A French writer! Yes, Mama, your son! The son of Yacine Smaïl. The grandson of Ahmed Smaïl, who barely knew how to write his name in French but who died for France just the same... A French writer! Like Proust, Mama! Like Balzac, like Stendhal, like Voltaire, like Diderot... And so very humble, you understand, still so modest! For modesty, no one can outdo me!

But there’s a rumor in Paris that I didn’t write my book, that I don’t even exist! And others say I’m a one-hit wonder, that after *Life Kills Me*, I’m finished. Well, Paris, here I come!\(^{164}\)

\(^{163}\) The *medina* is the old, Arab quarter as opposed to the newer, European-style sections of North African cities.

Mama is there at the arrivals window, her sweet, simple sorrow veiling her like a *hidjab*\(^\text{165}\) since the death of my father. Her eyes luminous with tears, she smiles and, lightly, discreetly, her fingertips gesture tenderly as if comforting a child... Her natural modesty, her instinctive delicacy. She's beautiful. I'd never before thought of her as a beautiful woman, nor even as a woman, but only as my mother.

She looks very chic in the black skirt and jacket that I'd bought her, on a whim, when I made a quick trip to Paris at the end of August. I remember not wanting to see her distress, not wanting to know that she needed me but was hesitant to ask for anything. And so I resolved the question as one would when one has more money than heart or imagination. Shame on me! *H'chouma alik!* My father would have said as if spitting on the ground. Yeah, I had money, the publisher’s advance; so I did the shops with Mama, the expensive boutiques that she’d never have entered had her son not authored a very promising first novel, had he not insisted and taken her firmly be the arm, had he not forced her, almost.

"You're hurting me, Paul!"

I pushed open the door for her. Ah, seeing my face in that mirror, where one could also read, backwards, *Victoire!*\(^\text{166}\) ...that blasé expression of those who have always had money. Now I thought, what a prick! What an ass! Five thousand francs for a little black jacket? Oh, that's nothing, Paul, nothing at all... half of ten, that jacket, and

\(^{165}\) A headscarf worn by women in North African and other Muslim countries.

\(^{166}\) House of haute couture, Place des Victoires, Paris.
only the jacket! Pauly! For your mother! Dress your mother! Yeah – mother-frocking as the way to gild over guilt.

She murmurs: “It’s too beautiful… It’s too nice for me, Son.”

Obstinate, I met her look without saying a word. With the complicity of the salesgirl, I discreetly removed the tag so that Mama wouldn’t know the price.

She at last consented to try on the suit. The black one, of course. Not the color of mourning, but the color of elegance. And naturally the salesgirl thought so. Besides, I was also wearing black.

Mama came out of the dressing room hesitantly, hardly daring to look at the lady reflected in the mirror. Unbelieving, she bites her lips. Then her pout slowly changes into the hint of a smile; her “Oh no, I can’t” becomes a quiet “yes, yes.”

“Perfect,” the salesgirl whispers. “And it needs no alterations.”

But on what occasion would she wear the black suit? And for whom, if not for me? In my honor, when she welcomes me on my return from Casablanca… My definitive return. But when?

“Mama, I’m here.”
Also there to welcome me are my aunt Zaïa and her intended, Jilali. Zaïa, so long faithful to the memory of her murdered husband Mehdi, has always had the common sense to avoid any sort of arranged marriage. She’s recently become engaged to Monsieur Ammour, a rich grocer, newly widowed. *Ouili ouili ouil!* Grocer in the original sense of the word: a wholesale importer of spices and foodstuffs. And if I spell out Monsieur, it’s because he really is a Monsieur, this Ammour with two *m*s. Two *m*s and more than enough stomach, a showy smile and a self-important air. And plenty of heavy gold: ring, pinky ring, tie clip … And the matching gold visa card. Plus the cellular, plus the black Mercedes, parked underground, at level minus one of the airport lot.

“Yes Sir! Not a Class A, but top of the line. And doesn’t turn over either!”

“Ah! Right off the bat, making trouble. And he’s hardly even touched down…”

“It’s OK, Zaïa, it’s OK.”

We get into the back seat, Mama and I. In the luxurious, leather-scented obscurity, we remain silent because we have too many things to say. She places her hand on the armrest; I take her hand and caress it without her even giving a hint of objection as she would have done when my father was alive.

Night falls. The sky is heavy gas, mauve-colored and noxious…. But the beauty of that sky! The highway rises in a gentle slope toward a traffic sign whose lighted

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167 A common yodel used by North African women.
168 The first-year models of the Mercedes A-Class “economy” compacts were notorious for overturning easily.
letters read *Smooth* – smooth is the traffic; smooth, the night; smooth, life! Smooth is this happiness that seizes me so suddenly. So intoxicating, so light. I’m back. Nothing has been said. Nothing has yet been written. Everything can begin again, joy or pain. My life here.

I catch myself humming that Charles Trenet tune, *Sweet France*. I sing it in the throaty style of *Carte de Séjour*,\textsuperscript{169} with the heavy irony of Rachid Taha.

\begin{quote}
*Douce France,*

*Cher pays de mon enfance,*

*Bercé de tant d’insouciance,*

*Je t’ai gardée dans mon coeur…*

\end{quote}

[Sweet France,

Dear country of my youth,

Cradled in happy tranquility,

I kept you in my heart…]

I keep time with my fingertips on the armrest. Then I loudly pick up the refrain, exaggerating the immigrant-son accent:

\begin{quote}
*Dzouce Frh’aince, Tcher pays de mon h’enfaine…*

\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{169} The group, whose name translates as “Residency Permit,” was made up of North African immigrants; Algerian born Rachid Taha was the group’s lead singer.
In the rearview window, Monsieur Ammour gives me a worried stare. Zaïa, her palms turned up toward heaven, silently implores the Great and Merciful. Mama, more indulgent, smiles at her refound son.

_Bhércé de tant d’hinzouciaince._
_Che t’ai gh’ardée dans mon cuheur..._

Down to the left, a mirage, a hazy cluster of light – Paris! Where I was born. The Eiffel Tower, blunted by fog, but golden just the same, like some souvenir of Paris… Ah, the beauty of Paris!

Then the highway enters a long tunnel accented the whole way by pillars on either side.

"_Ouili ouili ouili,_ slow down, Jilali!" cries out Zaïa. "Slow down! Think of poor Diana, oh, that poor girl. So beautiful she was! And how she had to suffer. The queen, a heart of stone, a real stone. Slow down, I told you… oh the poor girl! But, that millionaire boyfriend, I never liked him. Brash, showy! Jet set, you know. Common! Plain common!"

"An A-rab, huh." I said.

Zaïa turned around…. Angry? Amused? Both angry and amused. Surprised also to hear Mama laugh.

"There he goes! What did I tell you, Jilali? My nephew! Always a troublemaker… Insolent, with no respect. Even as a little boy, he talked back. Always
thought he was better. The little stinker! He'd read everything, he understood everything. That's why he was first of his class!"

"Zaïa, please....!"

"But you were first in your class, weren't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"And now you're a first class best seller, so there!"

"You're exaggerating! Number twelve, number thirteen, maybe..."

"One time you were number nine! On a list of ten! And those others, humph! And it's not their first book. And they've been on TV."

I assume a bit of false modesty, I whistle. Understood is "Let's change the subject!" And the truth is I really don't want to talk about it.

In a love-smitten tone, Monsieur Ammour permits himself to observe to his sweet gazelle, his heart's joy, the light of his life, the pearl of his Orient: "You're smothering him Zaïa, azīza."¹⁷⁰ He's just come back from a trip. He's probably tired, he..."

Monsieur Ammour is more perceptive than I'd have thought. My aunt, however, pays no attention: "What would you like to eat?" she asks me, interrupting him.

"I don't know," I say. "Steak and French fries... Really good fries. Not soggy, and not too greasy."

¹⁷⁰ dearest
“So there!” Zaïa cries out victoriously, retaking the advantage and taking us, Mama and me, as witnesses to the misjudgments of her Jilali. “What did I tell you, Jilali? So what did I tell you? He wanted to take us to a Moroccan place.”

“Chez Ryad. It’s classy and very good and with plenty on the plate.”

“So I told him: ‘Think about it, Jilali, think! Couscous, tajine, Paul has probably had it up to here!’ ”

“One eats less couscous and tajine in Casa than in Paris, you know!”

“Who are you kidding?”

“I swear! There are more Moroccans in Paris than in Casablanca…”

“But I know you! I told him, ‘Paul is going to want a steak and French fries…’ Didn’t I say that? Didn’t I?”

Jilali: “Yeah, yeah…”

“I said: ‘If you’re set on a fancy restaurant, Jilali, you must take us to Charlot or Wepler. There you have steak, you have fries, you have seafood…’ You’re driving too fast, Jilali! We’re not in that much of a hurry to die. You’re driving too fast. Medhi, meskin,171 took me once to Wepler and blew his entire end-of-the-year bonus. I remember how intimidated I was…”

Me: “You, intimidated?”

“Ah, what would you know? It was the first time my Mehdi took me out. And Arabs weren’t too well thought of back then…”

171 “poor soul”
“And things have changed a lot since?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t know, Mr. Know-it-all; you weren’t even born. First of all, a woman didn’t go to a restaurant, she didn’t go to a café, she didn’t even go to shop at the market. It was like back there, men didn’t go out with women; women stayed at home. But Mehdi, meskin, he was different. Open-minded. He was used to seeing all those stars at the Olympia... He dared to take me out as if I were a Frenchwoman. He had courage. And he didn’t want me to wear the veil. Religion, the butcher’s, customs... Là. He was a little like you, Paul. Insolent.”

“Zaïa...” Mama sighed, irritated to hear her sister judge in such a way her son, the French writer, her only pride.

And then again, she doesn’t like to hear too much talk about Mehdi, doesn’t like to stir a past which suddenly seems so present since the start of the Papon trial. I called from Casa one October evening, and Mama told me that on the anniversary of the bloodbath, the 17th, the facts were presented for the first time on the eight o’clock news. Two minutes, some black and white stills, newspapers from that period, I guess... Zaïa was horribly upset over it. She was screaming, crying and choking as if she’d only just then heard the news. Upset to the point where Monsieur Ammour called a doctor.

172 Parisian theatre and concert hall.
173 non
174 Maurice Papon, subsequently convicted of crimes against humanity, organized the deportation of some 1,500 French Jews from the Vichy Government of ‘‘Free France’’ between 1942 – 1944.
175 On October 17, 1961, some 200 “Mediterranean types” were killed or disappeared from the streets of Paris; Papon was the Paris police chief during this time and has been accused of organizing the killings. For these crimes, he was never brought to trial: By official decree, a general amnesty has been accorded all those administrative officials involved in the killings. Jean-Luc Enaudi and Elie Kagan, 17 Octobre 1961 (Paris: Actes Sud/Solin, 2001), p. 24.
And suddenly it was as if she was mourning all over again, reliving those hours that followed the massacre, the anguish of not knowing whether Mehdi had only been taken in for questioning, or was perhaps wounded, maybe hiding... or dead.

And then the curfews, the raids, the men with their hands in the air, spat upon, pushed into buses with the blows of nightsticks. The evenings of Arab bashing, the fear in the pit of the stomach when one knew that at the end of the deserted boulevard, a mass of black-clad MP’s was waiting... And one would ask oneself whether it would be less risky to turn around or to continue on one’s way. When you had to cross the Seine, you quickened your pace to reach the other side, all the while thinking of the many brothers who’d drowned after being thrown from the bridge, but held back from running so as not to attract notice. And seeing a 403176 – lights off, slowing down, door open... Or hearing, when passing by the Clignancourt commisariat, the cries and moans – *Sweet France!* As the song says, *Those familiar memories come back to me.* Memories that are not mine – I wasn’t born – but that have become mine as I’ve read so many accounts... What I read, I live.

We’re driving in Paris now. At every newsstand I see the hated name, the contemptible face: Papon, Papon, Papon.

*"Halouf!"* I say.177

Just as my father would have done. But Mama tries to calm me with a tender look and a finger to her lips. She moves to put her hand on my fidgeting knees, then stops – her modesty again. She guesses that I am suddenly nervous. And I am. I can no longer

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176 The Peugeot 403, the unmarked car of police inspectors of the era.
177 *Pork*, a serious insult in Muslim countries where, considered unclean, this meat is not eaten.
contain the anger that I had tried to put off until later, as one puts off a tiresome chore, so as not to spoil the joy of our reunion. My resentment wins out.

Curious association of ideas: Papon, the raids, the bashings and those rats who have put into doubt my existence or, at least, the fact that I could have written my book myself. Rumor, Parisian gossip, subtle racist allusions to Omar, the supposed killer—condemned with no other proof than a bloodied spelling mistake on a wall. A Moroccan. An A-rab... an a-ssassin. Assassin is a word of Arabic origin, everybody knows that. And A-rabs don’t write their own books; everybody knows that too. A-rabs, they just work the niggers!

Maman and Zaïa, fortunately, are unaware of these rumors. They don’t read the papers.

And they must not know. I must continue to protect them. That’s exactly why I’ve decided to protect myself. By staying incognito. By refusing to play their game, as they say. No photos, no television, no interviews, no nothing. But this infuriates those media mongrels; they’ll do anything to make the wolf leave the lair. How? Defamation, schemes, slander.... Paris will always be Paris. And la France, la France.

The Bastille is in sight. Then La République. Feeling suddenly emotional for Myriam... here one evening, crazy with love, we struck up our own Marsellaise.

“Dum de dum dum, dum dum, dum de dum...!”

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Then we kissed under the green light, waiting 'til it turned red, then for it to change back to green, then to red, to green, and back to red. And after that, Boulevard Magenta where we ran in the rain, arm in arm .... and then Barbès. At last Barbès.

Diop, Pinocchio, Agnes, Marie, Thomas, Fati, Sami, Salim and Salima have planned a little fiesta to celebrate my return – a surprise! But Diop, the goof, gave it away asking me, yesterday on the phone, to keep my evening free. I’ve got to call him, tell them that I’ll be coming later. Zaïa’s fiancé has invited us – my mother, my aunt and me – to dinner. Seafood, steak and fries.... It would be impolite to refuse. And Mama wouldn’t understand.

“I need to call my friends as soon as we get to the restaurant,” I said to Monsieur Ammour.

But Zaïa, pulling out a cellular phone from that big embroidered velvet bag that she always carries, the sack where she stocks whole heaps of beauty aids and ointments and her tsabih\(^{179}\) and her needlework and her gris-gris and her nibbles and her hocus-pocus powders for the liver, eyes, kidneys, teeth, varicose veins, intestines, memory, spleen:

“Here! I’ve got a cell phone, too. Use this. Jilali gave it to me, with the subscription paid up, so that I can call him any minute of the day.”

“I must be dreaming!”

\(^{179}\) prayer beads
Chiaroscuro of a covered street strewn with rugs, soft shadow of palm fronds fanning a wall of pink adobe, wind from the sands, indigo sky... fantasia, souk, forests of cedar, oases, moonlit minarets, snowcapped peaks of the Atlas, ramparts where break Atlantic waves... Splendors of Morocco, postcards my brother and I would tack to the posts of our bunk beds, into the mast of our imaginary sailing ship. Our horizon: the countrysides and faraway shores for which we weighed anchor just before turning off the lamp, only to continue our game a bit more as we fell asleep in the dark.\(^{180}\)

“Heave-ho! Hoist the jib and the main!”

“Heave-ho! Ready about!”

But real life was here... is here... and has always been here for me. At least that’s what I tell myself when I see the scurvy façade of the Louxor Theatre or the pillars of the overhead métro. I’m from Barbès as another is from Fez, from Sous or from the Rif. It was necessary for me to leave to realize it. And come back. But I had more or less understood this before my departure. I didn’t take off for the desert; I didn’t choose the south or the interior; nor one of the four imperial cities. No! Nothing of Moroccan splendor, but instead Casablanca – for a long time now not even a city, but a conglomeration made of bits and pieces. Anything and everything.

Barbès, in fact. All at once a bit of New York, a dab of Africa and a little of Third-Republic France at the Barbès–Rochechouart station. Parisian gray and checkered Tati pink. The colorful display of the Tunis Star and the one thousand and one treasures at the Gallery of the Golden Sands – all this, fronting the grandiose Haussmannian buildings, black with grime. The souk on Boulevard de la Chapelle. At the Esseltex Bazaar: a staggering pile of rugs, satellite dishes, scarves and turbans, incense lamps, household linens and switched-on TV’s, *The Wheel of Fortune* in Arabic on every stacked-up screen… Tin goods and copperware in bulk, gold-stitched caftans and *gandouras*, golden tulle, golden crockery, golden glassware, golden muslin, golden hardware!

O, Splendors of Barbès! All is fake; all is junk. Yep, real genuine junk! But it’s this junk I find enchanting. It was this gaudy rubbish that enchanted me even then, as a kid, going down the dreary Rue Ordener.

*I liked absurd paintings, pictures over doorways, stage sets, carnival backdrops, billboards, bright-colored prints...* Under the bridge of the métro, I liked to pretend I was in an American TV show, getting a thrill from picking out the dealers slouched against the wall, and the moneychangers digging in their pockets, taking out by touch alone, wads of dirhams, dinars, CFA francs... On the corner of Rue des Islettes, I liked to thumb through Abdelatif’s collection of Korans and second-hand books. I liked to slip into the crowd of men who gathered in front of the Hamdane butcher shop in order to

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181 Tati, the discount department store chain largely frequented by working class immigrants. The store was founded on Boulevard Barbès by a North African immigrant in 1948. The shopping bags are pink-hued and checkered.
182 A short-sleeved or sleeveless tunic worn throughout North African countries.
184 Monetary unit used in various African countries that were formerly French colonies.
prove to myself that, since I’d begun to box at Mr. Luis’s, I too was a man. I liked to play the potential buyer, mingle in the bargaining for the hot merchandise displayed on the hoods of cars and sold on the sly: pirated cassettes, leather jackets, ghetto blasters or video games, all fallen from a truck... Ah, the virile intoxication of risk! I also liked those sticky sweets at Halouaani’s place on the Rue Caplat, where Zaïa would help out during Ramadan. And the music that streamed from Hadj Youcef’s: raï, the real thing, pure, direct from Oran; and then those sappy tunes from Cairo... those syrupy refrains so insidious that they stick to you as you pass his shop and, despite yourself, you’re humming them for hours on end! Salma ya salama salma ya salama salama salma ya 185... And Christmastime – under the overhead métro... the street fairs... my brother. Bumper cars, shooting stands, ball throws, the cheap marvels one could win. Peanuts and cotton candy! 186

Daniel was pouting, sucking in his lips as if to keep from crying. All he’d won was a little pink pig made of marzipan. I asked him:

“‘You don’t want any?’”

I broke off a leg and bit into it. Disgusted, he yelled out:

“‘Shit, Paul! You’re eating pork?’”

“‘It’s not pork, little brother, it’s a pig made out of sugar.”

“A pig is pork, dummy ass!”

185 “What a joy to see you, Salma”; song popularized by Dalida, Egyption-born French singer and actress.
186 Of note in the exotized description of Barbes is Smaïl’s repetition of the anorphic devices of Rimbaud: “I liked...; I liked...,” etc. This passage is also heavily reminiscent of the youthful persona of the Parisian poems by the American poet Alan Seeger who, describing Barbes, writes: “What bright bazaars, what marvelous merchandise/Down soething allies what melodious din/What clamor, importuning from every booth: At earth’s great mart where Joy is trafficked in/Buy while the purse yet swells with golden Youth! (“Juvenilia” in Poems by Alan Seeger. New York: Scribner and Sons, 1920.)
“I can’t believe you, Daniel! I’m telling you, it’s not pork. It’s sugar and almonds. It’s... akda d’louz. You know, just like Zaïa makes us.”

“Zaïa never gave us pork...”

“Oh, you’re full of it!” I said, getting angry.

“She never gave us pork,” he repeated stubbornly. “She never gave us pork.”

“Damn, little brother, you want a slap?”

But in his eyes I see despair, and I realize that there is an underlying cause for his mulish obstinacy: some other deception, some other humiliation, some deeper sadness for which he probably doesn’t know the reason. Something has hurt him without his knowing it; something to do with a feeling of failure, of having missed out, something about the human condition. Or our human condition, ours – we Beurs. For a while now he’s been questioning me about the restrictions and rites of Muslims, those practices that our parents still follow vaguely, if at all. Or something, maybe, to do with his own condition of second son, of little brother.

Was I acting too much the big guy? Had I made fun of his awkwardness? He’d wanted Zorro’s sombrero and black eye patch. But to get them, you had to shoot down ten Moors, and he’d only shot down six. So I tell him:

“Wait, Daniel! I’ve still got some money. I’ll try to get them for you.”

With pretty good logic, he responds:

“But if it’s you who shoots, it’s not me who wins.”
And wouldn’t you know it, l’ain! I do worse than he — I shoot down only four. And he’ll never know whether I’ve done it on purpose. I myself don’t really know. But I see him smile, slyly; I see that he’s secretly pleased at my defeat. Of course, I’m supposed to act angry, at myself, at him… but I laugh instead. My giggling wins him over, and our closeness as brothers wins out. We’ve lost, both of us, and we really don’t care. We exchange affectionate punches and pommels, a fraternal bear hug or two. The rifle shots, organ music, bumper cars, the métro clattering up from underground — everything intoxicates. Together we shout… No reason in particular. Just for the fun of it.

_Anta! Anaa! Hna!_  

The memory is still so vivid, so painfully vivid. The tinted windows of the Mercedes isolate me from the world of the living and darken Barbès!

“T’m here,” I say to Diop on the phone. “In front of the Golden Sands.”

“You’re calling from a booth?”

“Naaaah, buddy! My aunt Zaïa packs a Nokia these days. We’re in the third millenium now.”

“Right.”

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187 _eye_ — i.e., the evil eye.
188 _You! Me! Here!_
I go over my plans with him: One, I leave my baggage at Zaïa’s; two, Jilali takes us to eat – my mother, my aunt, and me; three, I’m free at ten or ten-thirty – about there.

What restaurant, by the way?

After a pause, Monsieur Ammour solemnly pronounces: “Ah! I know. The Terminus-Nord. A brasserie, but deluxe … where I take my good clients…”

So, seeing ourselves elevated to the rank of good clients, off we go to the Terminus-Nord. With a sneeze, I discreetly cover a desire to snicker. And I think Mama guesses why. The grocer irritates her too. I sense it.

Diop: “At the Gare du Nord? You won’t have far to walk, the party is at the Yahias’.

Me, with big-time irony: “Oh really? Is there a party? I’d never have guessed.”

“Ah, damn, you got me.” He said, flustered. “You won’t tell them that I screwed up, OK?”

Pure Diop. Sentimental, and so ill at ease with his big heavyweight self, so awkward, but such a good friend too. In a real tough-guy tone he tells me: “Damn, fuck, I missed you, you know!”

Touched, I respond like an ass: “Oh, my baby!”

Monsieur Ammour parks squarely in the bus lane and turns on his hazard lights. Horns blow all around. The #31 flashes its brights. And a Speedzza delivery boy gets off a good kick, with a steel-toed boot, into the hubcap of the Mercedes. Only a few
months back, in the same shiny red uniform and helmet, I probably would have done the same.

"Out of the way, mother fucker!"

Monsieur Ammour grows impatient but doesn't really dare to rush the dear nephew of his dearest Zaïa. Me, bastard that I am, instead of getting out to unload my suitcase and duffel bag from the trunk, I throw myself into a serious discussion with Diop. How will I begin my next book, this novel, if it is one, this true fiction, this false non-fiction, my life, the rest of this story? I have the title: Round-Trip Barbès. And already about thirty pages written – the marabout, Sidi Abderrahman,\textsuperscript{189} dawn, ashes cast into the sea, my solitude, my anguish, an evening hearing the call of the muezzin... But first I want to tell about my return to Paris, this evening, November 24, 1997. This very evening. This miraculous moment, Boulevard Barbès, lounging lazily next to Mama in the back of the Mercedes while discussing my work as a writer with a friend. I believe I've found the first words of my book, and they're not mine: "True paradises are the paradises we have lost."\textsuperscript{190}

\textsuperscript{189} Sidi Abderrahmane, ascetic medicine-man and saint of populist "Moroccan-style" Islam. Under the Protectorate, his tomb was sanctified by Mohammed V, grandfather of Mohammed VI, the current king. (Stephen Smith, "Des Marabouts qui font de l'ombre aux islamists," Paris: Le Monde, section "International," 6 November 2001), p 4.

\textsuperscript{190} Marcel Proust A la recherche du temps perdu: Le temps retrouvé, (Paris: Gallimard, Collection Folio Classique, 1995), p. 177.
The National Orchestra of Barbès\(^\text{191}\) is playing when I arrive at Salim and Salima’s. Playing Salam!

They give me a hero’s welcome: Shouts, cheers, yodels of joy. They relieve me of the three magnums of champagne I’ve brought; they hug and kiss me. Sami presses the repeat button, and together they all sing with the National Orchestra of Barbès:

*Salam ‘alaikum, salam ‘alaikum, salam ‘alaikum\(^\text{192}\)* …

And then again, all together with the singer: “Once more, just once more!”

And all together, laughing.

They hug me, they smother me. For Diop, I act surprised; I play it to the hilt. He pretends to throw a left jab at my chin. Pinochio uncorks a magnum and splashes me with foam; Thomas keeps rhythm on a *bendir*\(^\text{193}\) … As for Nathan, who’s only six, he prances, playing horse and rider of a fantasia troupe, neighing and firing an imaginary rifle into the air.

“Nochio… Salim… Marie… Salima! And you, Fati! And you, Sami! And Agnes! And…?”

I’d forgotten the name of the baby sleeping in her arms, so calm in the midst of our jubilation.

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\(^{192}\) *Peace be upon you.*

\(^{193}\) A tambourine-like instrument used in North Africa.
“Amina,” responded Agnes. “And let me introduce you to Moh, the lucky father.”

Moh is the only one of the guests that I hadn’t known before leaving for Casa. But I greet him as an old friend. He’d written me a moving letter; he wrote that he too would like to be able to write, to tell what he’d lived… to try to free himself from it. For that, you have to distance yourself from your life and your suffering. You have to have the immodesty – or modesty? – to make a book from it. To be the hero of your book. To take the step.

Two years ago at Ramadan, one of his brothers was murdered at Blida. Last year, his two sisters were raped and their throats slit in the Mitidja.\footnote{Blida, a city on the Algerian coast; the Mitidja, an agricultural region of the interior.} He hastens to add that there will be another outbreak of killings at the end of the year, in six weeks time. He announces this with a cruel tranquility, as if speaking of a return of the seasons in his country, as if this carnage were a natural disaster.

Agnes hands him Amina, who smiles in her sleep as she passes from her mother’s breast to her father’s arms. Moh cradles her. Anything except going back there, he’d written me. He hopes that, since becoming a father in France, he no longer runs the risk of being sent back to Algeria….

Unfortunate coincidence: The National Orchestra of Barbès is now playing \textit{Ma Ychali}.\footnote{\textit{Wanderers}}

Salima: “Please, no! I don’t want to hear that.”

Salim: “Me either.”
He hurriedly picks up the remote to change songs. Marie wants to know why the melody touches them so. Fati answers that it’s the words that hurt more than the music.

Marie: “Because you understand what he’s singing?”

Fati: “Not everything, no, but the words are printed in French.”

Salim: “He’s singing of exile. He asks himself if we’ll see peace in Algeria one day.”

Moh: “He says that people will think to themselves, later, when they see our tombs: ‘Those were foreigners.’”

I say: “Ma Ychali. That’s Kabyle, isn’t it?”

Our gaiety is suddenly tinged with sadness. But sadness also has its sweetness. In gaiety or sadness, we’re in accord. Like those musicians who improvise solo, each in his turn, then together take up the noubâ.196 Noubâ in the noble sense of the word, in the Arabic sense: a canon, a fugue, a subtle suite of variations and harmonies… Elation.

Everyone swings and sways. The music infuses into us its irresistible tempo. Here and there, a few quick dance steps. The clinking of glasses, a joint passing from hand to hand, a bowl of pistachios and raisons, dates, a basket of candied fruit. There’s fresh fruit too, and ice cream. There’s wine, white and gray, and mint tea. There’s love.

I can’t find the words to express my gratitude, so I settle for smiling.

“It was Diop who arranged everything,” Salima tells me. “Don’t thank us.”

196 Noubâ, a fête or party in colloquial French.
Handing me the joint, Pinocchio asks if I, by chance, have a bit of stuff. One usually brings back more than tea sets and Arabian slippers from Morocco.

“Some smoke? And risk two or three years in the pen? Shoukrane! I’m not that stupid! They search you good in customs. They put the dogs on one bag out of ten. And if you’re not the Club Med/Cook Tour type…”

“Yeah. Paulito-the Arabito-bandito,” yells Diop

Nathan, delighted with this nickname, begins to recite:

“Paulito-Arabito-Bandito. Paulito-Arabito-Bandito…”

Until his father tells him that he’s a real pain in the… ears and that, besides, it’s high time he go to bed. Salima suggests that he sleep in her bed.

Marie adds: “What a clown head!”

The little rascal has stuffed his cheeks with candy; his face is white with powdered sugar. He fusses, however, at any attempt to clean it off. And even more at the idea of going to bed and leaving the grownups.

“Wait!” I tell his parents. “Paulito-the-Aribito will take care of him. Come here, Nathan! You’re a Bedouin, covered with desert sand. I’m the camel.”

I put him on my shoulders, and with a camel-like swagger, I carry him to the Yahias’ bedroom. I tell him: “It’s nighttime at the oasis. We’ve got to put up the tent and make a fire to keep away the scorpions…”

\footnote{\textit{thank you}}
Nathan takes to the game right away. Sami is amused seeing me make tent poles of two chairs, throw a rug over, place a mat and cushions beneath – all this to make a camp worthy of Sharif Nathan. I show the child how to roll up in Salim’s *djellaba*¹⁹⁸ to keep warm. I tell him there are jackals prowling all about but that there is nothing to fear – with my rifle, I’ll keep watch all night.

“And now, Young Master, you must sleep. Tomorrow, we have another day of desert before us, until we reach the next oasis.”

“Nathan, however, is not yet ready to give in to sleep. He sings out the fruit juice jingle: “Oasis! Oasis!”

I vaguely threaten him with a spanking, but he doesn’t buy it.

“I’ll never be a Bedouin since, after all, I’m a yid.”

“A yid?” I say, pretending not to understand.

“Jew, got it?” he answers, rolling his eyes to the heavens as if he’s dealing with a moron from Tafilalt.¹⁹⁹

“That drives me crazy,” says his father. “We do our best to keep them from thinking like that, but from first grade, it’s shot… Those little shits already know their race, their origin… their tribe! They talk about it on the playground. ‘And you, what are you? Who are you?’ One little brat in his class asked if he was Sephardi or Ashkenazi. Sometimes I ask myself why I didn’t give him a goy name – I don’t mean like Kevin or Eric like everybody now days, but Jean… Jacques… or Pierre…”

¹⁹⁸ A long sleeved, hooded robe worn by men and women in North Africa.
¹⁹⁹ A Berber village in southern Morocco.
“Or Paul,” I say laughing.

Sami is embarrassed for a second, then affirms: “Look, Paul. I understand your father. I think your father was right.”

He waits for me to agree, but I have no answer to a question that isn’t one. I’ve never had an answer to that question; I’ve never known whether my father did the right thing or not. He didn’t know himself. He did it on instinct. And I think that it wasn’t only for us, his sons, but for himself as well. To prove to himself that he was French. He was proud to have done it. His sons would be even more French than he was. He was neither right nor wrong; he did it, that’s all. He wanted this uprooting. And that’s the way it is. That’s the way it is, and I thank him for it. Yes. But how do I say so?

Sami: “You know, Paul, I’m forty-two years old. I went to the same school as Nathan, Rue de Maubeuge. But I don’t remember that at all. We didn’t talk about it. We hardly knew who was Jewish, who was Arabic, who was white, yellow or black… In any case, not at that age. In kindergarten I had a girlfriend from the Antilles; my grandmother had to tell me that she was schwartz, or I wouldn’t have noticed! My dear ol’ granny, survivor of the Sho’ah, didn’t much care for Negroes. She thought they had a certain smell…”

Nathan, as little as he is, picks up something of our conversation. He wants to reassure me: “You know, I don’t care if you’s Rebeu…”200

“If you are…,” his father says.

“I’m not Rebeu, I’m the camel. Did you forget?”

200 Back slang for Beur.
He bursts out laughing and asks me: “Is it true that Arabs have magic carpets that fly like planes?”

“Sure, sure. One day I’ll take you for a ride on mine. But for now…”

I wrap him in the djellaba borrowed from Salim, I put him on the cushions and close the tent flap. He goes to sleep right away.

Sami congratulates me: “You’ve got a knack with the rugrats.”

“You wouldn’t believe the number of tents Daniel and I put up, on Rue Ordener!”

“You still think about him…”

“He’s always there, yes. A little while ago, when I arrived, I saw him in the crowd… At Barbès-Rochechouart, there he was! My little brother!”

Sami puts his hand lightly on my shoulder as if to relieve me of too heavy a load. But the pain doesn’t weigh on me anymore; I’ve turned it into something else. And the memory doesn’t hurt so much now.

We don’t go back to our friends; we drop down on the bed and talk softly, all the while taking turns drinking from the glass of white wine he’d brought in.

The music, muted with the distance, suddenly seems farther away and yet more present. It wasn’t a record anymore but Thomas, playing the oud.

Unfathomable music. But the continuous sliding of fingers on the strings little by little weaves a pattern that at last we are able to grasp. The melody stretches out and becomes eternal. Time stands still.
To think that just an hour ago I was stuck listening to the raga of the pain-in-the-ass grocer, Jilali Ammour, at the Terminus-Nord! To think that at noon I was still in Casa! To think that last year, in November, I’d just started to write without knowing where I was going! To think that I’d met Sami only a few days before finishing my book, and that he was to be my first reader, and that he so quickly became as close as a childhood friend. *A friend, neither ardent nor weak. A friend.*

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Sami had entrusted the manuscript to one of his friends in the business. His mission was to protect me. And, first of all, from myself. Two editors to whom I'd mailed my manuscript were interested in publishing it. Far from being happy, I suddenly backed off. I refused to meet them. I was on the point of giving it all up. I wanted to ask them to send it back. So I could destroy it.

Now that I'd finally wrapped up my story, my novel, the real – the really real – came back to haunt me with all its all truth, all its cruelty. It was also a bit of my life that I'd wrapped up. In writing this book, I'd laid bare a good part of myself. I had divested myself of a past which was my only wealth. I'd turned it into literature. In the contemptible sense of the word: It's literature! Daniel was dead, he'd lost. I'd kept the promise I'd made him on his deathbed. I'd won... In a certain sense, I'd won. But won what?

And then this atrocious feeling of betraying. I'd betrayed my father, I'd betrayed my brother and I'd betrayed myself. I looked at myself in the mirror: Shame on you, Paul! What is your mother going to think of you? And Zaïa, whose name you only changed by one letter? And Myriam, who will surely read it? And Diop, and all the guys you box with at Mr. Luis's gym? And the guys at Speedzza that you fucked over so glibbly in your book as if it were nothing? Damn! Taouf, Gamal, Micky, Bruno, Farid who'd only be too happy to kick you ass! Who'd be right to kick your ass! Faggot!
They won’t read it? They’ll never know? Smaïl is a pseudonym and you won’t tell them anything… But Myriam will read it, she’ll know. And how will she like being called Myriam? And when the guys see your smug head on TV? When they hear your pathetic blah-blah on the radio? What a laugh! Laughter and rage! Look how he talks about us! A book! He narrates our sad, pizza ’livering life and lets out just how much snot goes in the mozzarella! And fake mozzarella at that! There are lots of stories to be told in Paris! And we could tell some too.

I can hear them now: “What does she think she’s doing, little Paulette?”

Writing isn’t everything. You still have to do your number to sell the story. The publisher wants it that way. Spit and polish because you’re on next: lights, camera, action. The whole shebang. You won’t get out of it. They’ll drag you out there and put you on the rack. Or worse! They’ll cage you like a rat. The rat that you are – the little desert rat that you’ll always be in their eyes. Because you won’t be a writer under the studio lights, you’ll be a rat who writes – nuance. And they’ll bait you, make you say things you don’t mean. You’ll be manipulated. You’ll be the Beur of the month, the Beur of all seasons, the Beur in fashion, the Beur in the papers, the Beur on TV, the Beur subject of discussion, the Beur of society talk, the talk show Beur… The well-integrated Beur or the angry young Beur, take your pick. If possible, why not both? The Beur who interrupts the Minister, the Beur who reads Proust! The Beur who bawls on live TV when he speaks of his dead brother, the neat and clean Beur who breaks the ratings record when, with dignity, he evokes the admirable figure of his father… The good Beur! The spokesman Beur, right? Because they won’t only ask you about your book. You’ll have to answer for everything and to everything: Islam and the Islamists, integration and
integrationists, blood rights, birth rights, human rights, Papon, Algeria, the National Front\textsuperscript{202}... the politics of Pasqua and Debré,\textsuperscript{203} the unemployed, the undocumented, the homeless... The last record of Cheb Mami, the unrest in the slums, the headscarf, racism, vandalism, drugs, steroids... Ramadan, rai, graffiti, menial jobs, religious rituals, rocks thrown at buses, sacrificing lambs... Brigitte Bardot... Le Pen... The Koran.... Ben Jelloun.... Chimo.... God!

"Does Chimo exist?\textsuperscript{204} And what about God?"

Questions for a champion, questions for a desert rat. "Tell us about the suburbs in flames, you who live in Barbès, Paul Smail."

Those suburbanites of Neuilly who consider themselves Parisians think that Barbès is a suburb. \textit{Khra}?\textsuperscript{205}

The worst is that I’ll probably know just what to say to make them laugh. Like a lot of timid people, I can ham it up. When I have to, I’ve got the gift of gab. There’s Beur humor just like there’s Jewish humor or black, and I know the lines as well as anyone else... Wooah! Time out! That’d be playing with fire. Because I just might get a kick out of selling myself. But if I play the game, I’m screwed. I become a puppet. I’m not only the author of \textit{Life Kills Me}, I kill me.

\textsuperscript{202} An extreme right political organization headed by Jean Marie Le Pen; members include the animal rights activist, Brigitte Bardot.


\textsuperscript{204} \textit{“L’affaire Chimo”}: under the name Chimo a presumably a young Beur published one of the earliest "autobiographies" written in a style often termed “réalisme de banlieue”; however, the true identity of the author has never been confirmed.

\textsuperscript{205} shit
So no number, no book tour, no portrait of the artist!

"A writer, if he is a writer, has nothing to add."

I have to forget about publishing, no matter what Sami says. What editor would take on a young shit head who from the start refuses to play by the rules?

"There is what I’d call after-sales service in publishing, just like in retailing."

But Sami insists: "Don’t be stupid. No one’s forcing you. You can state your conditions, have them written into the contract: no photos, no interviews, no book signings, nothing. Like Salinger who no one’s ever seen. Like Pynchon... But you can’t back out now. This book has to come out. You can’t throw it away! Shit, Paul, you’re a writer! You’re saved! And you owe it to Daniel."

I owed it to Daniel. You could take that more ways than one. But his argument won out. I could almost hear Mr. Luis encouraging me not to back down, not to back away, not to refuse the fight: "’Chu got balls or what? ’Chu eez hombre or a girl?"

I was still reluctant.

But Sami erased my last doubts: "Let your friends take care of things. We’ll find the publisher who’ll say yes, all you have to do is sign. One week! Just give us one week... Don’t you lift a finger."

I didn’t lift a finger. And a week later it was done; all I had to do was sign and put the check in the bank. The first five-figure check that I’d ever held in my hands. Yeah, life kills me, but maybe I could live by writing? Anyway, the die is cast. Life Kills Me would be in bookstores in August.
That night, I had a dream: I was in an unknown city, but I recognized certain streets – the Reeperbahn, la Goutte-d’Or. There was an overhead métro, palm-shaded avenues, several mosques and a familiar train station. It was snowing on a canal, but ten steps ahead stretched a wide, sunny beach where children played ball. The passersby were speaking a curious mix of German and Arabic. I didn’t dare ask them to show me the way. Besides, I really didn’t know where I was going. I felt guilty, but why? A veiled woman came up to me; she looked like Myriam.... She was Myriam. Before I could ask the question, she answered: “Because it is written.”

Because it was written, I had to leave. Like the hero of my book who was so much like me... Who was me. I had to get away. I wouldn’t be in Paris the day the book came out. What for? I remembered another promise made to my brother... a new life, adventure, back to the mother country, my roots... Enough of France. Forget insults and humiliations, this emptiness now that the book is finished, follow Melville’s example... Everything was all mixed up, confused. I couldn’t think. Let the waves take me. Go with the flow. Don’t fight it. Float. Inch’Allah.

All was decided so quickly. In fact, there was no decision to be made. Madame Solal, a friend of Sami’s mother, could put me up in Casablanca? So Casablanca it is.

Passport, ticket, boxes, sorting what I’d save and what I’d throw away, the few books I’d take, last minute business... Return the keys to Mr. Zeboudji. I’ll spend my last night in France at my aunt Zaïa’s, with Mama.

I can’t get to sleep. I see the family mementos piled up on the buffet, the eyes that stare at me in the darkness, the reflection on the ceiling of a luminous hand of Fatima. The ivy on the wallpaper grows and flowers into fantastic blooms. Sounds rise
in waves from Boulevard Barbès and fade away as the hours go by. Tomorrow, I’ll be in Morocco. Today. In a few hours... The garbage trucks rumble and screech. A rosy glow colors the shutters.

I hadn’t slept all night. I was in another world... the way I am tonight, back in Paris: joint, wine, friends, the sweet fatigue, the captivating sound of the oud... I was already in another world when on the plane, flying above the clouds. Land had disappeared beneath white foam – light, pearly and infinite. For the first time in months, in years, I could let myself go. At last I could breathe. With the touch of a finger I could put my seat back and settle into bliss. Royal Air Maroc was serving drinks.

“White wine if you have it.”

Then I opened at random A Season in Hell, the book that I’d slipped into the inside pocket of my jacket. Every page was about me, about what I was feeling.

I read the following, which I’d lived:

*My day is through, I’m leaving Europe.*

And this:

*Had I only a single tie to a point in the history of France!*

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206 Une Saison, p. 68.
But no, nothing.
I well know myself to have been, always, of an inferior race.\textsuperscript{207}

And then this:

\textit{O witches, O wretchedness, O hate! I fled, leaving you watch over my treasure.}\textsuperscript{208}

But also this:

\textit{Reborn in reason, I find the world good. I bless life.}\textsuperscript{209}

A stream of blinding sun streaked the window.

Back from the living room where he’d gone for another glass of white wine, Sami tells me: “What surprises me is that you could stand it so long there. You’re from here.”

“Yes, I’m from here.” I know it now. And them, yes, they know it too. One glance was all it took. In the plane just before arriving in Paris, the chief steward distributed customs forms. To be filled out by non-EU citizens only… Well, he looked at me and didn’t give me one. And so I say “them” now.

\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., p. 66-67.
\textsuperscript{208} Ibid. p. 65.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid, p. 71.
“I’m from here, but were I not an A-rab, would they have doubted my existence? Accused me of not having written my book?”

“You want to talk about it?”

“Yes. And then we won’t talk about it anymore, Sami, I promise. The stinking story kills me. What you told me, if I said that in my next book, novel or not, no one would believe it. It’s so farfetched. The shitheads in the media come up with all kinds of crap to sell their sorry papers. Those asses fill their fascist rags with filth about me…”

“The progressive left, please note!”

“Exactly! ‘A pore ol’ Beur who’s had lots of problems and who’s standin’ up for the values of the good ol’ Republic.’ That should have…”

“A pore Beur who doesn’t play the game! Who doesn’t play their game!”

“But why this conspiracy? Because it is a conspiracy, isn’t it?”

“It is a conspiracy, we can say that: people who secretly agree to take someone down, either with a gun or a rumor… As soon as you’re successful, you’re the guy to get.”

“But why?”

“Why, Paul? They didn’t have their claws in you! You proved that a young writer doesn’t have to show up to get talked about, that the book does the job. It’s the innocent ones who really have their hands full, you know. Your PR plan was no PR…
You want it your way? Live your life? Well, they were going to show you! A new writer, and they couldn’t brag about having made you, as they say. A young writer that they couldn’t throw in with the trendy antiracists. A young writer who claims that he has no cause to defend, that he should be judged only on what he writes. And now, if that means they’ll have to read first novels to review them, hell, what are they coming to? So if they can’t say they’re the ones who got you started, they start the rumor that you don’t exist.”

“And then they wanted me to respond to their bullshit! It was up to me to set the record straight!”

“So you hauled ass out of there? Well, they’d have your ass! A little gossip, a dirty Parisian smear. The kind of sordid anti-Semitic rumors that were going around Paris before the war, in the press, the movies, publishing. I’ve written articles about that.”

“Yeah, anti-Semite, anti-Arab, same difference. After all, we’re all Semites.”

“And the best part of it is that they call themselves anti-racists because they march against Le Pen!”

“When I was in Marrakech with Noureddine, I met someone like that: antiracist in Paris but a fucking slaveholder in his Palmeraie villa. A queen who told us, ‘If you like one of my boys, be my guest!’ Puke! And this guy’s always signing petitions for immigrants without papers and financing We are the people concerts… I was so

\[210\] The Palmeraie is a French-designed club/residence complex built in an architectural style recalling the red-ocre clay kasbahs of old Marrakech.
disgusted, I told Noureddine to take me back to town. Anyway, he could tell I was about to..."

"What really gets me is that you can only talk about scum like that with the same words Le Pen uses. That's the catch."

"But why hound me so much?"

"Because they think they've got exclusive rights to the race question, and you don't have their stamp of approval! You're not their bonafide Beur, you're not politically correct, you don't see yourself as a victim. And then what you write...! They thought you had it in for them."

"It never ends. Hands off my pal! vs. France for the French... 211 And us, we're on the sidelines... They always know better than we, and they've always got the mike."

"The other day Moh and I were invited to some sort of Algerian thing. Really chic: whiny intellectual humanitarian types – Hag-nès B, Gluck and BHL... 212 one-third wired, one-third wicked, one-third world! You know... Six months ago, it was Tibet; last year, Bosnia. They've got to have a cause per season. Just like Dior... Man, the arrogance of those people! And the gall! They had no qualms explaining to Moh, who'd just come back, and whose brother and two sisters had just been butchered, what to think about the situation. And when he dared say that the problem in Algeria isn't so much

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211 The slogans of the anti-racist organization, SOS Racisme, and the extreme right Front National, respectively.
212 Fashion designer and art gallery owner, Agnès B., philosophers Andre Gluckmann and Bernard Henri-Lévy.
Islamic fundamentalism, but Islam itself and the Chadli code, I thought they’d slit his throat... *Just like back there! You can bet, we cut out fast.*

That’s exactly why I escaped to Casablanca and asked my editor to conceal my identity. With all my success, I would have assuredly been invited to the Verdurins’.

Puffing out my chest I said, “Hell, I would have kicked some ass!”

“They kill with false rumors, all in good conscience... Because they're against Le Pen!”

I start humming *Sweet France* again.

Sami smiles and adds: “You can’t believe what’s happening in this fucking country, Paul! The Yahias were telling us before you got here: They're just back from a trip down south. You know those towns around Aix-en-Provence... The cafés are all run by National Front guys, and several times those pigs refused to serve them. They sat and sat; the waiter pretended he didn’t see them. Or else they’d call for a room in a hotel; ‘Yes, there’s one available.’ But when they’d give their name, ‘Oh sorry, I was looking at the wrong date; we’re full.’ It happened three times in two days. You can’t believe what’s going on in this country...” he repeated, discouraged.

Now it’s my turn to put a brotherly hand on his shoulder. With my eyes I let him know he doesn’t need to say anything more. We’ve almost spoiled the evening bringing up this shit. I’m sorry to have pushed it. Enough! Basta! We should just listen to the music. Thomas continues to improvise, his fingers unwinding a motif of infinite

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213 Government policy under Algerian president Ben Djedid Chadli legalizing polygyny and making Sharia law applicable to women.
arabesques. He plays faster and faster, louder and louder and, suddenly, he strikes the body of the oud with the palm of his hand and cries out as if at last delivered: “Olé!”

Everyone claps and embraces. Sami and I join them.

The noubâ continues, more joyful, danceable. Diop pops the cork of a magnum. Glasses overflow. Et Pinocchio suggests: “Faudel?”

Everyone calls out for Faudel. I chant louder than the others: “Faudel! Faudel!”

The first time that I heard him sing was in a taxi going to Bellerive.215

“Man haza?”

But the young driver didn’t know. It was the first time that he’d heard him too. According to him, an Algerian, from his way of pronouncing Arabic... Why then did this voice throw me from the heights of the corniche into such a violent nostalgia for Paris? Suddenly, under such a blue sky, in the incredible heat, I was no longer in Casa, but Barbès.

Then I realized that his words were laced with French words. Faudel sang N’self fik in Arabic but the word toujours in French.217 And he sang with an energy that wasn’t from here, and the sound had touches of gray that weren’t from here. I’d find out a few days later that he was, in fact, from Mantes-la-Jolie.

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215 A hotel located on the Casablanca seaside.
216 Who is that?
217 You belong to me/always
Salim turns up the volume. And Thomas picks up the bendir again to add still more noise to our pleasure.

I’m surprised that such a talented musician can switch so easily to boom-boom. He’d learned to play by listening to cassettes of Alla, the *foudou* of Bechar. Those cassettes that are traded religiously among the initiated... He’s surprised that I’m surprised: “Alla says all is good that gives joy. Alla with no h, that is. I’m talking about the lutenist.”

“I thought so. All is good that gives joy.”

As for Marie, she’s worried about the neighbors. Sami reassures her: “Dressmakers above, dressmakers below. At night, no neighbors. Anything goes.”

“Anything goes: Dance ‘til dawn, dance, drink, smoke, love, laugh, sing, whirl ’round eyes closed ’til your head spins, roll another joint, think about nothing, lean against a reeling wall and watch the others dance, fall down on the couch, beat a cushion like a drum, get up to pour another glass of wine, grab an orange, dance some more... dance alone, dance with Agnes, dance with Fati, dance with Diop... sit a little on the side. Eat some ice cream, whisper sweet confessions to Salima and tell her you’re happy to be back, yes. Put Faudel on again. *Abadou* once more. Once more..."
Tell yourself that joy is so close to melancholy! Go to the kitchen and drink water from the tap; let it run a while before splashing your neck. Contemplate the night for a minute. Then go back to your friends, who’ve put Abadou on once more... And dance, dance, dance, dance! Until dawn.

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220 Welcome dear friends who have now arrived; know that my door is always open...
Dawns are sorrowful... I underlined these words in my Rimbaud. It’s day and I’m still not asleep. I hear the muezzin of the mosque in the Habous chant the call to morning prayer. At sunrise his chant resounds louder than at other times. But then that’s because the traffic is light on Boulevard Victor Hugo.

This part of Mers-Sultan, near the new medina, still retains some of what was Casablanca. The tranquil, palm-tree lined streets, the villas of a pre-war, French seaside resort...

“By the end of the century, what’s left of it will have disappeared,” predicts Madame Solal. “And Casa will be nothing but cement and slums. Did you know, Paul, that it was here that the French word for slum was invented? Word and reality.”

I dare point out that the end of the century is just three years away. She responds with that smile, both tired and teasing, which had so enchanted me when I first met her.

“I’ll say again, Paul. In three years there will be nothing left of this neighborhood. My house will be gone. Mon Petit Trianon.”

Mon Petit Trianon is the ridiculous name of this French/Arabic/Art Deco construction built by the colonists in the 1930’s...

“Pure Protectorat style! And a little Trianon, indeed, but still too big for me.”

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222 Habbous, the religious-administrative quarter of Casablanca.
The ironwork rusts, the walls flake, the grayness dulls even the vegetation; a jumble of bougainvillea, yucca, bamboo, tamarisk, cassowary, aloe, cactus and brush encroach upon the tiled walk. I only knew these plants by name from travel and adventure stories. The reality is deceiving. Without exuberance. And almost without fragrance. The words are greener; for me they've always held more poetry. At school, I'd copy in my notebook: tamarisk, cassowary, aloe, cactus... words that would go so well in the travel and adventure stories that I'd write later when I grew up. I liked the sheen of exotic vocabulary.

Inside, the woodwork molds, the tiles are loose or missing, dusty ceiling fans uselessly stir so much damp sadness. Madame Solal can't really afford the upkeep these days. She's renting a large room with bath and balcony to one of her former patients, Mademoiselle Khadija. She rents another to me, just off the garden. The plumbing knocks, and the rushing of the water in the laundry makes me think of a ship casting off as night falls. Our ship, Daniel! Except it was easier to imagine weighing anchor for distant shores when we were back on Rue Ordener... We were innocent.

But I have a big bed and a monumental desk lit by a bronze lamp which invites me to write a work of genius. There's also, broken in just right, a big armchair in which to read. Every so often, Madame Solal changes the white damask handkerchief pinned to the threadbare red velvet which covers the back of the chair. And she changes the bouquet that she put on the side table the day I arrived. Madame Solal treats me much more like a guest than a boarder.
She speaks to me with a kindness, almost blunt, that reminds me of Mr. Hamel. The raspy voice – three packs a day – of my old French teacher. And just like my old French teacher, the perfect agreement of tenses, the subjunctive, interrogative inversion:

“Was it necessary that you come to Morocco to comprehend your culture, my son?”

(Just like him, she readily calls me “my son.”)

“Ummm, I mean, uhh, you know…”

(Shit, dude, look at you! You can’t be the one? The bright young man that Sami’s mother recommended to her friend Madame Salomé Solal, the psychoanalyst?)

Madame Solal is a widow. Her only son lives in America. Her husband died in 1967. Although many Jews left Morocco after the Six Day War, Madame Solal stayed, not wanting to abandon her patients. She hasn’t taken any new ones for several years, but there are still five or six who come to talk on her couch two or three times a week. From my room I can hear them ring at the gate, push open the screen door that always squeaks a bit and that you have to force a little. Latticed metal blinds protect from indiscreet eyes. But sometimes, when I’m sitting in the garden I overhear words. Sometimes crying.

“They have trouble living with their double – often triple – culture,” Madame Solal tells me. “Arab, Berber, French, Jewish, Hispanic… They all suffer. And, in fact, I’ve never treated any cases other than identity disorders. The Moroccan neurosis! The Moroccan neurosis with all its possible variations: Franco-Arab, Arab-Berber, Judeo-Arab-French, Arab-Franco-Berber… and so on. Whatever its manifestations may be –
phobia, insomnia, depression, anorexia – the cause is always the split between two traditions, two religions, two languages, or more. Women brought up in the Western tradition who find themselves sequestered by their in-laws... Men who feel guilty to have lost faith in a country where losing faith is still a crime.”

French by birth, Muslim parents who have given up their traditions, their religion, their language... That’s me. That’s what I’m thinking now.

But I wouldn’t have thought that the muezzin’s call to evening prayer would move me so.

_Al Maghrib_.

I can hear it even over the noise of the traffic: the backfiring of motorbikes, the screeching brakes, the horns. With time will I become so used to it that I won’t hear it anymore?

And what did I do with my day? Oh, I sat on my ass, as I would say in Paris... I lazed around as I feel I have to say here. If there is a split, my split is between two languages, not between Arabic and French, but between the French of Barbès and good French – the literary French, the French of educated Moroccans, the French of Mr. Hamel or of Madame Solal, the French of Marcel Proust. In what language do I write?

Eighty-six in the shade, and I lazed around in the garden, trying in vain to read, trying to think about what’s happening to me, trying to decipher the enigma of the interlacing swirls, arabesques and rosettes of the tiled walkway. The criss-crossings of the wicker chair are imprinted on my... uh... backside, but the day hasn’t been entirely
wasted. Today Madame Solal taught me a new word: Those mosaics which I find so visually fascinating are called zelliges.

The reasons that I'm here tonight, in Casa, seem to me as twisted as the pattern of those zelliges. Clouds of gnats darken the frosted glass of the garden lamps. The heat has not subsided with nightfall. The air is thick and smells of lead... I'm sweating, suffocating. I'm trying to catch my breath, as if having taken a sharp jab in the pit of the stomach. A sticky melody streams out from the kitchen, an oriental variety show picked up by satellite. And one hour after sunset, the last call to prayer rings out.

Al Ichaa.

It seems like a funeral dirge. And I'd like to cry out my distress in unison with the muezzin.
So, I screwed up. The evidence of that has been accumulating over the five days I've been in Casa; now it thunders in me, the proof exploding at last. Lightening rips across the sky, which for an instant turns purple. The bougainvillea quiver with the sound of rustling silk. The storm that had been threatening to strike since the evening prayer whips bamboo and aloe as if to uproot them and, suddenly, plunges the neighborhood into darkness, interrupting altogether the call of the muezzin and the recorded laughter of a sitcom from TV Dubai. A clamor arises from the nearby villas. Rain streams down the garden walls, flooding the tiled path. Instead of taking refuge in my room, I remain outside, under the cascade which gushes from the awning. Standing still in the dark.

"Are you being cleansed or punished? And for what offence?"

I am a man without honor. My father is dead, and I have abandoned the two women who depend on me, the women that I, according to tradition, am obliged to aid. According to the tradition and mores of every known culture. According to the simplest tenets of humanity... I've shirked my duty, fled my responsibilities. For an illusory return to my origins. But my origins would have me stay. Stay with my mother and aunt. Like a man. I'd let them think that I'd gone ahead to scout things out. They'd join me once I was settled. Except that neither my mother nor my aunt had shown the slightest wish to return to a country that was no longer theirs and hadn't been for a long time! They knew they'd never go back. And I always knew it. Just as I knew that I was deceiving myself, lying to myself about my deepest feelings and desires. I knew I
wouldn’t live in Morocco. How could I have thought I would? How could I have pretended to think so? To the point of thinking so? … The way a writer ends up believing what he writes. Home sweet home… It’s just a silly cliché. I packed up and left for a dumb cliché. The truth is I ran away. In other words I ducked out the minute my book was finished. I escaped, right, but in the chicken-shit sense of the word: Adios, I’m outta here. I’m no man. I’m a shit.

“For what offence?” Madame Solal asks again.

As if I hadn’t heard!

The lights are back on. My landlady sees me dripping wet, my shirt is soaking and sticks to my skin. I’m standing barefoot in dirty water that the overflowing sewers can’t drain off. I must look like a madman, but I am not the least bit ashamed in front of her. With a gesture she invites me to come in, and she hands me a towel… As if nothing were wrong.

Is it because I am not one of her patients that she treats me this way? Kindly but in no way patronizing. Respect to the max, as they say at Pizza Speedzza or in the locker rooms at Mr. Luis’s. She always brings that expression to mind.

She delights in seeing me disconcerted. She begins: “May I speak with you man to man, Paul? I don’t know you very well yet, but I read your…. novel last night. As you had the courage to let me read your manuscript before its publication, I’d assume it’s because you wished…”

“Yes.”

“Just a moment. Would you like a whiskey? I’ll have one myself.”
Without getting up from her chair, she calls to Aïoucha, loud enough to be heard over the noise of the television that her maid is watching in the kitchen... And she guesses that a disapproving remark crosses my mind.

"Is something wrong, Paul?"

I say no. But I won't escape so easily from the perspicacity of the smiling psychoanalyst. She persists, and I end up confessing: "Nothing, I was just thinking... Please, don't take this wrong. In Paris, I don't know anyone of your social standing... But I would think that a woman like you, in Paris, would have gotten up and served herself. Especially this late in the evening." Then realizing my tactlessness, "Please excuse me."

"No, there's no need," she replied. "You're right. However, I don't see how you will stand it here very long..."

Aïoucha brings in a tray with glasses and ice. When the servant leaves she continues: "Are you aware of the burden you've been carrying on your shoulders these past few years, Paul? Haven't you had enough? When are you going to stop judging yourself? And judging yourself so poorly? One must also know how to love oneself a little... Listen to me. You'll tell me afterwards what's on your mind, but first, listen to me. And if you want another whiskey, get another bottle from the kitchen... At the risk of vexing Aïoucha. Or, at the least, embarrassing her."

But I've had enough to drink. And I have no intention of interrupting her. When Myriam spoke to me the way Madame Solal is speaking this evening, I didn't know how to listen. I was always on the defensive. I was afraid. But of what?
“You're your own worst enemy. You're hurting yourself in the name of an ideal that's not even yours. For what have you come looking here? Come on, Paul! These stories of roots, of going back to your origins…” She shrugs her shoulders and cries, “Bull!” Enjoying my surprise at hearing this word in her mouth, she takes pleasure in adding to it, with a wink of complicity: “Damn! Bull! Yeah! I say yeah. I say bull! I say nonsense! An intelligent man like you shouldn't be wasting his time with that. You've made your choice, don't go back on it. It was a difficult choice, but the alternative would have been just as difficult. And since your father had already gone more than halfway…”

“My father and my mother, Madame…”

“I call you Paul, you can call me Salomé. Paul, you did what you had to do, you have no reason to reproach yourself. You've neither won nor lost. Because it wasn't a game… You did what you could. What remains Arab in you, if you permit the Jew that I am to say so, is your excessive sense of honor and manliness. It's this crushing sense of …h’chouma. Or as you write it in your book…”

“*Heichma.* I don't know how to transcribe Arabic.”

“No one knows anymore. But you know what I'm talking about: that obsessive fear of impropriety… The Jews suffer from it just as much. Everything is shameful, and wanting to live is also improper. In the end you become ashamed of living. Do you think you're egotistical, Paul? You're not egotistical enough! Living is killing you. But what if you lived your life a little more? To each his destiny. The story of your brother is his story…”

“He wanted to be cremated. It was a terrible thing.”
“Terrible because Islam prohibits it?”

“No, because…”

She gives me a few seconds to offer another reason, but everything is so mixed up in my head! Seeing that I give up, she continues: “At your father’s funeral, your mother was there, your aunt was there, and all the women of the family, right? And your friends…”

“Yes.”

“I read your book… You were all together. There were flowers. Your brother and you, you held your mother by the arm…”

“Yes. Why…?”

“So then it wasn’t a traditional Muslim funeral.”

“No.”

“Were you any less bereaved, any more bereaved? Your grief…”

I exclaimed: “No! What an idea!”

She has presented the evidence: “You see! You see that none of this has any importance. You brother was cremated; he asked you to cast his ashes into the sea… OK, tomorrow you’ll go to the shore and open the urn. Not under the Grand Mosque, for pity’s sake! But at the point of El Hank, just after Ain Diab223… And then it’ll be over. And you can go back to Paris. You have nothing to do here.”

“At the end, Daniel talked about returning to live in Morocco… Where he’d never been.”

“And you, Paul, you wanted to follow your little brother.”

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223 Two seaside areas of Casablanca: the lower-class El Hank light-house district and the affluent Ain Diab quarter.
A curious remark and it bothers me. From her smile, I understand that that was her goal. And then she doesn’t let me answer.

“But Morocco is not the country for you, Paul. It’s not a country for a man so enamored of liberty. It’s not a country, it’s a penal colony! It’s a totalitarian state. I’m warning you, Paul: Here everyone spies on everyone. If you see fewer uniformed police officers here than in Paris, it’s because one Casablanca in four is an informer. You should know that the mailman is an informer, that the gardener who rings the bell to propose his services is an informer, that the boy in the blue shirt who helps me park my car is an informer... Why do you think I give him two dirhams each time he parks my car, when I really don’t need him to park my car in front of my house? He’s watching my car? He’s watching me.”

Little by little her voice fades away. I detect a sudden reticence as if she were afraid that she’d told me too much. I have to encourage her to continue.

“Yes, you were saying?”

“Be very careful, Paul. Watch what you say. I beg you, never discuss religion with a stranger and say nothing about the King – May God glorify Him! May His reign be long and prosperous... Seeing me smile, she insists: “Don’t laugh! These are the standard formulas, and it is never superfluous to slip them into the conversation when you say His name... But it’s better still to keep quiet. Thousands of people in this country have been imprisoned and tortured for speaking imprudently of Him, capital H.”

“Of God?”

“Of His Majesty the King, who has equal rights with God to a capital letter. People have disappeared for saying one word too many. I didn’t give you Mademoiselle
Khadija’s last name when I introduced you. She prefers that it not be mentioned. Her brother was one of the best-known dissidents of the regime; he died under torture. She herself was tortured for several weeks in the basement of the Averroes Hospital. Yes, we even torture in hospitals here... And Paul, when you go out by the back door and you pass in front of the royal palace, please stay on our side of the sidewalk, don’t cross the street, don’t do anything that could be taken for insolence by the guards! An unfortunate street sweeper paid with his life for carelessly knocking over a garbage can in front of them. And if a stranger in a café brings up politics, beware, Paul! Not a word. It’s certainly an informer. Play dumb! Act as if you don’t understand Arabic...”

“I won’t have any trouble pretending that...”

“And as if you don’t understand French either. Understood?”

I silently consent. Madame Solal gives me a challenging stare, all the while stirring the melting ice at the bottom of her empty glass.

“If you decide to stay,” she continues, “I’ll be happy to have you as a boarder; if you leave tomorrow, out of friendship for you, I won’t keep you. And don’t be ashamed of having dreamed, but don’t be stubborn! Honor... Bull! Happiness, Paul, happiness above all. Now, if you decide to stay a while longer, you’ll no doubt have the chance to meet some wonderful people. They’re here. Overwhelmed to live in a poor and corrupt country, subjects of a tyrant, suffocated by family, by religion, by all sorts of constraints... But all the more generous and refined. And attentive to others.”

“I’ve already had the good fortune to have met you.”
She lowers her eyes and, defeated, says softly: “I’m an old lady, and drunk. I’m rambling and I’d really like one last drink before we say goodnight. The bottles are in the second cupboard to the left of the sink. Aïoucha has gone to bed.”

I get up and go to the kitchen. The smell of spice reminds me of Zaïa’s kitchen and of the Dejean Market in Barbès. The TV is still on, though the evening programming has ended. It’s snowing on the screen.

I remember Myriam asking me one evening, at the beginning: “Have you ever cried, Paul?”

I shrugged.
The city is crawling with little red taxis. You can hail them from the middle of the street, night or day, and be driven anywhere for only a few dirhams. It was one of my few pleasures in Casa. Like my brother in Hambourg, I got in the front seat. A verse of the Koran carved in plastic hangs from the rearview mirror. There’s music: rock, rai, crap from Cairo with weeping violins and accordions, or Claude François singing Alexandrie... Alexandra... Or Oum Kalsoum... All that I need to be happy. The driver laughs when I tell him my destination. I have a bizarre accent, and I confuse the names: Ziraoui, Zektouni, Moulay Youssef, Moulay Hassan, Hassan Zektouni...

“Hassan Zektouni?”

“Uh... Souktani?”

The driver gets confused too: Avenues, streets, squares have had two or three name changes in the past few years in Casa.

It was six-thirty in the morning. I flagged down a taxi on Boulevard Victor Hugo. I had the urn with the ashes of my brother in my duffel bag. The driver was very young and wearing a Pluto cap. Heavy metal poured from the speakers. I told him in French to head toward the ocean and that I’d stop him when I got to where I was going. He didn’t seem surprised. He said pleasantly: “You OK?”

“Yeah, fine.” Yes, I was fine. I was going to be OK, I told myself. For the first time since I arrived in Casa, I had had a good night. The city had been washed by the storm. The morning light was a beautiful yellow, puddles of water reflected a vivid blue
sky, everything glistened. It would be a lovely day. And in less than an hour, I would have done what I had to do.

“I’m Mourad,” he said.

“I’m Paul.”

“Are you from France?”

“From France, yes. From Paris.”

He pulled on an ear of his Pluto cap, which came from Paris too. Paris Disney. A French guy had given it to him.

“I’m lucky.”

“Yes.”

“The music’s not too loud?”

“It’s OK.”

By way of the Boulevard Moulay Youssef, he drove me to the Grand Mosque Hassan II.

“Nice, isn’t it?”

“Magnificent.”

I remembered Madame Solal’s lesson. I was not going to tell him that I found the colossal mosque colossally cold, colossally hideous, colossally ostentatious… Colossally commercial, in a word. Along with every other Moroccan, Mourad did without so that he could volunteer to make the mandatory contribution to see it built.224 The Moroccan artisans lavished all their love of art and craft in the interior decoration. But His Majesty the King, Commander of the Faithful – May God glorify Him! May His reign be long

224 The Hassan II Mosque, built by the French conglomerate Bouygues, is second in size only to that of Mecca. In order to construct the elaborate mosque and its numerous dependencies, thousands of Moroccans were displaced. Many hundreds are still today without adequate shelter.
and prosperous! – and His Majesty’s architect, and His Majesty’s administrative adjunct wanted the exterior like this. Puke.

(So there! What did I tell you, Jilali? My nephew! Always the trouble maker… Insolent. Just insolent!)

I ask Mourad to continue toward El Hank. It’s low tide. A stagnating pink foam clings to the rocks. Men are raking the sand, picking up discarded cans and plastic bags. We pass the lighthouse. Mourad slows down, I ask him to keep going. In front of MacDonald’s, in the middle of the intersection a fatalist prays, prostate on the yellowed grass, facing Mecca. Farther on, at the risk of being run over, another hurtles toward the road, brandishing puppies for sale. Yet another offers clocks. It’s a quarter to seven. The beaches and pools of Ain Diab are empty at this hour of the morning. But I can’t see myself opening the urn at the Miami in front of the pool boys cleaning the slides and unfolding the lounge chairs… Not at the Tahiti either. 225

“Farther.”

I see myself back in Hamburg, walking briskly through sleet turning to snow, looking on my soggy, disintegrating map for the street where Kurt lives… I see myself again, wearing a mask and aseptic white paper, going into the room where Daniel is dying. The nurse lifts the translucent plastic veil, and I step toward him:

“So here we are.”

“So here we are. My poor Queequeg!”

“Here?” Mourad asks me.

“Yes, here.”

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225 The Miami and the Tahiti, two beach clubs of the Ain Diab area.
And here we’ve arrived at the grotto of the marabout Sidi Abderrahman.

It’s a holy place – the place to scatter ashes. Around the tomb of the venerable servant of Allah are some white hovels perched on a huge rock that you can reach on foot at low tide. Women come here to be purified and to pray to the saint for fertility. The sisters of magic, who live in these hovels, throw molten lead into the water to exorcise the evil spirit and to free the women from the evil eye… And also from the harmful effects of magic. The men sit on the low seawall and meditate facing the ocean.

I tell Mourad to wait for me. I won’t be long.

I go down to the shore. The sand is littered with rags, bottles, combs, brushes… everything needed for purification.

Then I’ve got to go over the rocks, slippery with seaweed, and between the water-filled holes sparkling in the sun. I go around the marabout’s rock, I continue walking toward the ocean. Seagulls circle and squawk over my head.

*I ask that God grant me celestial, aerial calm, and prayer – like the long-ago saints…*\(^\text{226}\)

Rimbaud?

Yes, Rimbaud. On these words I turned off the lamp last night.

I go just to the spot where the waves break. I open the urn and throw the ashes to the wind.

I had no time to think about my act. It’s done.

\(^{226}\) *Une Saison*, p. 72.
“Queequeg?”

“What?”

“Are you sleeping?”

“Yes.”

My cabin boy has gone to sleep. So I’ll weigh anchor alone tonight?

I turned around, the sun was blinding. I put on my sunglasses thinking that no one would see my eyes and that it would be better this way. I slipped on the seaweed, I almost fell.

At the top of the steps leading to the road, a toothless little beggar came up to me. I went through the pockets of my jeans; I didn’t have a single coin to give him. I held out the empty urn. He ran off with it probably having no idea what it was.

A little group of pilgrims came toward me: the lame walking with wooden crutches and holding on to each other; the limping, the blind and the morons holding hands… I got back into the taxi and asked Mourad to take me back to Boulevard Victor Hugo. Then I took a Kleenex to blow my nose – there’s always a box of Kleenex on the dashboards of taxis in Casa.

“You OK?”

“Yes.”

He let me off exactly where he’d picked me up about three quarters of an hour earlier. The meter read thirty-two dirhams… Around twenty francs. I gave him a fifty dirham note and motioned for him to keep the change. He gave me a look so full of gratitude that I was ashamed.

He said goodbye, hand on his heart; I said goodbye, hand on my heart.
It was always 7:30 in the morning. Ahead of me lay the dizzying perspective of an empty day in the heat and stench of Casa, followed by an endless procession of other empty days... be it here in the heat and stench of Casa or somewhere else on earth. Life was unforeseeable. Stay here or go back to Paris tomorrow? What’s the difference? Depressed here or depressed in Paris? Failure in either case. An impossible choice. Nothing or nothing.

I reread Departure:

Enough seen. Visions converge in the airs.
Enough had. Ever-present echo of the cities, evening time,
daylight and always.
Enough known. And so the stages of life. 228

I read no further; I chucked The Illuminations; it landed in the garden. It was kind of funny.

Slumped on the bed, I tried to imagine what to do next. Finally write to Myriam the letter that I’d put off writing ten times in more than a year? How could I write her now? Now that I had shamelessly recounted – and only slightly fictionalized – our story?

No, I’d better not write her. Besides, write her what? That I love her still... dum de dum dum, dum dum, dum de dum... That I’m dying of love for her in Casablanca?

227 Here and in the sentence that follows, Smahi playfully paraphrases Proust: "...comme s’il n’y avait que sept heures du soir."/...accablé par la morne journée et la perspective d’un triste lendemain...” A la Recherche du Temps Perdu: Du Coté de Chez Swann. (Paris: Gallimard, Collection Folio Classique, 1995), p. 43-44.
228 Les Illuminations, p. 20.
Schmaltz! Romantic schmaltz, but schmaltz just the same. Why take the risk of making her suffer, of suffering myself? For nothing. For the fun of it, as they say.

But what else? What to do today, what to do in life? And what to do with this anguish? Fuck!

Had I been in Paris, I’d have gone to Mr. Luis’s gym, put on my gloves, asked him for a garbage bag... A good sweat, that’s the thing. An hour of jumping rope, a bone-crushing session with the punching bag... Crushing the bones of the left hand at least, the one that writes.

With one last effort, I tore myself out of the gravitational pull of the bed... I’d go running.

Salomé Solal, so much the duchess in a crimson caftan, was having her morning tea in the shadow of jasmines under the pergola. Seeing me in shorts, she cried out in a tone of cordial derision: “Where are you running to in this heat, poor fool?”

“I’m going to the Iseesco park.”

“Iseesco, ¿que es esto? Iseesco is the name that you see on signs and maps, but we’ve always called it Murdoch Park, after the noble foreigner! And we’ll keep calling it Murdoch Park... But... When are you going to...?”

“The ashes? It’s done. I’ve just come back.”

“Good.”

She was no doubt going to ask me next if I’d decided to stay or to go. And how would I answer? I preferred to break out into a run worthy of Saïd Aouita.229

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229 Saïd Aouita, Moroccan runner; gold and bronze medallist in the 1994 Olympics.
Murdoch Park is, in fact, just a big square. I’d have to run around it ten times, twenty times, before wearing out my anguish. Running and shadow boxing, running and breathing the heavy air, running to the point of nausea.

On the thirtieth lap, blinded by the sweat dripping into my eyes, deafened by the blood beating in my temples, I was still running.

No, it was no longer me running. It wasn’t really me. Detached from myself, I floated. I told myself that I was going to collapse there and then, dead. And I didn’t give a damn.

I blacked out. But I could still hear the laughter and the cries coming from the blue-tiled pavilion, the children’s playground. I also heard my brother tell me, God knows why, “Stop, you’re crazy.”

I was overcome with thirst. There was only one street to cross and fifty more meters to run, or to walk, to get back to the villa. Mon Petit Trianon! But I couldn’t go another step without taking a drink.

The Café Canne d’Or was closed, probably because it was Friday. And there was no other refreshment stand in Murdoch Park.

Then I saw the faucet. I drank from the faucet.
Dumb ass! You’re surprised to have the runs? Drinking water from a rusty municipal tap... Here, in *this* place! What even the most ragged of backpackers wouldn’t dare do... Would you have done it in Paris? Hell, what were you thinking? That your camel-jock genes would have somehow immunized you against the local parasites?

And here we have Paul Smaîl, the French writer in exile in Morocco, scolding himself a little later in the john.

Feverish, mouth bitter and dry, doubled over, shaking with painful spasms, dripping with rank sweat – I’m drained. I’m writhing in pain. *Al hadaou!* I’m going to die! Hell, I’m going to die! Amoebic diarrhea and bacterial diarrhea. Dysentery. Irreversible dehydration with cramps and convulsions leading to death... Typhoid? Typhoid also. Giardiasis? Giardiasis. A *parasite present in polluted waters*, I read that somewhere. The word alone: Giardiasis! Symptoms: liquid stools, torrential defecation, often fatal... yeah, yeah. All that shit.

And no point calling for help. The paramedics would arrive too late. And the emergency rooms in Casa...! Horrible, no doubt. Hospitals where they torture! I’d die of shame before calling. Call Madame Solal, Mademoiselle Khadija or Aïoucha? Impossible. *H’chouma*. Nothing but women in the house. I’m the only man; I’ll die like a man. I’ll have Moroccan courage, the courage to suffer in silence. They won’t hear the

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230 *Help!*
slightest sound from behind this locked door. They’ll have to break it down – I’ll be
dead.


I did, however, come out at last. I made it back to my room by holding on to the wall, then collapsed onto my bed. But I had to drink or I would die of thirst. I got up again to go into the kitchen to ask Aïoucha to make me some tea.

The young Berber hardly dared to look at me. I don’t know which of us was the more embarrassed. She smiled, I smiled. But she saw that I was going to fall down; she pushed a chair toward me. Then she showed me a dozen teapots lined up in the cupboard. I chose the biggest. She prepared the tea the way that I’d always seen Zaïa do it: pouring boiling water into the teapot, then pouring the water in steady circles over the broken branches of mint, and then a big splash from the sugar lump, broken just right... the way Mama never could.

It’s the only tea I could ever drink: with mint and a lot of sugar. In this, at least, I am Moroccan. ‘Llah.\(^\text{231}\)

\(^{231}\) ‘Llah, an interjection derived from “Allah.”
I reread my notes; I relive the day that I thought I was dying, and those empty days that followed. Madame Solal had wanted to call a doctor; I stubbornly refused, saying that it was nothing, even though I didn’t really believe it. I was indifferent to my destiny. Sidi Ali, Sidi Harazem – even the mineral water tasted bad to me. I threw up all solid food. I could hardly keep down a little consumé.

*My health was threatened. Terror set upon me.*
*I fell into sleeps of several days, and, once risen,*
*continued to dream the saddest of dreams…*  

Rimbaud was my only consolation. Randomly, I thumbed through *A Season in Hell*, reading here and there:

*The horror of my stupidity…My guts were on fire… my temples pounded… I am dying of thirst,*
*suffocating, unable to cry out…*  

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232 *Une saison*, p. 85.
233 *Ibid.*, pp. 73, 72.
I went from my bed to the joh..... oilet. Then to the garden to collapse into a lounge chair. But the heat quickly sent me back inside. It seemed as deadly in the shadow of the thuja or under the pergola as it did in direct sunlight.

I went back to the kitchen to ask Aioucha for more mint tea. I sat down on an iron chair in front of the television that was always on. Madame Solal, who didn’t want it in her living room anymore, had put it here in the kitchen between the oven and the sink. I watched with fascination the stupid programs transmitted by satellite from the Emirates – stations DTV, MSC... Arabian modernity! Islam and the digital decoder, sharia and soap opera! The continually frustrated love affairs of the rich blonde floozy who applies her Maybeline with a trowel, and her poor Mohamed with the bulging eyes of a mad cow... A series from Syria. O Damascus, your merciless universe! Singers even more coiffed and spangled than the Claudettes\(^{234}\) ... whining out interminable pieties to the glory of Allah. Strict Shiites, covered from head to toe, praising the soft superabsorbancy of their feminine hygiene products, while others recommend the benefits of laxative cereals. Let them just drink out of the tap in Murduch Park! That’ll take care of their constipation! Shi-ite!


\[\text{Nonetheless, I never dreamt of the pleasure had in eluding modern suffering. I had not considered the bastard wisdom of the Koran... More Rimbaud.} \quad 235\]

\(^{234}\text{ Troup of singers and dancers that backed-up Claude François, flamboyant French pop singer of the 70's-80's disco era.}\)
\(^{235}\text{ Ibid., p. 87.}\)
Madame Solal: "You’re watching MSC? The bourgeois women here, who are very proud of themselves for watching A&E, say that MSC stands for My Servant is Content."

Me, in a low tone: "Ha, ha. Very funny."

Madame Solal: "And our King has declared that there is no more poverty in Morocco; when he flies over His Kingdom, all he sees are satellite dishes."

I go back to my room and take up Rimbaud again.

Lay not my disgusts nor my betrayals before the world.\(^{236}\)

Days pass. I still haven’t found the will to live, but mineral water no longer tastes so bad. I’m starting to eat again. I’m getting my strength back. I go out. I sit under the awning at J. Omar’s, the nearest café. I order mineral water; and I sit an hour or two doing nothing, just watching people. Out of the corner of my eye I watch as the mokkadem\(^{237}\) has his shoes shined while he watches the informer in Raybans who watches the café and the street...

There’s not a single woman in the café or in the street. I’m a foreigner in this world where there are only men who, like me, do nothing. A foreigner in this oppressive heat. Each day is one or two degrees hotter than the day before: One hundred and two... one hundred and six... one hundred and seven today.

\(^{236}\) Ibid., p. 68.
\(^{237}\) The mokkadem is a city government employee whose function is to know (and report) the activities of all those living in his sector; he is commonly referred to as the "indic."
I tell myself again that I really have no reason to stay in Casa.

That’s why I decide to stay a little longer.
Sitting at the table under the window, the 27th of November, 1997, I calmly reread my notes. I know the date only because there was a calendar tacked to the wall when I moved in. I really don’t know how I live... But I live. With, today, a giddy feeling of coming back to life. Once again, everything’s happened so quickly, without my thinking about it much.

The day after my return, just two days ago, I’d asked Mr. Zeboudji if I could have my old room back, Boulevard Barbès. My room, no, but for five hundred more a month, he had “a real studio under the roof, not an attic where you bump your head when you stand up.” Go for the rooftop, then. We shake on it; it’s a deal. He knows me – he won’t ask for a deposit from the nephew of Zaïa. For him that’s a much better guarantee than the recommendation of Editions Balland\textsuperscript{238} – what the hell’s that anyway?

Studio is really saying a lot. Let’s call it a room with kitchenette, plus a shower and toilet in a closet. But there is a round dormer window, rimmed in brass like a porthole. And the view is great. Outside, a sea of grey-green roofs is battered by rain. The clouds are heavy. Such clouds I would have described as portentous in ninth-grade comp. – “Oooh! Listen to that! Portentous! The little faggot!” – Sacre-Cœur lies in the distance... I’m content. Raise the anchor! Cast off!

\textit{Ah! Back to life!}\textsuperscript{239}

\textsuperscript{238} The publisher of Smal’s \textit{Vivre me tue}.  
\textsuperscript{239} \textit{Une Saison}, p. 74.
With Diop’s help, I set up in less than two hours. A hendira\textsuperscript{240} for a bedspread, a beaded curtain to hide the door, my books on the shelves, a tarnished mirror from the flea market, a comfortable armchair, a white wood table under the porthole, which looks out on that open sea... Four photographs: Rimbaud, Melville, Stevenson, my brother Daniel. A boom box with CD player to listen to Faudel or Alla, or Thomas’s oud recordings. The PowerBook that my publisher gave me yesterday – before leaving for Casa, I had to return Pequod’s PC, the one I’d used to write \textit{Life Kills Me}.

I open it up. I click on \textit{Round-Trip Barbès}. And we’re off!

\textsuperscript{240} An unstructured cape-type garment woven of wool and worn by many Berber women of Morocco.
When we’ve strength, who backs away?
And who, ridiculous, when truly gay?241

Jilali Ammour! Screwed! He wanted to find me a room. He was taking care of everything! …Three calls on my cell phone, and it’s all set, son. You are kinda like my son, right?

No. I don’t need him to find a place for me; I don’t need him for anything.

“I can’t believe that bastard,” I said to Diop. “That ass wasted three hours of my time the night I arrived, two hours night before last, two more last night… I’m not his son, dammit! I’m not his nephew, not yet. And besides, if Zaïa marries him, I still won’t be his nephew, but his wife’s! He wants to play the moul dar with me? No way.

Diop looks confused: moul dar?

So I explain: the man who has authority over the entire family, the one who obliges, in both senses of the word. The protector, the guardian, the…

“Oh, the godfather!” he says cutting short my run-on explanations.

“Right, the godfather.”

And when I think about that nightmare of a dinner at the Terminus-Nord!

Jilali Ammour, swaggering, trumpets commands in a loud voice; Jilali Ammour snaps his fingers... The embarrassment! The maitre d’ offers menus to the ladies, but Jilali Ammour presumptuously has him understand that they wouldn’t know the correct way to order. Jilali Ammour takes charge. And, true, my mother and aunt, although they can both read, wouldn’t quite know what to say or what to do. They are much too intimidated. Intimidated and humiliated. Secretly humiliated. Zaïa, in private, can always say what she thinks to Jilali Ammour, can contradict him, even tease him. This actually amuses Jilali Ammour, excites Jilali Ammour, because it reinforces the high opinion he has of Jilali Ammour, of the broad mind of Jilali Ammour, of the generosity of Jilali Ammour. In public, Zaïa is submissive to her protector and intended; she keeps quiet. Like Mama, who’s visibly ill at ease here, in this bright and noisy place, where enormous mirrors highlight her embarrassment and discomfort.

Do I have to put up with this? No. But do I have the courage to make a scene, to get up, to take my mother somewhere else... Like a man, as they say. A real man! Except that would be flaunting my position as her closest male relation, playing the role of family boss, of the moul dar. That’d be provoking Jilali Ammour by acting just like him. Becoming another Jilali Ammour.

Assume in front of my mother and aunt a role that I don’t accept? Risk embarrassing them even more? Risk spoiling this reunion even more? No. Out of respect for these two women, whom I love, I have to let the moul dar go on humiliating them. I – like them, with them – must suffer in silence the big man’s show. I’d rather not, but what else can I do?
Having ordered for everyone, Jilali Ammour booms out jovially: “Well, Paul, what are you going to do, now that you’re back in France? Writing, that’s not a career. Unless you’re famous like that Ormesson guy, or that philosopher who writes detective stories, you know?”

“No, I don’t know.”

“Yeah, you know who I mean…”

“No.”

“The one who’s married to the blonde who had the facelift, the one you see in the magazines… Anyway, I know one thing, if you want to be a writer, you gotta go on TV. But that’s beside the point. What you need is a real job. To earn a living! I’ll find you a job! Two or three phone calls, a word from Jilali Ammour. Everybody respects Jilali Ammour. I have connections. Just tell me what you wanna do.”

“I ask for nothing.”

“You think you’ll make it long with what you’re gonna get from that book?”

“I’ll see.”

“There’s plenty of jobs! Not for shirkers, but for someone who wants to work…”

That’s news to the three million plus on unemployment. News to Fati, who’s been looking for two and a half years and who’s sent out over five hundred resumés. News to Pinocchio, who has his Masters and is still delivering pizzas while waiting for something better. News to Marie, who wanted to kill herself after her umpteenth unsuccessful interview. News to Salim’s mother, laid off at fifty and who can only find
unpaid stints as a trainee. News to Daniel, who couldn’t find anything either... Get stuffed! *Halouf!*

Just listen to the bastard slurp up his oysters!

The women keep quiet and I say nothing else, but it would take more than that to disturb Jilali Ammour. He talks and talks. The value of money, the value of work... Between two oysters he recites a maxim. Between mouthfuls of meat, a proverb.

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach...”

You said it, slob.

With the match-stick potatoes – his and the ones he eats from Zaïa’s plate – we get the whole story of his life. How Jilali Ammour, starting from nothing, made a fortune in spices... With the chocolate mousse, the wisdom of Jilali Ammour! With the coffee, financial advice from Jilali Ammour!

“You gotta put something aside, Paul.”

It reminds me of something Mr. Hamel use to say: “Save the money you can spare, and you’ll end up with money to spare.”

I’d gladly quote my old French teacher. But why? Neither cast pearls before... *halouf!* And anyway, the sooner we finish, the sooner I can meet up with Diop, Pinocchio, Sami, Salim and Salima – my friends.

Hallucinating from boredom, I stare at the blue band around the plate with the name *Terminus-Nord*. This morning I was in Casa.
Long ago, if my memory is true, my life was a feast...

With the brandy, Jilali Ammour lowers his voice: “What you make, Paul, pass it on to me. I’ll put it into something for us. I have friends, you know. You wanna keep some aside for everyday business… But for every ten you put in, we can get you twelve.”

Who’s this we? The slime. My father would have been horrified to hear such a thing, he who warned his sons, “If anyone ever suggests something in a low voice, refuse immediately; it’s automatically something shady. And if you don’t understand, don’t ask them to explain; it’s automatically something shady, I’m telling you.”

You should see him when the check comes, this Jilali! The way he opens his wallet with a majestic gesture. The way he takes out his gold card and holds it just so… so the hologram flashes in the light before he puts it on the check he’s looked over two or three times. But he hesitates, he changes his mind; at the last minute, he snatches it back from the waiter and pulls from his jacket pocket a thick wad of green. He counts out four new bills and snaps them between his chubby fingers… Not a crease. Suspicious. Automatically shady, as my father would have said. Rotten.

To think that my mother and aunt are in the care of this scum! But whose fault is that? Who abandoned them to run off to Casa?

I’d shirked my duty by going to live in Morocco. Morocco is also here… At least the Makhzen, whose hidden power reaches us here. The ways of the Makhzen rule, even here in France.

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242 Une Saison, p. 65.
“The Makhzen!” I say to Diop, scraping the back of my throat for the k, the h, and the z to better spit out my rage. Those ridiculous cretins who wear a tie under a white djellaba and shiny black shoes… Like the King!”

I hadn’t dared overtly defy Jilali Ammour. Now with no chance of ridicule, I throw myself into a violent diatribe against the cronyism and corruption that are summed up by the word Makhzen. I rehash what Madame Solal, Mademoiselle Khadija and the others who had the courage to talk about it, had said about the way things work back there. The State, the power, business, the administration… It’s all mixed in together. Organized misappropriation – a mafia that in Morocco controls everything and everyone. Everyone is manipulated by one more corrupt than he, to whom he, in turn, is obliged. We, as Jilali Ammour says. The friends.

Amused by my anger, Diop jumps around me boxing a phantom adversary. I go on: “From the little bean seller in the souk to the most rotten of the rotten, the commander of the faithful and the rotten, His Majesty the King – May God glorify…”

I embellish my exclamations with an extended middle finger. Diop breathes loudly, punctuating each one of my sentences with an ironic exhalation. To tell you the truth, he’s making fun of me… of my big mouth.

“Ammour has a French passport, but I’ll be damned if he doesn’t have a picture of the King hanging up at home.”

“Wheeeewwwwww!”
“Like all the shopkeepers back there.”

“Wheeeewwwww!”

“The Makhzen!”

“Wheeeewwwww!”

“The underworld! ‘Turn over to me what you save, and we’… Shit!”

“Wheeeewwwww!”

“No, stop. Don’t laugh… I don’t mean that the ’roccos and the rebeux are the only rotten ones. We both know how it is. Beni’s a Jew, Pequod’s whiter than white, pure roumie;243 but they’re all… Makhzen! And they’re everywhere. What can you do? But what really gets my ass is to think that my aunt Zaïa… That a family like mine… Hell! If my father could see that! It kills me. I’d like to know how she met him. I go to Casa, I come back five months later and my aunt is engaged to that fat pig loaded with money. I don’t get it.

One does wonder after all. I’m wondering, as the reader must be wondering. It seems so unlikely to our story, in this novel that really isn’t one: How did the modest Zaïa ever cross paths with the rich Jilali? Ah… the makings of a drugstore romance.

But it’s the absolute truth. I’m not inventing anything. Life is a book.

I ended up asking Mama, who told me, biting her lips as if to punish herself for her indiscretion, that years ago Zaïa worked for the Ammours; she took care of their children. With her goodness and lively spirit, they took to her right away. Her sweet

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243 North African term originally designating the Roman conquerors; now used to refer to any “white” occidental.
disposition, her friendly chatter, her special couscous... She was the good fairy of the household. And all the while, the lovely Rajaa Ammour was wasting away, lying feeble on her daybed, dressed in gold lamé from Firdaous Couture, Place de la Bastille.

Later, every time Jilali threw a big party – for his first million, for the purchase of his new house, for his eldest son’s coming of age – he’d ask my aunt to prepare the hors d’oeuvres and pastries, the punch, the mint tea, the rose water... Jilali’s wife, the mother of his children, passed away last year. As befits a good Moroccan, he had to have another, a younger one, set up in an apartment not far away – a false blonde with long lashes like those in the shows on MSC. But, as befits a good Moroccan, he had to have yet another, a more presentable one, to run his household. The ideal, for a widower such as he, would be a widow who would take care of him in his old age, a maternal wife, but one with no children by her first husband. Zaïa!

Poor Zaïa believes that Ammour loves her. And maybe Ammour believes he does too – a real good bargain. For three trinkets, some sweet talk and flowers, the Nokia cell phone with paid-up subscription, he gets an obedient wife who’ll watch over the maid and personally prepare the orange flower water that her dear Jilali must have before going to bed.... Something he was never able to get from Rajaa, however much Jilali that he is.

Zaïa is sixty years old. No, fifty-nine – I added a year in my first book. She became a widow at twenty-three. She’s refused arranged marriages ever since... in memory of her Mehdi, to devote herself to her younger sister and out of love for us. Do I have the right to make her see the abominable Jilali for what he really is? To open her eyes to what he really wants of her?
She must not have kept the promise she made when my father died to stop seeking advice from marabouts. She must have gone to see some fucking Ali Baba – one of those charlatans who sticks his card in every mailbox of the neighborhood. Just this morning I found another in mine.

Professor X

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I found out that these guys also are giving money under the table to those rotten bastards who run the Parisian Makhzen. We, the friends.

It had to have been a marabout, a marriage contractor, to have set up my aunt with Jilali Ammour. A set up, as they say. Barbès is a souk, a real bazaar.

Mama knows nothing about it. Or she knows but won’t say anything to me. Not from mistrust, but out of modesty. I have to tear her secrets out of her, read between the lines. With the horrible feeling that I’m hurting her. Such things are left unspoken in our house. Questioning one’s parents isn’t done. So I can’t insist.
But our modesty kills us. Daniel died of silence. My father never mentioned his suffering. Mama denies her own sadness. She suspects that her sister is making a mistake but won’t say anything to her. And Zaïa! Zaïa, so outspoken, so expansive, so indiscreet sometimes, except when it comes to talking about herself! I never knew she’d worked for that ouald al qabba!244 Damn it all! Our closest kin remain strangers. So close to one another, yet we die in silence.

Mademoiselle Khadija: “You’re fortunate, you have a way with words.”

Diop: “You should start boxing again.”

244 son of a bitch
Madame Khadija put it to me very simply: If I’d like to take her out… A suggestion honorably presented and honorably accepted. And it was her treat. A woman, however emancipated she may be, can’t go out alone in Casa. To go into a café is out of the question. Unless it was at the Igloo, behind the courthouse, where, in the daytime, two or three young businesswomen dare to brave the gaze of men… A woman can go into a bar or sit down at a café on the Corniche, so long as she is accompanied. Alone, she’d be taken for a prostislut.

Mademoiselle Khadija, former student at the Lyautey High School,\textsuperscript{245} hesitated between the standard term and a more vulgar word – the end result, prostislut. This made us both laugh.

“"She wouldn’t be served… no doubt about it.”

“Have you tried?”

“You must be joking!”

“Is it prohibited?”

“No, I don’t think so. The prohibition comes from within.” She thinks back nostalgically on her student days and life in the Latin Quarter. The pleasure, for a woman, to sit alone for an hour with coffee and a croissant… without anyone’s hitting on her.

\textsuperscript{245} One of the more prestigious schools in Casablanca; it is operated by the French Cultural Mission and the curriculum is that of the French national educational system.
She takes a childish pleasure now in using words she considers really slang. I tell myself that I’ll teach her a few more, and some real bitchin’ ones.

God knows why I suddenly feel so free. I’m not in hell anymore. Nothing is getting me down. This heat, this stench, this noise… I’m happy to be in Casa. Why? Well, for no reason at all. It’s just that – there isn’t one. Happiness knows no reason.

It’s a question of tact also: I can’t very well act less carefree than Mademoiselle Khadija, who exclaims as she leans over to open the door for me: “Get in and entertain me!”

How could I keep from thinking about what Madame Solal had told me? About the horrors she had survived… But she has the nervous gaiety, almost cruel, of those who have suffered greatly, but don’t want our sympathy.

However, everything she tells me must give her pain. She’ll probably never see Paris again; her passport has been confiscated. Even if she gets it back one day, she’d still need a visa. Might as well wait for a miracle – France issues so few of them! As we pass the consulate, she points out the gray stains left by visa seekers who lean there, back to the wall, from dawn to dusk.

“I’m ashamed for my country,” I say in a grandiloquent tone that makes her smile.

“Not you, please.”

She confides to me that she’ll never marry because she can’t have children. I’m afraid I know the reason; I don’t ask questions. She lives alone which, in Morocco, takes a lot of courage. Out of loyalty to her brother, who died a hero, she broke all ties with
her family when her parents went to the King to seek a pardon. I have this from Madame Solal.

Mademoiselle Khadija: “I make a good living. I have a few good friends. And this evening a handsome young man is taking me out for a drink. What more could I ask?”

I can also pretend to think that the tears in her eyes are due to the dazzling light – we’re driving into a blinding sunset. I put the visors down. The palms of Anfa\(^{246}\) seem like cutouts pasted onto a background of fiery sky... It looks so much like the illustrations in the adventure stories of my childhood, like those clichés that I used shamelessly in my compositions – “Oooh! Fiery sky! The little faggot!”

Mademoiselle Khadija: “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Me: “Yes, it’s beautiful.”

How’s that for dialogue.

At the café: romantic blue shade, cool air, cool piano... What more could I ask?

“Sparkling white wine?”

“Sparkling white wine it is.”

But the waiter did not understand. Mademoiselle Khadija had asked for a bottle, not two glasses. Doesn’t he hear that she speaks to him in Arabic? He addresses her in French, excuses himself in French.

\(^{246}\) An elegant residential quarter of Casablanca.
“No, he doesn’t hear me speak to him in Arabic,” she whispers to me. “He does not hear me speak to him in Arabic,” she insists.

“He doesn’t see that you…”

“That I’m an Arab? Not necessarily.”

“And what about me, does he see that I am?”

“First of all, I’d say that you look a little more Berber. But that’s not the question. I’m not sure that…”

“I don’t understand, I don’t understand. What does he see…?”

“Nothing. There’s nothing to see. That’s the way it is. You may be an Arab in France, but here…”

“I’m a Berber?”

“No! That’s not it. Not really Arab, not really Berber. You can’t tell. To see you…”

Unable to find the right words, she smiles. How to define the indefinable? Besides, the subject bores her.

“Tell me about Paris.”

But my Paris isn’t her Paris. She’s never seen Barbès, and I couldn’t find the Latin Quarter on a map. She talks about the cafés where she used to sit and read, the little art-house cinemas... She has a hard time believing me when I confess that I’ve never seen *Casablanca*.

“You’ve never seen *Casablanca*?”
“You’ve never read Remembrance of Things Past... We’re even.”

She laughs. Question: Is it your move, Pauly?

For the moment she has the advantage. She takes me next to a seafood restaurant near the port. After that, we go dancing at the Fandango. The night has just begun. It’s her invitation; she’s the one who pays.

“You remember our agreement, right Paul?”

“Yes. I take you out. I’m an escort... in a word.”

A little more and I would have said the wrong thing. Discomfort, ambiguous smiles, confrontation or complicity, questioning looks... An awkward situation.

At the port, Mademoiselle Khadja orders a second bottle of sparkling wine. The evening sparkles with excessive gaiety. The slightest word makes her laugh; she talks a bit too loudly. I have to remind her that we are not in a café in the Latin Quarter, but in a restaurant in Casablanca. There’s bound to be one or two informers at the neighboring tables, as well as a few friends of the King – May God perpetuate His illustrious reign!

“You’re right. Excuse me. Let’s dance.”

As we leave the restaurant, she wisely suggests that I take the wheel. Wisely?

“You know I don’t know how to drive; I don’t have a license.”

“Really?”

If she could imagine what my life has been up to now! If she only knew!

We weave a little on the road, but then no one drives straight in Morocco.
She turns so abruptly into the Fandango lot that I’m afraid she’ll run over the kid directing her... A ten year old? Eleven? Certainly no more. And it’s midnight. And he’ll still be there at two in the morning when we come out. Shit! What a country!

“You’ll at least let me give him ten dirhams, Khadija?”

“If that’s the price of your clean conscience, Paul, it’s a real bargain. Be my guest.”

_Hmar!_\(^{247}\)

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\(^{247}\) _Jackass (I am a...)_
For the first time in my life I don’t worry about not getting past the bouncers at the door… an A-rab in A-rabland! A Moor in Moorocco! Two heavy clods, real beefed-up blockheads, man the door at the Fandango. Agreeable as pit bulls, but they do wave me in… and with a phony smile to boot. If only Daniel could have seen that, he who so hated face-value judgements!

But just what is the selection criteria for these pumped-up Mr. Cleans in Fruit of the Looms?

“You don’t exactly look like a bum, Paul.” Mademoiselle Khadija explains. “And they know me here.”

What do I think of the Fandango? Sincerely?

“Shitty.”

“You said it.”

“Not the décor, but the crowd: Way cool rich kids, CKed and DKed, all Bossed-out and super blasé… Puke!”

Her comment in the parking lot really hit home; so I roll off some verbal twists in an attempt to forget it. But it flops.

“What?” She shouts through the techno blare.

“Nothing. Forget it.”

She grabs me by the wrists and pulls me to the dance floor.
I don’t know how to drive, I don’t know how much you’re supposed to give the kids who direct cars in parking lots at midnight, I don’t know how to dance. But they don’t dance any better, the little snots. Of all of them, Mademoiselle Khadija and I have the most… style, shall we say. Or so says me.
It was nearly two-thirty in the morning when together we pushed open the garden gate, holding it carefully to keep it from squeaking.

In the darkness that smelled of jasmine and orange trees, a coarse question pops into my head: *Jbed?* 248

As if she’d read my mind, Mademoiselle Khadija murmured: “Please, don’t kiss me.”

I lied: “It wasn’t my intention.”

“You shouldn’t expect anything else of me… You understand?”

I perceived a slight panic in her voice. I answered: “Yes, I understand.”

“Did Madame Solal tell you…?”

I lied a second time: “No, she didn’t tell me anything, but I understand.”

The words of Madame Solal came back to me: “She was broken…”

She must have guessed that I was lying. She rushed toward the stairs leading to her room and said without looking back: “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

She’d already closed her door when I hear myself answer: “It’s for me to thank you.”

248 *“Go for it?”*
Broken – all the nice people I meet in Casa are more or less. But I discover an unexpected pleasure: It’s certainly easier to make friends here than in Paris. Mademoiselle Khadija introduces me to her friendSaïd; Saïd introduces me to his friend Malika; Malika introduces me to her friend Noureddine; Noureddine introduces me to his friend Leina. They’re all rather surprised that I’ve chosen to live in Casa… And so am I! But that’s the way it is.

“No one chooses to live in Casa!”

I reply that otherwise I wouldn’t have had the chance to meet them. What else could I say?

If I’m asked what I do in life, I keep it vague.

“I write.”

As if I’ve been writing for years – that it was my career, when in fact my first book hasn’t come out yet… They have the tact not to insist. They’re not always judging others, they don’t push it. But it’s not indifference. On the contrary, it’s as if they know what it is that makes each person suffer or feel hurt. When I’m talking about myself spontaneously, and then stop, instead of encouraging me to continue, they say: “Excuse me, I was indiscreet…” Even though they had asked me nothing.

What class! I’d have stupidly said to myself in Paris. In Casa, I think: Simple, heartfelt courtesy.
And it’s not only that they have a refined way of speaking, but they also address me using the polite forms. But they don’t get heavy. Theirs is an elegant and light despair.

Occasionally Mademoiselle Khadija takes me to a party in a neighborhood some distance away. She warns me: “First we go through Hell.”

We drive a long time along rutted avenues, swerving between the potholes, wrecks and rubbish strewn over the shredded asphalt. We pass slums and more slums and go through dumps. Cigarette vendors, veiled women, kids playing football, carts, motorbikes and donkeys pop up in the beam of the headlights. For a hundred yards the way is lit by streetlamps that have managed to keep their bulbs – one out of two, one out of three… Then there are the abandoned, unfinished buildings, the shacks… And then we’re back in darkness. More vacant lots, more shacks, more vacant lots, and so on and so on. A heap of trash in the intersection, old tires and dead rats… Lights again… a slum again. Street lights again and palm trees… A residential neighborhood. A guard in the gatehouse at the entrance of a private drive, a truck from Rahal Caterers.

“Caterers to the King,” I said.

The gates open. Hell is behind us; in front of us, a paradisiacal garden and the sound of a fountain.

“You’re bringing me to meet the very rich?”

“No, comfortable, let’s say; and intellectual. The very rich and only rich, I have nothing to do with.”
But I’d never set foot in such a beautiful house. Doesn’t Mademoiselle Khadija understand? A marble hall, cushions, ottomans covered in silk brocade…

“Welcome, Paul!”

Diwan, Andalousian music, lemon and rose sorbet, conversation, joints, orange juice, Ait Souala – a syrupy red wine that makes you a little sleepy. And then that muted sentiment of impending disaster. All signs point to the end. Corruption has contaminated everything. Poverty is growing, as is fanaticism, and obscurantism in the universities. People no longer dare to speak about religion in front of their own children, and now their colleagues are coming to work wearing veils…. Every day, abandoned children arrive from the country by the dozens. They sleep in the streets, sniff glue and die at fifteen. And it’s feared that when Hassan II dies, things will only get worse… There is nothing left to hope for.

Noureddine: “I’m hoping for an earthquake. The big one! Bismillah!”

Casablanca is built on a fault line; from time to time a little tremor reminds us. And Casablanca is a rotting city. However, the insidious sweetness of life here is beginning to win me over. For the first time ever, I can let myself live, as they say. Living no longer seems so deadly. Living is just living.

I finally realize what is meant by to take one’s time. In Paris, time was lacking. In Casa, I have almost too much. Every minute that passes has its weight, its density, its heat, its odor… I’m not bored. I read more slowly; I read word by word. Rimbaud:

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249 Here, a large reception area.
Enlightened repose, neither fever nor languor, in the bed
or on the plain.\textsuperscript{250}

One day follows another, and they’re all alike.\textsuperscript{251} I get up late, I take a bath and
then I go stretch out in a lounge chair in the garden or drink coffee in the Habous quarter.
Or I go running – just a jog, without forcing myself – in Murdoch Park. Sometimes I go
on to the Park of the Arab League … Or I flag down a taxi and have myself driven to Ain
Diab. At the Bellerive, I take a chair in the row farthest from the ocean, away from the
shouts in the pool and from the noise of the games and the waves. I read in the shade.
My eyes go back and forth, from the horizon to the printed page.

\textit{Found again!}
\textit{What? Eternity.}
\textit{Sea and sun}
\textit{merge as one.}\textsuperscript{252}

I also have a notebook where I write down whatever goes through my head. A
second novel is beginning to take shape. The one you’re reading now.

In the evening, back at the villa, if Madame Solal asks what I’ve done with my
day, I’m satisfied to give an exaggerated shrug… And we laugh. Then we pick up our
conversation where we’d left off the night before.

\textsuperscript{250} \textit{Illuminations}, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{251} Lyrics of Joe Dassin, "\textit{Les journées se suivent et se ressemblent}" \textit{Salut les Amoureux}.
\textsuperscript{252} \textit{Une Saison}, p. 84.
"What were we talking about?"

"I was telling you that I'd like to continue writing... Incognito. So that no one will know what I do and how I live." Live hidden, apart, untouchable.

"I'd never have thought that you'd have held out so long here, my son."

"Two months today. One month more and I'll have overstayed my visa. An illegal alien in Morocco! No visa, no papers... Not quite the right way around."

I rather like the idea.

The muezzin chants the call to the last prayer of the evening. This evening, I can still hear it, but it no longer moves me. Soon, it won't surprise me to hear it: I'll no longer hear it.
Untouchable, unavailable, unassailable...Known but not known! Not seen, not compromised. A stowaway in life... The game is much more exhilarating here in France than in Morocco. Because here, it’ll be much harder to stay incognito.

Sami warns me: “It’s open season! The success of your book has got them all excited. If they find out that you’re back, they’ll put the whole pack on your trail.”

Tongue hanging out, he imitates the panting of a bloodhound. It makes me laugh.

“To live happy, live hidden....” I tell him. And, squinting and spitting, “Ah! The Beur’s quoting us the moral o’va fah’ble of Laah’ F’ontaine! The good Beur in the tradition of Azouz Begag, you know. Abbou! I leave with Rimbaud; I come back with La Fontaine.”

In Paris, how many know that I wrote Life Kills Me? In Casablanca, only Madame Solal and Mademoiselle Khadija, because I gave them the book, and then Noureddine. Here, twelve, thirteen ... maybe fifteen people, if I’ve got it right, no more. My publisher, of course. Sami. His wife, Marie. Her mother. Albert, a journalist friend who swore on his honor not to give out my real name. My friends – Diop, Pinicchio, Salim and Salima, Moh, Agnes, Thomas, Fati. Plus Mama and Zaïa... and, regrettably, Jilali Ammour. Sixteen in all.

\[253\] father
So really, the Parisian rumor that I don’t exist shouldn’t piss me off that much. Paul Smaïl doesn’t exist? OK, so let’s stop looking. Call off the dogs. *I is another*? Alas, no, I isn’t.

A week ago, the day after my arrival, I faxed Balland, telling them the shit was going to hit the fan. Walking on the Rue Dunkerque, I see a fax office. I step inside, scratch my fury onto paper; fifteen francs and it’s sent – ‘Ilah! Outside again, I felt as if I’d landed a good left hook... But today, I really don’t give a damn.

But yeah, I do! I understand that I mustn’t strike back if I want to remain a free man. I have to hold back, keep up my guard, duck, dodge... In short, refuse the fight. That fight. A dog fight. My answer will be in a book... This book. I’m a writer.


No, no, no! Barbès, my mansarded cabin, my table under the porthole, my rediscovered joie de vivre, my experience of exile and the notebook brought back from Casablanca.

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255 *Les Illuminations / Une Saison* pp. 33, 60, 82.
Thumbing through it, I come upon this:

*I thank God for having made me a citizen of a country where I am not obliged to believe in Him.*
A glance at the screen. I reread the last lines of an earlier chapter:

*Mademoiselle Khadija:* You’re fortunate. You have a way with words.

*And Diop:* You should start boxing again.

Diop’s right. Writing isn’t enough. I haven’t exhausted my rage against Jilali. Words don’t do anything. I’ve got to go back to Mr. Luis’s. No problem – and since my time is my own, I go. I quickly shove a towel, shorts and sweats into my duffel bag... I slam the door – run to the métro.

Barbès-Rochechouart, Place de Clichy, La Fourche... The first time I took this route I was in my socks, dragged by my father – see pages 30, 31, 32 of *Life Kills Me*. Avenue de Clichy... The back alley. The stairs.

Sweat, sawdust, wax, leather, resin, liniment – the familiar odors again. And the dirty light that falls at an angle from the skylight. And the noise, the smacks of jabs on the punching bags, the whistling of the jump ropes, the rusty squeak of the lockers... However, no one’s noticed the six-month absence of the author.

Mr. Luis only says: “Huh! He’z back. ’Chu dried out.”

It takes me a few seconds to understand that he’s not commenting on my disappearance, but the fact that I’d lost weight in the sun of Casablanca – I’ve withered a
bit. I was a light heavyweight, now I've dropped down to middleweight class: less than 165 pounds.

As for Farid: “Wass’up!”

Gamal: “Wass’up!”

Taouif: “Wass’up!”

Just a quick slap of the palms and basta. They could give a fuck... wouldn't give a fuck with what's up or what’s fucked up with Paul Smail. Whaloo!256

Everyman for himself here, and the same goes for me. Any questions? No. No curiosity. I wouldn’t have to hide anything from them; I wouldn’t have to improvise, elude or lie. But damn! Such indifference shouldn’t bother me. It has its good side too. With these guys, it’s no great effort to keep to myself. Often, in Morocco, I’d tell myself that I’d never be able to live as a Moroccan, constantly under the eye of others, victim of their thoughtfulness, of their attentions. In the end their scrutiny and excessive concern drove me crazy. I thought: If liberty comes at the price of indifference, give me indifference. The rather suffocating kindness of the people there had become intolerable. In the middle of the medina in Marrakech, I started snapping like the nasty little lapdog of some white-ass French guy.

“Enough of your ever-solicitous salams, fuck! Leave me the hell alone!”

Yes, that was me. Now I’m ashamed.

Did I say I prefer indifference? Here, I'm overwhelmed with it: I leave, I come back six months later... “Wass’up!” Period.

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256 *absolutely nothing*
I don’t have my hands taped, I put on the gloves and I choose the heaviest bag in the gym, heavier than I am – the Everlast. I mentally cram it with all the subjects of my rage: the rumor, the press agent who spread that shit about me, the fools who say I didn’t write the book, the racist drivel... The prick who titled his article: “Mutterings of a Maghrebi”... And the other, “Bitching Beur.” The editor who told Sami that the book was too intelligent to have been written by a Beur... Screw them all! But also, while we’re at it, the Makhzen, the King of Morocco, We...The friends... Slime like Jilali Ammour. The scum who scheme ten grand into twelve. Marabouts who abuse the trust of women like Zaïa... La Chapelle\textsuperscript{257} dealers who hand out freebies to fifteen-year-olds to get them hooked... The killers in Algeria... The religious and their accomplices who can sentence a writer to death for the superfluous word but can’t spare a word to denounce the massacres, as Moh says so well... The Fundamentalists... The National Front, the café owners in the towns around Aix-en-Provence... Employers... Social policies... Directors of human resources ... The stock market... That irritating advertisement that I saw on my way here: \textit{Anyone can be a cyberman! Click here!}

Anyone, yeah.

I punch, one punch then another. Jabs, left, right, uppercut, uppercut, crosscut, direct, left, left again, jabs, jabs, left, right, left, left, right, left, uppercut, uppercut, uppercut... Le Pen – ‘llah! Hassan II – ‘llah! Jilali Ammour – ‘llah!

\textsuperscript{257} Area adjacent to Barbès and, like Barbès, heavily populated with African and Asian immigrants.
I left tired but happy, light-hearted, walking in the rain of this Monday, December 1st. I wasn’t going to get back on the métro, didn’t want to see at every station that idiotic fool proclaiming that anyone could be a cyberman — just click. I was a free man! Untouchable! Night was falling, and I went back home humming Abadou. My wooly hood muffled the world around me, muted the noise of the traffic and cut from my line of vision all that I didn’t want to see. Was it raining? It was raining. Did I care? I didn’t care. In Casa it never rained. Or rather, the rains were devastating — deluges to drown the world. Not like these fine Parisian rains, so light that you’re humming Abadou while dodging, in extremis, with agile footwork and a lively twist of the chest, the pizza deliverer in shiny red who rushes full throttle on an asshole’s walkway… A pal from Speedzza?

“Micky?”

“Wass’up!”

But he’s already gone.

\[ El’ Atti ou hna \]
\[ El’ Atti ou hna abadou...^{258} \]

At La Fourche, shooting stars have fallen onto the pavement. Sirens, flashing blue lights… a big red truck with a revolving light and a high ladder, like the one

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^{258} The Provider and we, the Provider and we, his servants...
promised to Daniel, but a real one here. Cheers and applause when two firemen, perched on the ledge in acrobatic equilibrium, hang the word Christmas in the sky.

A street sweeper brushes into the gutter the broken bulbs that had spelled out a luminous Merry.

Daniel: “Paul, Santa Claus is for everybody, right? He’ll come to our house too?”

Me: “And why wouldn’t he come to our house, little brother?”

Daniel: “’Cause, well…”

I guessed the reason behind his worry – we aren’t Christian – but I don’t want him to think that I’ve understood the sense of his question. Or explain to him that Santa Claus isn’t Baby Jesus, that he’s no more Christian than he or I. So I say:

“’Cause why?”

“Well, ’cause…” He doesn’t go on.

I reassure him: “Well, yeah, little brother, you’ll get your fire truck… I’ll help you write the letter.”

“Yeah! On pochman paper!”

“Parchment, dumb ass, I already told you!”

“Nagib and Yared say that it’s their dad…”

“Santa Claus? Nagib and Yared, they say anything!”

“Then, if you can say anything, why can’t I say pochman?”
“Nagib and Yared can go get fucked!”

“But why can you say anything and I can’t say pochman?”

“Because I’m the oldest.”

(I’d forgotten that one, Daniel.)

I continue on my way under the Christmas lights, hooded in wet wool and memories. Christmas, Avenue de Clichy, Christmas, Place de Clichy, Christmas, Boulevard de Clichy...

*Christmas on earth!*259


And next? The last words of the poem?

*Slaves we, but let us not curse life!*260

I should continue along in the rain and in the stream of lights of Boulevard Rochechouart, but on a whim I turn left, onto Rue des Martyrs. To go past *Le Modern*.261

259 *Une Saison*, p. 90.
260 Ibid.
261 The *hôtel de passe* in which Smaïl worked as night watchman in *Life Kills Me*. 
And whom do I see, as brightly dressed as a sunset over Ain Diab? None other than Pequod. A Pequod even more Pequod than in my book, where I'd allowed myself to add a little shiny lilac polyester and white vinyl imitation snakeskin to dress him up. This time I don't need to invent: He's wearing a tightly belted mauve nylon suit striped with burgundy ultra-suede, and two-tone crocodile skin cowboy boots, gold-green and plum.

"Damn! What class!"

But he neither saw nor heard me. He gets into a racing-type sports car and takes off, tires squealing. He's gone so fast that I don't have time to note the make or model, only the blazing silver metal and enough fog lights to blind the passersby.

"Showy bastard," yells big Lulu scornfully. I recognize the giant in the blond wig and tiara, decked out today brighter than ever. "His little gift before Christmas! Pequod! New wheels every three months! S'if he grows his own money. I dunno how he does it. You still working for him, handsome?"

"Naah."

"You've got some pretty eyes, you know!"262 I just get all wet when I see you, but I hardly see you anymore! You're better looking than ever. And you've got the dick to match, I bet! You give me a super hard-on! Touch! Come on touch it! If you want...."

"OK, Lulu! I'll think about it! Some other time. No, wait, I have a question for you: Was it you who slashed his white leather jacket?"

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262 Le Quai des Brumes, dir. Marcel Carné with Jean Gabin, Michele Morgan, France, 1938.
“I wish! The little fucker!”

I ask him about the new blonde wig and rhinestone tiara; he laughs and tells me that he’s hoping to pass for the reincarnation of Princess Diana.

“There’s a niche!”

“A niche?”

“You know, a new market! Limited, but a market. Hafta know what the client wants and adapt.”

“And are there some who…”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m illusioning...”
I continue toward Montmartre, toward the Square des Abbesses... Instinctively. It was here that I used to wait for Myriam. Sitting on this bench.

This was also the setting of the bookstore in my novel; the bookstore, run by the one I'd nicknamed The Abbess, where I'd made my thunderous debut in the business. I'm illusioning, as Big Lulu would say. In my way, I'm illusioning. But - Wow - No, I'm not illusioning anymore; I must be hallucinating! Reality imitates literature. I'm certain that the bookstore that I see two steps from the square didn't exist when I wrote my book! Or at least then it wasn't called Bookstore des Abbesses.

I go in. The clerk confirms that yes, in fact... Did I blush when I asked the question? She's smiles more that Madame Moriot, and her shop is certainly less monastic than Books on the Hill. I leave my duffel bag next to the counter. Madame Moriot always made her clients do that even though the store had a theft alarm - beep beep. Here, where there is none, she tells me: "Oh, please, that's not necessary."

Life Kills Me is there, tabled as we'd say at Madame Moriot's. It's among the recent arrivals, wrapped in a red band indicating your bookstore recommends this book. Fanfare for the artist, whose heart beats Pomp and Circumstance, pom, pa-pa-pa, pom pom... And the winner is ... ladies and gentlemen, Paul Smai! Standing ovation, please! All rise and applaud! Author! Author!

Did I blush?

263 The owner of the bookstore in which Smai was a clerk in Life Kills Me.
I try very hard to effect an indifferent air as I thumb through French novels displayed around mine – bi kher. A few are wrapped with the red band of literary prizes. Usually you only need to skim the first page to know if you’re dealing with a writer. The first page? The first line is enough, the incipit even. Here! Reread the very first sentence of the book that you have in your hands. Isn’t that the work of a writer?

I open one book after another. The Goncourt Prize… The Renaudot Prize… Shit, what is this trash? I burst out laughing. Look how he writes, the old fart. And that one. And that. They all reek of mold and mildew… of decrepit France, Sami would say. (Me, rebeu that I am, why I’d never!)

Did I put that one down a bit too noisily? The clerk asks me: “May I help you?”

“Uh…”

And then she hands me – ouch! Life Kills Me.

“Have you read it?”

Did I blush?

I answer her grumbling, refusing the book with my hand: “No, no, no thank you.”

Now it’s her turn to blush. “Excuse me, I didn’t mean to…”

I start over: “No, it’s me, it’s all right.”

She suddenly seems as embarrassed as I am. To have proposed to a Beur the novel of a Beur? Out of discretion, because she remembers that in the book, the hero, the author, rebuffs – and how! – the clerk who insisted that he read only Arab writers? Or is

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264 Good
it that she sees a resemblance to the man in the drawing on the book jacket? Salima, Fati, Marie, Madame Solal, Mademoiselle Khadija – all claim that I am the spitting image. But not me – no one sees himself as he really is.

You can feel the uneasiness between us. For an instant, I was about to confess… But no, I can’t do that. I can’t give up my freedom.

I put an end to the discomfort by simply saying: “OK, I’ll take it.”

Did I blush?

“Is it a gift?”

I blabber: “Gift? Uh… yeah, yeah, a gift.”

A gift for whom?

I left like a thief, the gift-wrapped package inside my jacket, next to my heart. I walked up to the bench in the Square des Abbesses. And suddenly I felt as if I were broken in two by an ineffable pain. I wanted to cry out… I thought about Myriam – the real Myriam. Whose name isn’t Myriam.
That's twice I'd almost confessed my crime.

Back in Paris for a few days at the end of August, I'd seen Life Kills Me in the windows of all the bookstores. My first reaction was the brusque and childish desire to proclaim to the passersby that I was the author! ...That that was me on the cover! — my likeness on the jacket, my pen name, if not my real name. At least Paul was my given name, and I could prove it! Then straightaway, a second reaction: a terrible feeling of shame, a kind of religious shame — the shame of a Muslim. The Koran prohibits human representation; I had profaned in putting my life in a novel. My life, that was bad enough. But the lives of others too! The lives of those I loved and who would feel betrayed... Mama, Myriam. The lives of those who are dead and could never put forth the truth — their side, anyway... My father, my brother.

A tome honoring the dead... a tomb. Tomb for Yacine, tomb for Daniel... And tomb for me, the author. My book featured in the window of the bookstore; my face in faiyum,265 a leaden image, palid, death-like, eyes like two black holes, mouth contorted... Frightening.

Why did I go back there? Why did I return to Casablanca, which I'd already begun to hate? To escape, of course! To escape from myself. I hated Casa but hated myself even more.

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265 Faiyum is the name given to the type of painted portraits representing those persons mummified in the necropoles of the province of El Faiyum in Egypt.
Departure, September 1st. Just as things were starting up again after the summer... the new literary season. My success terrified me. For a second time I was abandoning my mother. My mother, dressed in black by Victoire this time. A bitter victory.

And Zaïa, although I was unaware of it then, had let herself be persuaded by a marabout on Rue Poissonniers to accept the attentions of Jillali. The entrails of a chicken, gutted alive on the night of a full moon, a knot in the bookmark of a Koran, a spoonful of molten lead cast into water from the sainted village of Moulay-Idriss – all foretold a happy marriage.

I told no one else the date or time of my departure; Diop didn’t accompany me to Orly.

Pangs of anguish at take-off – as if the plane were not only lifting us from the earth’s pull, but tearing us from earthly existence. The steward had to tell me to keep my seatbelt fastened. I was ready to get up and run toward the door even as the engines roared at full throttle.

“So you haven’t had enough?” exclaimed Madame Solal who had come to meet me at the Mohamed V Airport. “Must you punish yourself still? Your fists are clenched, ready to get back to the fight... But your adversary is you, Paul! And life is not a boxing match.”

No, I wasn’t yet down for the count, as one says in the ring. I was still standing.

Dazed, KOed, but still standing. With glazed eyes, I watched the infernal countryside go by on the S-114. Red dust under a leaden sky, hills of garbage, cinder-
block shacks, scraps of iron, tin and plastic in corrugated sheets... shelters for thousands of the wretched. All the horror of what I was returning to rang out. All that I abhorred in the Kingdom. The ever-present portrait of the King – in the tire retreading stall, on the cart of the fishmonger, even on the fold-out table of the old man who sells two or three eggs and a couple of eggplants in the souk. And the mokkadem who has his shoes shined while watching the street from behind the mirrored lenses of his Raybans. And his friend who chews on a siwaak, a following me with his eyes as I enter this café in the Houbous quarter... And having to haggle with the florist from whom I’m buying this bouquet for Madame Solal – he’d despise me even more if I didn’t bargain.

In no time at all I take up my old habits, my old schedule – là – my unschedule. I read in the garden. I doze on the terrace at the Bellerive. In the evenings I take Mademoiselle Khadija out. Or she takes me to visit her friends, so refined, so depressed, who deplore the misery of this country where they, too, live as if in exile.

What am I doing in Morocco? What is keeping me here? Keeping me here when my publisher is calling from Paris, letting me know that my book is a success, that the reviews are very good.

Here, too, they’re good.

“There’s a nice article in Libération,” I tell him. “Our Libération.”

I’ve said “our” spontaneously. I was speaking of the Casablanca daily. Have I become Moroccan without realizing it?

266 Twigs or cut wooden strips used for dental hygiene.
Maybe. Here I don’t feel at all ashamed to see my novel in bookstores. On the contrary, I’m proud. Although I don’t let on, my heart is beating faster on this September evening as I enter Book Junction and immediately spot it there, stacked amidst piles of other books. I suddenly have the urge to shout that I am the author – me, here before you, in flesh and bone. But how would that look?

No. Better nothing said. Out of modesty. Stowaway on board, tranquilly strolling the aisles, thumbing through a book or two, exit… I don’t remember why I entered or what title I was looking for.

I push open the door. In the stifling heat I hear the muezzin from the nearby Maarif mosque chant the call to evening prayer. I go back in. I’ll stay a few minutes more in the cool, air among the books. As Monsieur Hamel used to say: “The sole consolation, Paul.”
So I left for the imperial city of Marrakech – splendor of Morocco, Daniel! That such splendors should be unknown to me had astounded my friends in Casa. (The reader will note that I have learned at least one thing in Morocco: a strict respect for the agreement of tenses – “that it should be unknown... Oh, the little faggot!”) And they never ceased repeating:

“But, Casa is not Morocco!”

Me: “A metropolis said to be modern because all possible taste has been avoided in the interiors and exteriors of its dwellings as well as in the planning of the city itself.”

Malika: “What? You’ve never been to Marrakech, Paul?”

Saïd and Leina, together: “Ah! Marrakech, Paul!”

Noureddine, who has to spend a few days there, suggests that I accompany him. His parents can put me up. They have a big house in Gueliz, the new part of the city.

“So Marrakech it is! ... Allach là?”

Allach là Allach là Allach là... the wheels resound on the rails. Adventure at last, why not?

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\(^{267}\) Les Illuminations, p. 28.

\(^{268}\) Why not?
The air-conditioning of first class isolates us from the desolate countryside, from a Rimbaud-like melancholy: red earth haze, adobe villages, underbrush yellowed by the summer, trees – ash gray and leafless, dry riverbeds. Noureddine overwhelms me with recommendations for those times when I’ll be on my own in the city. But at last I convince him to use the familiar tu with me.

His parents welcome me with an excessive kindness that I find embarrassing. And they repeat the advice their son had given me on the train. To hear them, their fellow citizens are nothing more than a pack of cut-throats and bandits; they speak of them with a vocabulary straight from cloak and dagger stories. I could easily imagine myself in a novel by Alexandre Dumas.

“Don’t get yourself hoodwinked by the scoundrels!”

While waiting, it’s they, I find, who smother with their solicitude. Had Madame Solal not taught me the rudiments of Moroccan courtesy, I don’t know what... Damn!

_Hafif_,²⁶⁹ Paul! Be calm, cool – smile... Don’t get yourself riled! Don’t forget that not too long ago you were night watchman in a fuck hotel on Rue des Martyrs, that you slapped on the vomit sauce and flattened dough at Speedzza. You wanted to move up the social ladder? Well, here you are. Casablanca – Marrakech in first class, a villa in Gueliz... A lackey serving mint tea in harem-pants and white vest, complete with fez and slippers. Just like the illustration on the cover of Fabulous Tales from Morocco that you got for Christmas... And here too, birds of paradise chirping in a finely crafted brass cage. Ah! Marrakech, Paul!

²⁶⁹ _lighten up_
But after all, I don’t look like a tourist. I’m not a tourist! No camera, no guide book under my arm, no pack on my back or slung over my shoulder, no fanny-pack bouncing over my balls, no pack at all. No shorts, no sandals, no hiking boots either, no ten-pocket vest, no sun hat, no cap worn straight or backwards, no tee shirt – not Club Med, not Kuoni, not Thomas Cook-Cock-ups! No tee shirt at all. Dark glasses? Yes, dark glasses. But all the young Marrakchis wear them as soon as they step out of the covered streets of the Medina. In direct sunlight, you have to.

And just like them, I wear jeans and white shirt. I don’t sightsee with my nose in the air nor gawk at the circle of Gnawa musicians at Place Jemaa-el-Fna.270 I haven’t opened my mouth… And I look like I look.

Yet people speak to me in French – even the kids from here. To offer me hash, a whore, contraband cigarettes, to change my money on the black market or a simple “What’s your pleasure?” Just like Barbès.

How do they know? I haven’t opened my mouth, haven’t said a single word! But they don’t doubt for an instant that I’m not from here. But how can they tell that I’m not from here? Is it my walk? Some gesture that I’m unaware of? I don’t know… The way I roll up my sleeves? I don’t know. The way I slide the stem of my sunglasses into the buttonhole of my shirt collar? Damn! I don’t know! What the hell is it? What?? Do they at least see that I’m an Arab? A-rab, rag-head, desert rat, camel jock, Ali Baba, sand nigger... North African Male, as the cops put it in their files.

270 The Gnawa are a North African ethnic minority that trace their origins to West and sub-Saharan African slaves.
The tourists, they make no mistake; that is, they mistake me for a native – yeah, an A-rab!

Some Pierre and his Françoise come up to me: “The Menara, please, my friend?”

“No, the Medersa, Pierre!”

“Are you sure? The Medersa?”

“Ah no, you’re right, the Medina. The Medina, my friend?”

Menera, Merdersa, Medina... Merde! And then they spout this exaggerated “my friend,” those dickheads! And right off the bat they use the tu form, the dickheads! Since the formal vous doesn’t exist in Arabic – it says so in their guidebooks – they think they’ll be all the more respected by the natives if they act warm and friendly. That’s in their guidebooks too: “Don’t be too reserved and you’ll quickly make friends...” Sic.

Or, on the other hand, they go overboard to have you know that they’re acutely aware of their “intrusion into a culture equal in dignity to their own...” Re. Without imagining for a second that such obstinate insistence on formality is even more condescending. Self-conscious backpackers and embarrassed tourists, coming to a poor country for intellectual enrichment! Madame Moriot types, all of them! Well-meaning

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271 The Menara Gardens consist of a vast expanse of olive trees irrigated by a central lake near which is a small Moresque-style pavilion. The pavilion is commonly referred to as “the Menera.” The gardens, lake and pavilion date from the 12th century.

272 The Ibn Youssef Medersa was formerly a Koranic school. Founded in the 14th century, it was a self-contained university for approximately 850 students: mosques, libraries, gardens, student lodgeing, etc. It is accessed through the Medina.
hypocrites who think that poverty is picturesque and the natives, noble. Why the fuck
don’t they just go visit Mantes-la-Jolie or Val-Fourré!273

And that dumb ass over there! All the gear for his Camel Adventure orientation
trek: backpack, ventilated vest, water bottle complete with plastic tube for continuous
hydration, special t.p. holster, first aid kit, Gatorade, legionnaire’s cap, and a laminated
map of Marrakech which he wears like a bib.

Jacques asks: “Bab Jdid?”

“Me don’t know.”

(Me, standing under the sign written in French that points to Bab Jdid, do so
know, M’seuur, but me fed up.)

And then – it’s my lucky day! – two more white-ass Frenchies, weighed down
with backpacks, Nikons, video cameras and tripods, ask me to show them Jemaa-el-Fna
Square. They’ve just stepped out of Club Med, the address of which is 1, Jemaa-el-Fna
Square, and they have to ask me the way to Jemaa-el-Fna Square!

And so the guy from Barbès responds in an elaborate dialect chock full of choice
obscenities conjured up from his native jargon, casting doubt on the virtue of their
mothers and suggesting imminent anal aggression, but in a tone so polite and humble that
they feel obliged to thank him even though he hasn’t answered their question.

“Never mind, Raymond. He doesn’t understand.”

“But I said it right, didn’t I?”

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273 Two cities in the greater Paris region with large immigrant populations.
I play the wise guy, but it doesn’t last long. A few minutes later in a passage of the Koutoubia,²⁷⁴ two veiled Berber women rush up to me, backing me against the wall. One of them has a sleeping baby in her arms. I can’t get away without getting rough, and I might hurt the baby... So I give in. She announces: “You’re French!”

How did she guess? I could say no, try to deny it – but what’s the use? She’s already slipped a bracelet into my shirt pocket.

“‘It’s for good luck! Baraka!’” she tells me. “‘It’s for you. A gift. You can’t refuse!’” Then she takes out more bracelets. “‘This one’s for your wife! Solid silver... low price! I’m like Monoprix – more for your money!’

I smile. I’ve been had and I know it. But I can’t help laughing to hear her quote the supermarket slogan.

“I used to live in Paris. Rue des Poissoniers. But no visa, and Pasqua kicked me out... Buy the bracelet for your wife! Real Berber craftsmanship! Look, guaranteed pure silver! Look, I’ll rub it on the wall. See? It’s not plated! Three hundred dirhams.”

“A hundred...”

“Three hundred dirhams, what’s that to you? I’ve given you good luck for life! I’m not cheating you, I’m a Berber!”

“Me too.”

²⁷⁴ A quarter of the city that takes its name from the Koutoubia Mosque, one of the oldest in North Africa.
Did she even hear what I just said?

"Baraka for life..."

No. There's no escaping destiny. Screwed, Pauly! Ripped off like any other tourist in the Koutoubia! I laughed and before I knew it, I'd started to bargain. Something I'd never have done in Barbès, where I know how to look without being suckered. *Ouald l'...* \(^{275}\) Resistance is futile.

All the more so because the other Fatima, more heavily veiled, practically burka'ed, and who hasn't uttered a word, is no more Fatima than I am, I suddenly realize. The build of a heavyweight under the robe. A honcho, we'd say in Barbès... I could handle him, but I'd just as well hand over a hundred dirhams and be done with it. I give him a hundred, Honch snatches another out of my hands; his accomplice tosses me a bracelet that falls to the ground, and the two take off running. *'Llah!*


Understand what? That there's nothing to understand, as Mademoiselle Khadija said?

I finally bend over to pick up the bracelet. When I do, the other falls out of my pocket. The one that was supposed to protect me. Ill omen?

\(^{275}\) *son of a...*
Sick at heart, I went back to Jemaa-el-Fna Square. Like the night before, I sat on the terrace of the Café de France. At sunset the view extends all the way to the rose-colored snows of the Atlas Mountains. And rose-colored, too, the walls and minarets, rose, the lamps that light the square, rose, the smoke from the cooking fires, rose, the clouds in a rose-colored sky...

*O pleasures, O world, O music!*\(^{276}\)

Alcohol isn’t served in the cafés of the Medina, but the snake charmers’ plaintive flutes and the bitter chants that rise in the torrid evening air intoxicate just as well.

Is it the Berber blood in me? The continuous rhythm of the bendirs and the raw, piercing sounds of the *awadas*\(^{277}\) make me happy. I suddenly want to believe that I do have good luck.

Then I left the Café de France to join the gaping tourists who surround the troupe of Gnawas. Nourreddine found me in the crowd.

He explains that they are performing a dance of sacred origin. Dance gives trance and from there, *m’louk.*

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\(^{276}\) *Illuminations,* p. 46.

\(^{277}\) *oud players*
“The m’louk is... How can I say it? Forgetting oneself. Feeling in the flesh one’s own inexistence. One’s nothingness. Living one’s death, so to speak...” But he interrupts himself, suddenly remembering something he needed to tell me: “Oh, someone called from Paris and wants you to call back as soon as possible...”

He hands me his cell phone and the scrap of paper with the number.

*One must be entirely modern,* Rimbaud said it. But, of course, I’m not going to call Paris from Jemaa-el-Fna Square amid the healers, the storytellers, the monkey sellers, the drummers and the swirling Berbers... And all these tourists who circle around them. No way!

But Noureddine, thinking my refusal to use his phone is out of consideration for him, insists so much that I’m finally forced to accept.

I walk away from the Gnawa musicians and call my publisher. What can he have to tell me that could be so urgent?

“I am sorry to inform you, Paul, but you don’t exist!”

“M’louk!”

“There’s a rumor going around that you don’t exist,” he repeats, laughing.

He adds that the rumor is growing, and that he’s being bombarded by the press. He’d like to send me some questions from a journalist. He wants me to answer – just this once.

“OK,” I say. “For the first and last time. Go ahead and send it, Jean-Jacques.”

Then, laughing: “Too bad I don’t have a portable fax on me.”

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278 *Une Saison*, p. 91.
The connection is broken. I go back to Noureddine.

"Nothing serious?" he asks.

"No, I just learned by satellite that I don't exist. The m'louk, I guess!"

I give him a big smile. I've neither drunk nor smoked. And I'm not crazy either. I listen in awe to the yodeling of a Berber dancer, a piercing shrill - joy and pain, ecstasy... *hal*. 279

The fax arrives the next day at Noureddine's parents'.

Maybe I can use his laptop for a couple of hours?

"Please, be my guest, as long as you like. It's all yours, I never use it."

Leisurely lounging on a cushion in the shadow of a tent in the Palms, a café in the Palmeraie, I composed my answers to the questionnaire. The stillness, the singing of the birds, a slice of blue sky between the white canvas, the canopy that flutters in the soft breeze, a camel kneeling in the sand... The land of our childhood dreams, Daniel! On Rue Ordener we stop for the night to make camp amid the mirages. We build a fire to keep the jackals at bay. We plot our destiny in the stars...

"Queequeg?"

"What?"

"Are you asleep?"

"Yes."

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279 bliss
My destiny would find me one day in September, 1997, under a tent opulently set up in a grove of palms, composing, by means of a Word program, a page that I'll later fax to Paris:

I reread the last lines:

I am happy to have chosen exile and silence. Three publishers were fighting over my book. I quickly understood what I was risking: becoming the token Beur, the fashionable Beur, the "good Beur." Therefore, I signed with the one who assured me of anonymity and offered me enough money to live here and continue to write. And that's that.

And that's that. Back in Gueliz, I fax it from Telsat, International & Telefax, a kiosk on a corner of the highway to Casablanca. Crouched in front of it, a barefoot shepherd in rags watches over three goats nibbling on the grass that grows between the cement slabs. This is Morocco, Daniel! This is the world. Our world. It's not quite the way we had imagined it.

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280 This message appears in Le Novel Observateur, "Smail nous écrit du Maroc," faxed to Anne Crignon, 9 October 1997, p. 138.
“It’s all the more unbearable that there are fax machines and satellite dishes: One can see, one can know what goes inside the the walls of the jail... Algeria is a jail. A prison and a penal colony: a prison for the women, who stay at home; and for the men, a penal colony – the street. The guys, no jobs, in the street all day long, leaning against the walls, fantasizing about girls as in the stories of Fellag\footnote{Mohammed Said Fellag is an actor and stand-up comedian born in the Kabyle region of Algeria. At present, he lives in exile in France.}... Naturally, they end up blowing a fuse. And if they join up with their brothers, the killers of the AIS,\footnote{Army of Islamic Salvation} it’s not to follow the teachings of the Koran, it’s simply because they don’t have a girlfriend! They can’t shoot their wad... So they shoot Kalachnikovs and throw pipe bombs. Massacre with axes... Because love between men and women like on TV is forbidden, because simply speaking between men and women like on TV is forbidden. Everything is forbidden! Everything is... indecent. \textit{H’chouma.}”

“One thing I learned in Morocco is that there is no way to tell a girl ‘I love you’ in Arabic.\footnote{“I love you” can be said in both standard and classical Arabic. The author here is relying on reported dialogue: “...pourtant arabophone, n’a jamais dit “je t’aime” qu’en français. Le language et les codes amoureux n’existent pas dans la langue algérienne.” Cited by Florence Aubenas in “Portrait d’un Humouriste Algérien au sommet de son art,” (Paris: \textit{Libération}, 26 March 1998).} There are no words for it. \textit{H’chouma.”}

Moh, Sami, Diop and I had gotten together for a couscous at a place on the Rue des Poissonniers. We’re deploiring the everyday sequestering of women in North African countries as we down a bottle of red... “Just us men, see?” That makes us laugh.

“Down with it!”
I also see that Moh, as soon as he starts talking about his country, or about sex, or worse, about love, and more dangerous still, about Islam, begins to look around furtively—left, right, over his shoulder—to make sure that no one at the other tables is listening. Just like he would have done in Algeria, or the way he would have done in Morocco. And we’ve all lowered our voices.

Not that there’s any real danger in a bar in Barbès. Not yet. But...

“Korrrection korrranic,” I say in the mocking tones of Fellag.

Sami, who has undeniably the lightest skin color of all of us, is probably the most vehement—although vehement in a low voice: “And all those white asses who don’t let up about respect for religions! Hands off my headscarf, hands off my yarmulke, hands off my cross... Damn! Give us Voltaire! And quick!”

“That’s also what they said in Morocco. Not ‘damn,’ but ‘Voltaire!’ ‘We want Voltaire.’ ‘We need a Voltaire.’”

Mademoiselle Khadija, Noureddine, Malika, Saïd... they all said it.

That’s also what I thought yesterday coming back from Professor Si Kif’s, who practices a little farther up the Rue des Poisioniers. Zaïa finally admitted that she had gone to see this witch doctor and that he’d been the one who persuaded her to marry Jilali Ammour.

When I start to tell about my visit, Diop cries out: “Shit! I can’t believe it! You didn’t go to Si Kif!”

“Hold on! Did I say I went for a séance?”

“What the fuck else if not find a job, fidelity in love, cancer cured!”

“You certainly know a lot about it for a guy who’s never seen a marabout!”
“I wish! That bastard took my mother for every cent she had! All her welfare checks! So what did you ask the great spoofessor? To rekindle love’s flame?”

“Oooh! That’s good! You guessed it, dumb ass!” It irritated me that he honestly thought I’d gone to Si Ki’s for a serious consultation. And for love, of all things!

(I believe more strongly in the power of literature. As I’m writing these lines I’m surprised to find myself dreaming of a chance encounter with Myriam, and we fall into each other’s arms, and we... I tell myself that if I were writing this scene, I’d perhaps force the hand of destiny.)

Sami who doesn’t know if he should be amused or worried to see Diop and me going at it so, as if we were at Mr. Luis’s gym, cuts in: “Well, can you tell us why you went then?”

“To have a little chat, face to face. And then bust up that face, naturally. His front teeth... ’Llah!”

Diop: “You should have called me for that!”

“Right, Bernie, just like you did for your mother!”

“OK, time out, guys. And you, Pauly, did you?”

“Nah, me neither. Not that I didn’t want to. But...”

“Yeah, I know, same here.”

Sami: “Tell us about it, Paul.”

Me: “On his cards it says No appointment necessary. So I just went. Top floor. The door is open. Knock before entering... OK. So there I am, waiting in the middle of a whole tribe of Malians, women and children... Illegals. I didn’t get it right away, but
when they saw me come in, they all tensed up. I figured out afterwards that they thought
I was with immigration.

Diop: “Yeah, you look like...”

Me: “Have some more couscous! And don’t talk with your mouth full.”

Moh: “Never mind him, Paul, go on. So you’re not the inspector, but did you get
them to talk?”

“Shwia.” They told me that big Kif had promised to take care of everything
after a little exorcism – green cards for the twelve of them. That’s why they’d brought
along a black hen in a basket. Shit! What a con, that Si Kif! It really drives me mad!
To take advantage of... I tried to explain to the poor bastards, but no way. They were
convinced. It had worked for a family from Banamba, so there! So then I went down the
hall, determined to do a remake of Terminator II on the professor – don’t laugh! I could
hear him behind the door telling some granny to knot the cord of her Koran and dip her
elbow into the water from the sacred site of Moulay-Idriss... That’s how he’d cure her
arthritis, the son of a bitch!

“What did you do?”

“What could I do, Sami? First you tell yourself you’ll break down the door and
reduce everything to smithereens, Kif and all. Then you think it over. I thought it over
and figured that the poor Malians would be the first to suffer, and suffer the most, if
things got out of hand and they didn’t get out of there in time. From the sixth floor, down
the stairs, boubous and flip-flops, babies on the back... Instead of green cards they’d have
won themselves a one-way ticket on Air Chevènemement,285 pronto! All we needed was for some moron to hear the racket and call the cops...

Sami laughs: “You figured all that, did you? You’re not a novelist for nothing, bud.”

“Yeah, all of that. So I didn’t do a damn thing. I turned around and walked out with my tail between my legs. I went back through the waiting room without trying to convince them that Si Kif would only rip them off. Anyway, had I even tried, I think they would have thrown me out.”

“You wised up in Morocco; just six months ago you’d have followed your first instinct.”

“Maybe. But what do you do? Shit! What do you do? You don’t want to make a mess, so you don’t make a move. So the marabouts get away with plucking chickens and illegals alike. And to think that behind the marabouts, there’re the Ammours, and the Friends who pull the strings... The Makhzen, like I told you, Bernie! Just like back there! Superstition begets slavery... Water from the sacred site of Moulay-Idriss! Where Hassan II goes to wash his feet once a year. Puke!”

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285 Jean Pierre Chevènemement, Minister of the Interior, 1997-2000. Smaïl is here pointing out that the “Air Pasqua charters” (of which the one way Paris-Mali flight had become a biweekly) continued with a very regular frequency throughout the leftist administration of Lionel Jospin. Albeit, a campaign promise of this latter had been to abrogate “les lois Pasqua-Debré,” these laws were, in many areas more vigorously upheld. (Charlote Rotman, “Chevènémement s’attaque aux filières de l’immigration clandestine,” Paris: Libération, 22, 23 July 2000.)
But... Baraka? Would the bracelet that the Berber woman gave me in the passage of the Koutoubia make my wishes come true, Cartesian-Voltarian that I am? If I believe it, at least?

I remember the story of the magic ring from the Fabulous Tales of Morocco. From memory: Having made three secret wishes, El Kaatib flew away high over the Koutoubia, glided through the air, saved the lambs from the wolves, restored strength to the suffering... (Although I am not quite sure of the name of the hero, I am certain that it was the Koutoubia.)

And so it is. The four of us – Sami, Moh, Diop and I – having polished off three bottles of red between us, giddily made our way down Rue des Poissoniers to Boulevard Barbès. Here we adiosed, each returning to his own turf. I had intended to go home, sit under my porthole, work at the computer correcting the passage about what comes to pass in the Passage of the Koutoubia (Yeah, that red wasn’t bad... a bit heavy though), when I got the idea to cross the boulevard: First I’d go do a quick hello-goodnight to Zaïa and Mama. I wasn’t too proud of having snooped into my aunt’s private life the night before. I wanted to apologize.

I have the key but I ring anyway. Mama opens the door. She seems excessively emotional. Bad news? She doesn’t answer right away but is surprised when I ask a question in Arabic:

“Anti mrida?”
I’m surprised too. I usually don’t. But no, she isn’t sick and neither is Zaïa.

What happened? The door to the bedroom is closed, but I can hear my aunt crying. “Tell me what happened.”

But I should know that Mama doesn’t open up so easily. With my eyes I signal her to follow me into the kitchen, where Zaïa won’t hear us talking about her. I have a hunch: “She and Jilali…”

I don’t need to finish my sentence, a gesture is enough.

Mama nods.

“Did he…?”

“No, no, she did. She… She broke it off.”

She’s stammering. Such a confession! That a woman like her sister, a woman like her, had the courage to stand up to a man, to dare to humiliate a man like Jilali Ammour! That she had such gumption!

First wish granted, I tell myself: Zaïa’s eyes were opened.

Finding in herself the strength to go against what Muslim decency imposes on women, Mama tells me in a whisper of her sister’s discovery of the other woman in Jilali’s life – a younger woman, a blonde. Zaïa had the finesse to artfully suggest to Jilali that he could let it be known that it was he who no longer cared for her. She wouldn’t let on to the contrary. Furthermore, in Jilali’s circle very few people were aware of his plans to remarry – which says a lot about his esteem for her. She thought it wise to have the message delivered by Mehdi’s brother-in-law, Mohamed, and Monsieur Zeboudji, who is a little like her protector also.
Why not me, her nephew?

But no, I don’t even ask. I know why. Zaïa did the right thing. The Friends have long arms and can ruin your reputation around Barbès... I wouldn’t have known how to handle it to avoid retaliation. Up against Jilali Ammour, I wouldn’t have known how to maneuver Moroccan style. I might have punched him, putting her in danger.

Even my father wouldn’t have known how to go about it. He always refused to comply with tribal ways.

“Did Zaïa give back the cell phone?” I ask Mama.

“Yes, yes, everything.”

“That wasn’t much, for him.”

“She gave everything to Mohamed, and he gave it all back.”

“Good. You didn’t like Jilali much either.”

Mother and son are united in a look of complicity. She bites her lips, trying to hold back an insolent smile. I’ve never seen her this way. She says: “Yacine would have been happy.”

“I’m happy too, Mama. I’m relieved. You knew that associating with such slime went against all that my father believed in. Me too, I have to try to live up to his expectations. Success, money...”

“It’s good that you don’t show off, that you don’t go on TV, that your picture isn’t in the papers. It’s good that no one...”

“...know, Mama. So you approve?”
But my mother wouldn’t be my mother if she answered me directly. She simply assents with her eyes.

A second hunch, suddenly: “You had something else to tell me, Mama?”

Trembling with pride, she announces that she’s signed up for general education courses offered through the SNCF.\textsuperscript{286} The wife of a former colleague of my father told her they were open to the widows of railroad workers. Mama didn’t want to say anything about it until it was all settled. She signed up on her own this morning, without anyone’s help. She’ll begin in January.

“I’m going to learn to read faster, to improve my writing and all the things I missed out on…”

“I’m so happy, Mama.”

She has tears in her eyes. And so do I, I think.

That my mother’s sadness would be lifted had been my second wish.

One more question: “Mama, would...?”

“Yes?”

“No, never mind.”

The questions was: Would my father have approved of me? I can’t bring myself to ask it.

\textsuperscript{286} The French national railway company.
I left without seeing Zaïa, without speaking to her. A sudden flash of tact. Rather late, it’s true. I’d been awfully indiscreet in my book. Shame on me.

A group of fifty or so were marching down Boulevard Barbès shouting, “3000 jobs! 3000 jobs! 3000 jobs!”

One of them dressed as Santa Claus hands out leaflets reading: *This is no life!*

No.

*Away with this reeling world.*

I climbed back up to my crow’s nest. Night was falling, and the bleakness of December darkened the porthole. I didn’t turn on the lights. Only the computer screen was lit. I reread what I had written the night before about my aunt and my mother. I noticed that I’d let slip Zaïa’s real name several times. The words seemed like black reproaches against the luminous background of the screen. In the darkness it all appeared more disturbing, disrespectful, almost obscene. Ficticious, more than anything. False, as a matter of fact. Disgustingly false. Once again, I had betrayed. Shame on me. Once again.

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287 *Les Illuminations*, p. 60.
False and vulgar, like almost everything that you see on screens. The screen screened my true feelings, hid my love for my mother and her sister. So with no regrets I highlighted half a page and clicked delete. Enough said.

Discretion? Or superstition. A writer’s superstition. One can’t get away with mocking life and its truths. Life is sacred. Fiction, dangerous. Genies, ghouls and other evil spirits tormented El Kaatib. He begin to fear that reality would seek vengeance for his fantastic inventions. (Fact: El Kaatib means the writer in Arabic.)

I had a bout of writer’s block. I turned on the lamp, I began to flip through my messy notebooks from Casa, to reread my scribblings from the terrace of the Bellerive and Madame Solal’s garden. My natural left-handed penmanship, at one time surpressed, here seemed to contain more truth and more discretion.

I came across this: "Most young North African writers start out with their autobiographies."

And: "The novel is a disreputable art, therefore Western."

Just a couple of things that Noureddine had said one evening in Marrakech when we were discussing literature.

I thought back on those few days spent in Marrakech, late September, early October, when I realized that I’d always be a foreigner in Morocco. I thought back on those interminable days in the swelter of Casablanca – “Oooh! ‘Swelter!’ The little faggot!” I hadn’t been back in France long, barely three weeks, but already these impressions were becoming indistinct, or just as false as all the others. Clichés of a hack novelist: swelter, fiery sky, the aloe and bougainvillia, the call of the muezzin... Exotic
garbage. Junk. As junky as the tacky treasures displayed in the windows of Barbès. Literature!

I toyed absentmindedly with the Berber bracelet. I still had one wish to be granted: to have Myriam back. Sitting in front of the screen, I continued to turn over my memories and to imagine a sequel to our story. As a novelist.

But no idea materialized. Again, sitting on the bench in the Square des Abbesses, I waited for her. Again, I saw her arrive, walking with exaggerated calmness as if trying not to run toward me. But she was smiling, even from far away.

Or again, embracing, we fall onto my bed. And again, she pulls back her heavy hair, lets it run through her fingers and fall over her shoulders... And again, I undress her while whispering in her ear, “Your lips, your breasts, your hips, your ass...”

Then, again, in that bar on Rue Myrrha, I redial her number, but it’s still busy. I go back to the counter, turning my head to keep from seeing myself in the mirror, and order another white wine. On the screen of a videogame, intergalactic missiles stream toward a rift in the eternal night. Oum Kalsoum sang the sorrow of love. I knew that it was over.
Using my left index finger as axis, I spun the bracelet faster and faster on the table. It was an obsession. I was going crazy. In this state, I might as well have asked Professor Si Kif to break the spell, or why not, to rekindle the flame? I could have bought a chicken to sacrifice, folded – diagonally – a page of the Koran, dipped my index finger into the sacred water where our friend the King had washed his feet... Anything to deliver me from this incessant turning about, this horrendous headspin.

I pulled myself together, Bismillah! I managed to put down the bracelet, get up, turn off the computer and tell myself that since I’m not getting anywhere with my writing, I might as well live my life. Who knows? Maybe I’d run into Myriam in real life. By chance.

So I put on my parka, slammed the door, took the stairs two by two, and left the building. With the lights of Christmas decorations all around, I begin my stroll in the rain.

With no direction. But as if by chance, I headed toward La République. As if by chance, I went down the Boulevard Magenta. As if by chance, I took – this time in the opposite direction – the route Myriam and I had taken, two years before in the rain with the lights of Christmas decorations all around. We had left her parents’ and were going to my place, Boulevard Barbès... To make love.

The window of Face-à-Face, where she had pointed to the tackiest of the wedding dresses and said, laughing, “That’s the one I want!”
The corner of Rue Faubourg St-Denis, where we kissed while waiting for the light to change from red to green, to red, to green, to red.

Place de la République, where, gripping my arm even harder, she had confessed, “I have bad news for you, Paul.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“I think I love you.”

“Shit.”

Should I keep going? I keep going.

At the corner of the Rue du Faubourg du Temple, the subway entrance where we had arranged to meet – No! I'm not hallucinating! Her lacquered paper Chinese umbrella, her black suede jacket, her sexy walk, her silhouette... It's her. I – oh! my heart – see her from behind as she goes down the steps to the station and closes her umbrella. I could call out, I could follow her... I should! But no, I stand there, a knot in my throat, my arms at my sides, jostled by the passing crowd. Oh, Pauly.

And the truth is I was about to call her Myriam. As if we were in my book.

*Reality, too jagged for my esteemed character...* 288

I retraced my steps. I went back to Boulevard Magenta. I went back across the corner where... I went back past the window of *Face-à-Face.*

288 Ibid., p. 55.
And 5th District, where Pequod shops. And Champeix Studio, where my parents had there wedding pictures taken. And Joe’s Fine Fabrics, where Zaïa buys her shiny satins and silks.

At the boarded-up entrance to the Louxor, a poster advertises a special event two nights in a row. For the first *iftour* of Ramadan,289 which this year falls on December 30th, and also the next day, New Year’s Eve, a dinner and show with Hassiba Amrouch, Cheb Tarik and Kamel El Bedaoui – *brought to you direct from Morocco*. And every night, hot soup for the out-of-work, *our brothers*, who squat the unemployment bureaus.

Then the bridge of the overhead métro, under which, as the train passed, Myriam and I had shouted out our joy... where Daniel and I had shouted out our joy.

I could have shouted this evening, but out of despair. I was going home, beaten, fists clinched in my pockets. And yet, I wasn’t in Casa anymore, but Barbès.

Madame Solal: “Your fists are clinched... But your adversary is you, Paul. When are you going to stop judging yourself? And judging yourself so badly! You have to learn to love yourself a little too.”

Tacked to the trees of Boulevard Barbès are posters of the 8-cupped candelabra announcing the celebration of Hanukkah.

Hanukkah, Christmas, Ramadan: The Treasures of the Orient is having a sale on 18-carat gold until New Year’s Eve.

A bulletin asks the question: *Residual terrorism, how many more deaths?*

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289 The after-sunset meal on the first day of Ramadan.
Around the automatic toilet in front of my building I find the usual evening get-together: Dealers have jerry-rigged the mechanism which controls the sliding door so that junkies can shoot up inside.

And whom do I see? The inseparable Nagib and Yared in their latest incarnation: Dealers now, and crack dealers no less! You can tell just by looking at them. Shaved head, pierced nose, lips and eyebrows, black leather gloves and the standard uniform: black wrap-around shades, black and grey combat fatigues, quilted black nylon jacket with the swoosh on the back, open at the front to show identical Death is our job tee shirts, Heckel commando boots... Plus the Ericsson cell phone, the antenna sticking out from the grenade pouch on the thigh. And the albino pitbull complete with spiked collar. To die for!

Not so long ago they were bearded proselytisers of the true faith, dispensers of the word of Allah, dealers of Korans printed in Saudi Arabia, the sons of bitches... Jihading their sisters into wearing the veil and proclaiming as their sole ambition to become little saints, sages, fakirs, the sons of bitches!

Not much before that, they were addicted to Kronenbourg, four or five six-packs a day each, competitors in who farts-burps-pisses-the-loudest-longest-farthest.

Not much before that, they were the champion figure skaters of Rue Ordener.

Friends then.

"You coming, Pauly? Let's go skate."

"No, not now. I want to finish my book."
“M’dereh! He wants to finish his book!”

But they never believed in Santa Claus. Like I told you, Queequeg, “Nagib and Yared, they’re fucked.”

But they’re not. That’s just it.
Whenever the legalisation of cannabis is debated, TV immediately gives us long shots of syringes scattered over the broken asphalt of urban ghettos, skeletons of burned out cars, and broken-down, rusty fences; background images of human wreckage sleeping amid the broken glass of bus shelters; close-ups of faces ravaged by suffering – identities concealed by digital scrambling.

Christ, I don’t believe it!

Syringes for shooting up grass, no doubt! Neighborhoods ruined, gone to pot because of the Saturday night reefer! Industrial areas polluted by thick clouds of smoking hash!

Christ, I don’t believe it!

I zap. And this one? Oh, a replay of last night’s brutalities: Abdelkader, 16, killed by a highway patrolman as he attempted to run through a roadblock; Fabrice Fernandez, 20, killed by a cop while handcuffed in the police station.\(^{291}\)

Right on, guys!

I zap. “After all, it was Dalida who invented rai...”

And I guess composed the operas of Mozart too, assholes.

I zap. “Next year Parisian métro stations will be equipped to transmit cellular telephone calls. Nonetheless, the project will be halted if the transportation authority

\(^{291}\) The author here refers to the deaths of Abdelkader Bouziane, shot near Fountainbleau while running a road block; and Fabrice Fernandez, who died in police custody at a commissariat in Lyon. The events took place on December 18, 1997, and December 17, 1997, respectively.
detects an increase in drug traffic in the stations due to cell phone usage by drug dealers...”

*Nonetheless!*

“...and the security personnel will be given broader powers.”

In Algeria? No, the ninjas of the transport system: those booted thugs in army fatigues who terrorise the blacks and Beurs at the Marcadet-Poissonniers or Château Rouge stations.

“And the Laughing Cow wishes you a Happy Moo Year.”

And in Algeria?

“Two families of fourteen people massacred, five young girls kidnapped Sunday in Cheraga.”

And in Morocco?

“Monsieur Jospin, 292 on an official visit to Morocco, praised – and I quote – *the expansion of democracy in Morocco.*”

Elections that were completely rigged! Makes me want to puke!

“*Ouili ouili ouili,* calm down, calm down! If you don’t want to see it, change the channel or turn it off. What are you doing anyway? Holding up the wall? It won’t collapse if you sit down.”

Zaïa is right. I’m bored, so I let off steam in front of the TV, leaning against the wall like the losers in Casa or Algiers. She doesn’t realize that she sounds just like

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Madame Solal or Mademoiselle Khadija, who called them "the kids who hold up the wall." Just like the skits of Fellag or Gad Elmaleh. And those articles of Y.B. in El Watan. Over there, thousands of kids do nothing but hold up the wall, as if waiting for something. But waiting for what? They know nothing will ever come. Residual terrorism, an expansion of democracy...

But I can't excuse myself. And Zaïa has certainly more dignity than I. She didn't let herself fall apart because of what happened to her, and I doubt that she'll ever mention the name of Jilali Ammour again. As if she'd never met him... She's already turned the page. I must learn to do the same.

As she does every year at Christmas, she's made her cakes and candies for family and friends, Christian or not. She garnishes her baklavas and cream horns with sugar pearls and powdered cinnamon. Then she adds a trickle of honey and some pistachios. She scolds Mama who can't seem to arrange the stuffed dates correctly: one row of pink marzipan, one row of white marzipan, one row of green marzipan, and so on...

"It's much prettier like that!"

It seems that I've always heard my aunt reproach her sister for these trivial negligences. And Mama, ever docile, never minds the criticism. But her smile lets you know that she sees no real reason not to mix the colors.

"It doesn't matter, Mama. I can give those to my friends."

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293 Actor and comedian of Jewish Moroccan origin.
294 Yahia Belhouchet, former editor of the Algerian daily newspaper El Watan, now living and working in Paris. In September of 2003, his Allah Superstar was published by Grasset; he has subsequently been accused of plagiarism of Paul Smail’s works.
“Oh, no!” insists Zaña. “I’d be too ashamed! If it’s for you, I want things to be even better. What would your publisher say?”

Zaña has that same strict sense of honor that my father had: Do your job well, never accept an offer made in a low voice, be proud, but know how to say thank you too, don’t wipe your feet on the seats of trains, always return library books on time and carry on the strike to the bitter end.

“Do you remember that year at Christmas, the big strike?”

The last segment of the evening news shows a sit-in at the unemployment office – dozens of the jobless bundled up in sleeping bags, vans of MP’s surrounding the building...

Then the Laughing Cow wishes us more “Happy Moos” and a few enchanted kids exclaim that Santa Claus is “awesome, man!”

_Morality and language, reduced to their most simple expression – at last._

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295 Les Illuminations, p. 28.
The strike had been long and hard. The conductors went back to work, but several maintenance workshops still hadn’t given in. A gallant last stand – or a last bit of unruly defiance if you watch the television news which portrayed the strikers as heartless. Christmas was coming, the toys wouldn’t be delivered on time, the foie gras would spoil in the blocked train cars. And would there be ample champagne on the shelves?

Dignity required waiting until midnight, December 24; not giving in to blackmail. In the workshops of the Paris North station, ironic banners decorated with holly leaves and shooting stars urged *Keep the Strike on Track and Santa Claus is on Our Side!*

“Is Papa still being picketed on?” asked Daniel, indignant that our father should be punished for something he couldn’t have done. Our father was a good man.

Mama and Zaïa took us to the picket line. They brought along hot meals and clean clothes. My brother and I could feel the tension increase as we approached the vans of MP’s parked along the métro line on Boulevard de la Chapelle. Instinctively we stuck closer to Mama, clenching our teeth and our fists like the brave little men that we were. From behind the reinforced glass of their vans, the sons of bitches watched us pass.

Night darkened the windows of the workshops, which hadn’t been lit since the beginning of the strike. In this vast obscurity, in the flicker of the braziers, the scene resembled an encampment before the last battle, the final assault. The men, red-eyed and unshaven, waited wrapped in blankets and sleeping bags. And like in a western, one of
them played the harmonica. Something sad that would have had us in tears at the movies. One picket sign read: *Carry On!* My father would carry on. He was a hero, camped before the fire. I was proud of him.

Was it his idea to have the party at the workshop? Every year there was a railroad Christmas party. Snacks, presents, sappy songs and dances at the Palais de Congrès or a circus followed by a visit to the menagerie at the Cirque d'Hiver. But this year, to make a point, the wildcat strikers weren't going to send their kids to find out that lions stink like hell, nor have them sing along with Chantal Goya. They'd improvise the party here. They'd all pitch in for orangeade and champagne and presents for the kids. The wives would make the cakes, and there'd even be a Santa Claus.

"A Santa Claus? The Santa Claus, the real one?" inquired my brother for whom the indefinite article was reason for suspicion.

Daniel was the only one in his school who still believed. His friends could call him retard, moron, imbecile... but the little stoic, he still professed his faith in Saint Nicholas. And like all fanatics, he quickly spotted the impostors: department store Santas. This one was wearing Nikes with his red suit, and Santa doesn't wear tennis shoes. That one had a fake nylon beard. And as for the poor chap who tried ringing his bell in front of Tati, the security guard was right to send him packing: A black Santa!

Daniel had asked for roller skates. I knew all about it – I had helped him write out his letter, specifying the exact model: all-steel, padded ankle, bumper breaks. Santa Claus couldn't miss. But would he drop them off tonight at the workshop? Or tomorrow morning at the foot of the bed?
The night was cold and our laughter made clouds in the air. We walked on ahead, chanting gaily with the strikers: *Carry on! Carry on!*

Mama and Zaïa carried cloth-covered hampers filled with *bstila, briouates*, and *chorba* straight from the oven.

The magical glow of the Bengal lights was reflected in the windows of the workshop. They were, in fact, railway signal lanterns. One worker, disguised as a clown, tripped over his oversized rubber shoes and fell... As for Saint Nicholas, he was just 'ol Nick, the father of one of our friends: Daniel recognized him behind his fake cotton beard. He'd been deceived, and the presents were a disappointment: a game of Mille Bornes for me, and for my brother, a toy electric guitar.

"Oh, sh-shoot!" He stuttered. "My roller skates?"

He was worried sick. Had his letter to Santa gotten lost? Zaïa tried to reassure him: Santa would stop by Rue Ordener a little later. She passed around a tray of cream horns. But Daniel and I preferred the chocolate drops and Christmas cake from the store.

At midnight everyone hugged and kissed. The strikers were drunk with fatigue and cheap champagne; the women cried.

My father said, "Let's go, we've lost."

We walked home in silence.

Zaïa had saved us some of her candies, but we weren't in the mood.
Mama asked, "Should we wait until tomorrow, or should we give out the presents now, l'drari?"\textsuperscript{296}

Daniel could hardly keep from crying. At last he understood. He had to accept truth’s deceptions – especially if he wanted his skates right away like I wanted my books right away.

"Yeah, right away."

It was the Dickens I’d wanted. And the skates my brother had asked for.

He put them on and began skating around the table. Zaïa had turned on the TV; dancers were waltzing as fireworks lit the sky. Daniel tripped trying to copy their turns.

My father scolded: "You don’t skate in the house!"

“Oh, just this once, Yacine,” Mama pleaded. “After all, the wheels are new.”

My father shrugged his shoulders, resigned. I was sad: It was the first time I’d seen him give in.

\textsuperscript{296} to the little ones
So I would be alone Christmas night? I kind of liked the idea. Single-handed sailor, taking shelter in his cabin in the middle of the frenzied sea of a celebrating city. Still hiding out...

“It’s been confirmed that you don’t exist,” my publisher laughs.

“Wonderful!”

“But you’re definitely a subject of great interest. And for someone who doesn’t exist, you certainly receive a lot of mail!”

He hands me a big packet of letters addressed to me at Editions Balland. And I give him, to pass around the office, four boxes of Zaïa’s sweets.

They’ve written me some very nice things: Beurs who tell me about their struggles, colleagues of my father who recognized their friend, “Yacine.” All sorts of readers: fifteen year old kids and seventy-five year old ladies... I’d never have believed it! But there are also some nasty ones: Death threats from FN²⁹⁷ fascists – the suitcase or the coffin! Go back to Africa if you don’t like it here! North Afs who insult me, El Arabi, for sleeping with a dirty Jewess – Allah’s wrath upon me! And then those who never opened the book but decided I was a fag based on the review in Libération – “written in the first person singular, the identity crises of a young homosexual Beur”!²⁹⁸ That really pissed me off! They’re fucked up, that paper! The guy confused me with my brother – or the character of my brother, I mean! Can the guy even read? He writes that

²⁹⁷ Front National
²⁹⁸ Maati Kabbal “Smaïl, Les Pépins du melon.”
I am going back home when I leave for Morocco, as if I’d already lived there and that I were Moroccan! I work for a bookseller active in anti-racists causes; he writes that I’m a “receptionist for a racist librarian”! My brother’s friend is Turkish; he writes that he’s Kurdish! This guy, hell, he’d tell you the story of Lolita and say that it takes place in Russia and that it’s the story of some old granny who falls head over heals in love with an illiterate kid! He’d recount Moby Dick, and it would be the story of a hunchback hunting a black eagle in the Alps! He’d take on Proust in his rag, this guy, explaining to you that the Guermantes are a couple of bad ’rabs who live in the ghetto and tinker with broken down scrap... Ah! And who shoot marijuana to boot! Like on TV! Now do you see why I insist that they call my work a novel? Novelists write less bullshit and stick closer to the truth. Or try to, at least.

On this note, our hero says goodbye to his publisher and returns to his novel, Round-Trip Barbès. Really.

Already in his thoughts he’s sitting once again at the terrace of the Bellerive or in Madame Solal’s garden. But it suddenly occurs to him that today is the shortest day of the year, and he feels a vague anxiety. Christmas is four days away. Rain is falling and so is the night.

Words are being washed from the notices tacked to the trees – the assassinations in Algeria, the 3000 jobs... Flyers cover the sidewalk like a mushy carpet of dead leaves: specials at Treasures of the Orient, sales at Toto’s, discounts from Professor X who will drive out your demons for half price until the end of the year – Start the New Year Right!

A billboard on Boulevard Barbès shows the three wise men bringing a cordless phone to the baby Jesus in his manger. A poster announces the concert of a singer named
Smail, December 31st, 1997, in Montrouge, 88 Avenue Aristide Briand. Free admission – I’m not making it up.

Our hero sees Jilali-the-moul’s black Mercedes go by and raises his hand in an imaginary up-yours. A bit farther on, at a red light he gives a fraternal wave to the Speedzza deliverer revving up his engine while waiting for the green. But this guy, an asshole, barks out like a neutered chihuahua, “What’s your problem, fucker?”

OK.

Climbing the stairs, our hero tells himself that he’ll soon be nostalgic for Casablanca.

Going in, he automatically presses the red button of his answering machine. He listens to the four messages: Moh wants to know what he’s doing for Christmas; Marie wants to know what he’s doing for Christmas; Salim wants to know what he’s doing for Christmas; and Diop wants him call back before Christmas.

The packet of mail that he got from his publisher falls from his hands as he drops flat on his stomach onto the bed. A blue envelope slides under the table. He has to crawl to pick it up. The lovely old-fashioned stationery, almost square, the handwriting remind him of... Whom?

He opens it and reads:

Paul,
I read *Life Kills Me*. And I know that you are back in Paris. I’d like to see you again.

"Myriam"

I’m not making this up. I have no imagination.
In a little more than an hour, *Christmas on earth.*

I’d give myself the pleasure of waiting. I still remember our very last conversation, when we stopped seeing each other last year in June:

“*I need time, Paul.*”

“Yes.”

“I’ll call you when...”

“Yes?”

“I’ll call you. Just give me a little time.”

Time has changed nothing. However, the words “it’s over” were never said. And since she writes: *I’d like to see you again...*

I let Monday evening go by, all of Tuesday, all of the day today until this minute. And I can’t wait a moment more. I have to do it now. The deadline that I’d set for myself, I really don’t know why, has expired. I have to call her. I have to.

At her house, or at her parents’ rather. But if her father or mother answers, what do I say? And if they’ve gone to bed? It’s 11 pm. I can only hope that they’re up late celebrating Christmas or Hanukkah. But I think I remember that the Finks are not especially religious... *Inch’Allah!* I’ll soon find out.

Standing, facing the porthole, I dial their number. I turn off the lamp. It’ll be easier to talk in the dark.
First ring.

Second ring.

"Hello, I..."

"It's you."

"It's me. I don't know if I'm doing the right thing..."

"It's the right thing. I'm happy you called."

Her breathing, her voice, her way of accenting her words with light irony. Out of modesty. Always afraid of saying too much, she never says enough about how she feels... And I can even hear the quotation marks when she says, teasing me, "The one you called 'Myriam.'"

"Were you upset? Did I hurt you?"

"No, why? I wouldn't have written the note if I had been. I am and I am not Myriam. And it's you, it's absolutely you in your book, and then again, no. It's not exactly you either. It's not exactly the Paul that I knew, that I..."

"Yes? That you...?"

But she avoids my question by asking one of her own, "Are you alone?"

"Yes. And you?"

"I'm alone. My parents were invited to celebrate Hanukkah with the neighbors. They didn't really want to go, but you know them, they're too polite to say no. And frankly I... I pretended to be exhausted. I preferred to stay here and..."

"And... Were you... Were you waiting...?"
I hear her hesitate, I hear her emotion. In the darkness, I listen to her silence, and I'm happy.

Abruptly she yields. "If the question was, 'were you waiting for my call?' the answer is, yes, Paul, I was waiting for your call...I shouldn't tell you this, but when the phone rang, I knew it was you. I knew it!"

"And why shouldn't you tell me?"

"I guess I'm not sure."

She gets upset, but I don't relent. "Because you are afraid?"

"Afraid of what?"

"Afraid that we will..."

"Start all over again?"

"So you've said it."

She sighs as if discouraged. "I sent you the card at your publisher's, you're telephoning, so..." She's on the verge of tears.

"How did you know that I was the one who wrote *Life Kills Me*? How did you figure out that I was the author since that's not my name... Oh, how stupid of me! It's true, you do read a lot. And you'd certainly have heard about it..."

"Well actually, and you're going to laugh, Paul, it was because of the picture on the cover and the posters in the bookstores. The face reminded me of you..."

"Oh no, you too?"

"Why me too?"
“Because lots of women tell me it’s a good likeness. An El Faiyum mortuary portrait!”

“Were there a lot since me, Paul?

“Women? None. I was talking about some people I know who know about the book and commented on the resemblance. And you? Since me?”

“Were there a lot of women?”

“Ah, very funny... I mean, were there other men in your life?”

“Can we talk about something else?”

“We can, yes. You’re right, I don’t have to know. Rewind – the question was never asked.”

But she laughs nervously, hesitates, and her laugh changes to a sob as she admits, “No, but I should tell you, there was someone. I met him this summer. And then I read your book... And... I stopped seeing him. And that’s it. After I read your book, I... I bought some music of Oum Kalsoum.”

I’m thrilled inside. Can she tell? Half crying, half laughing, she says, “Damn, damn, damn! It’s awful, Paul! It’s just awful!”

“What’s awful, mon amour? Mankind is condemned to happiness.” Rimbaud said it. But never would I have known how to say such things before I wrote the story of my life.

She asks, “Where are you living?”

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299 Une Saison, p. 85.
I know what she’s thinking.

“Barbès. The same building where we... dum de dum dum, dum dum, dum de dum... But another floor, at the top. The view is much nicer. I’m in the dark.”

“There’s no electricity?”

“Yes, but I’ve turned off the lights. It’s easier to talk in the dark.”

“What do you see from your window?”

“I see... oooh! Fireworks!

Yes. Fireworks explode in the sky in a rain of pink, purple, red and gold sparks. And I, too, laugh nervously, not quite crying yet...

I tell her, “In fifteen minutes, Place de la République, by the métro station... You remember – our spot. I’ll be there.”

I don’t add that it’s starting all over. But I can’t help thinking it.

She answers softly, agreeing, “OK.”

The way she answered in my dream, “Because it is written.”
What could I bring her? Ah, the Berber bracelets, my good luck charm! Christmas is for us non-Christians too. Why not? Daniel got his firetruck, Daniel got his roller skates...

With the bracelets in the pocket of my parka, I ran, ran toward her under the fireworks and the decorations on Boulevard Magenta. I took her in my arms... And – *h’chouma* – I’d like to ask that the reader permit me to skip a page. For modesty and to honor the promise I made to her when I gave her the bracelets.

As I kissed her, she whispered, “Are you also going to write about our...?”

“No. I’ll leave a blank page, promise. An odd-numbered page, what printers call a *belle page*. It will be our secret, our private page.”
It’s starting all over again. I could just as well recopy these lines from Life Kills Me:

And so it is! I’m madly in love. Desperately and giddily happy. Happy and unhappy all at once. Terrified that things might fall apart at the first little hitch, yet sure that they’ll last forever...\(^{300}\)


“Do The What-chama-jig!”

And hurray! My houri bangles her Berber bracelets and dances with me, two steps forward, one step back, under the statue of the République.

“We’re crazy!” she says.

And we are, even though we’ve had nothing to drink. But where can we go for a drink this beautiful Christmas Eve, as the bells ring out the Christian midnight? as the bells ring out the Christian midnight?

“There’s a bar I like not far from here on Rue Oberkampf,” she says. “Maybe it’ll be open.”

\(^{300}\) Vivre me tue p. 120.
It is. Old movie posters, smoky blue light, a crowd... but knowing how to box
does give you a least one advantage in life: It gives you the agility to move through a
crowd without jostling people, lithely squeeze your way up to the bar, and – touchdown!
– tackle two free stools that a good dozen stunned patrons had been coveting.

Then a wide-eyed, innocent smile to all.

Myriam – I’ll continue to call her Myriam – lets herself fall into my arms and
points out that we’re sitting under a poster from *Casablanca*.

I emphatically answer the question she hasn’t yet asked. “No, I’ve never seen
*Casablanca*. But it’s been playing for at least fifty years in a theatre in Mers-Sultan. I
had the time...”

“You’ve never seen *Casablanca*?”

“You’ve never read *Remembrance of ...*”

“What?”

“Nothing. It’d take too long... I have my memories just as you have yours.”

She softly sings in my ear, “*You must remember this, a kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is
just a sigh*...”

“What’s that?”

“As Time Goes By, the song from the film. I know it by heart. *The fundamental
things apply, as time goes by*...”

“What’s fundamental to you... at the present time?”
But Myriam avoids my question by kissing my neck. And I understand that I shouldn’t insist, that we both have to let time go by, leave a few more blank pages if necessary. And especially, not open up old wounds. Avoid reliving the past... I can still hear her saying, “Your fears frighten me a little.”

No, I don’t want it to start all over again; I want a brand new beginning, starting tonight. Turn the page, a new story. Or better yet, I don’t want anything other than what’s to come... Come what may! In Casa, Madame Solal and Mademoiselle Khadija made me see that is wasn’t so much life that was killing me as it was not accepting life as it is. As it comes.

“In Casa, I learned to be patient.”

“Can you be patient until the start of the new year, until the second or third of January?”

“What do you mean?”

I hadn’t managed to keep my resolutions for even two minutes, and Myriam can tell that my old fear is coming back. The fear of losing her. Losing her a second time...

Delicately, she announces, “We’ll have a drink, Paul, just one, and you’ll walk me back and then we’ll each go home. I will, I mean; you do as you like...”

“But...”

“Wait, wait! Tomorrow, today, I mean, I’m going away for a week. Please be nice, and don’t ask me where, how or with whom.”

“I’m not asking.”
“I can’t just drop everything now.”

“I’m not asking that.”

“I don’t work in the bookstore anymore, you know. I got a job in the archives department at the Louvre.”

“Wow!”

“I’m going with some friends from the museum to their house in Brittany, and there will be...”

“I’m not asking anything.”

“Well, then...”

“Well, then you’ll find a way to be back on Wednesday night. The last night of the year will be for me.”

“What? But no, I told you, we have to... I’ve got to...”

I look into her eyes and say firmly, “You’ll find a way to be back on Wednesday night. That’s all I ask. You always said I was too impatient. Well, you see in Morocco I learned to be patient. And I learned the subtle art of bargaining. I could beg on my knees, ‘Stay! Stay with me!’ But I’m only asking that you come back on the 31st.”

“But, Paul!”

“You’ll find a way. You found a way tonight. To see me again.”

“It wasn’t to...”

“It wasn’t to see me again?”
Confronted with such suspicion, she pretends to choke and makes a face instead of answering. She moves as if to slap me, but her gesture becomes a caress; her frown, a smile; her smile, a kiss.

“Tell me the words again.”

“What words?”

“The song from that third-rate tripe that I’ve never seen. A kiss is just a kiss... And after that?”

After that, modesty would require another belle page. Passionately she whispers to me, “After that... That’s between us. I love you. I’ll be here on the 31st.”
The 31st of December is the last day of the year and the second day of Ramadan fasting. To celebrate, Moh, Salim and I impiously break out the champagne at eleven o’clock in the morning, in a rai bar on Rue Richmann. And when Agnes, Salima and Fati coolly stroll in, drawing looks from the other men at the counter, I ask the owner to quickly uncork another bottle. It’s on me – labès?

*Ma kayench’ mooshkil!*\(^{301}\)

Cheb Mnouni emphatically congratulates himself for having had the foresight to put more than one bottle on ice. He’s always had the courage of his irreverent convictions – and that shocks many in the neighborhood. And so what if these Meccamofos break his windows from time to time, sons of bitches. Screw their mothers! Fucking ISF’its!\(^{302}\) In his bar you’ll find all the hard-core fans of authentic rai from Oran.

Faudel sings *Tellement n’brick*.\(^{303}\) Salim, ribbing me a bit refers to the check I received from my publisher yesterday. “In your case it’s *Tellement n’bucks*.”

And Diop, when he finally arrives, “So, richmann, the lemonade’s on you?”

“Yeah, and not just the lemonade – everything, until 1998!”

From here, we’ll go to the DeJean Market where we can get what we need for our New Year’s Eve Party. Just like the evening I got back to Paris, tonight’s celebration will be at the Yahias’. But this time, I’m the host: Non-stop champagne, fine wines, assorted

\(^{301}\) *OK? /No problem*

\(^{302}\) Islamic Salvation Front

\(^{303}\) Freely translated, “I love you so much.”
tajines, meat and fish, seafood, bstilas, briouates, cakes and candies, exotic sorbets like those I had in the grand villas of Casa, where I was invited by the friends of Mademoiselle Khadija.

There’ll be music too. A real noub. Thomas is bringing some guys for a jam session: sax, violin, derboukas and bendirs from Jajouka. Sami and Fati are bringing a selection of CD’s for dancing. Because there’ll be dancing! Anything and everything! The Whatchamajig, maybe.

“Non-stop cheer.”

Friends will invite more friends. And I’ve finally persuaded, not without some difficulty, Mama and Zaïa to join us. I’ve promised to walk them back home whenever they’re ready to go. But Zaïa insisted on coming in the morning to help out.

“Young people don’t know how to put on a bash. Just let me handle it.”

She was delighted to play the fairy godmother and sent me off with a long shopping list of ingredients that we wouldn’t have thought to buy. And the added pleasure – khalit! of getting her nephew to do the shopping.

Salima, Salim, Agnes, Diop, Fati, and Moh burst out laughing when I tell them Zaïa’s into slang now.

The morning’s champagne really got things rolling. It’s raining? Yes, but who cares. It been raining since I returned from Casa. It’s raining and so what? Singing in the rain at the Dejean Market where everything glistens, everything shines: counters weighted with foods, heaps of poultry, meats wrapped in silver mesh, game garnished

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304 drum and tambourine; Jajouka, Moroccan city known for its annual ‘Pipes of Pan’ festival.
305 Aunt of mine!
with gold paper, still-lifes displayed on shelves decorated as alters, rainbow trout, scallops, shellfish, tilapia, red mullet, yellow pike, swordfish, rockfish, an open-mouth shark, crabs crawling in their crates, thick slabs of tuna bleeding onto icy beds, the splattered oilcloth, the knives and cleavers, the aprons of the fishmongers, the flasks of oils and spices, the colored lights, the reflections, the flowers, the fruits brought from Africa and the Antilles...

“Sapodillas, pomegranates, mangos, persimmons, kiwis!”

“Feast for the Gods!”

Barbès be’s a bash! It’s noon. In six hours, Myriam will be here. In twelve, the year will be over.

*Life.*

Was this then it?\(^{306}\)

I looked back for the last time before getting into the taxi; I heard, for the last time, the squeak of the gate. From behind the bars that she gripped with both hands, Madame Solal called out, “Don’t forget what I told you! Live up to your success! Don’t be ashamed! Live your life!”

And Mademoiselle Khadija added, “Be happy.”

\(^{306}\) *Les Illuminations*, p. 35.
And for the last time, I crossed through what Mademoiselle Khadija called the *inferno*: this conglomerate, no, this agglomeration of red mud, cinder blocks, wreckage, junk and detritus that one calls Casablanca, the dumps, the shacks, the vacant lots, the recent ruins of the eternally uncompleted structures... For the last time under the gaze of His Majesty the King Hassan II whose portrait in golf get-up from an old *Paris-Match* was taped to the dashboard of the taxi. For the last time, probably, because on this trip, this last trip, I’d begun writing *Round-Trip Barbès*. I may have a chance of staying incognito in Paris, but in Morocco, there’s the police to fear – and they’re up to the task. Once my book is published, it could be dangerous for me to return to the Kingdom.

“No, I don’t think I’ll ever be back. Do you remember what you told me? ‘Morocco is not the country for you!’ You also told me that a man who takes root, can’t very well go forward. And that men are not trees... You were right. I’m calling to thank you once again and to wish you a Happy New Year. I’m about six hours early, but...”

“About seven hours early. You’ve already forgotten that we’re missing an hour here... Or have one more than you do. Depending upon your point of view. From where are you calling?”

“From a booth in the Montparnasse Station. I’m waiting... I’m waiting for the woman I love. Her train arrives in nine... no, in eight minutes. It’s... well – since you’ve read my book – it’s Myriam.”

“That’s all so wildly romantic, my son.”
Madame Solal laughs, her voice hoarse, scratchy, but full of warmth. This laugh will be for me one of the few happy memories of Casablanca.

"These days," she tells me, "Khadija and I speak of you like a character in Chekhov: 'Ah, Paul! — Ah, Paris, my beloved Paris! — Paul lives in Paris! — Will we see Paris again one day? — Has he forgotten us?' If I tell her that you also..."

"Oh, please don’t tell her!"

"Why not? I’m certain that she would be happy to know that you’re happy."

"You’re right. Go ahead and tell her. You see how I am..."

"Very French."

"People here are so cruel, so petty, so lacking in generosity, for the most part. Moh, an Algerian friend who... who..."

"Paul, please, no details over the phone!"

"Yes, thank you for reminding me. But I can still tell you the awful thing he told me. ‘A lot of people here think it a bit odd that I’m still alive.’"

"Some of my family had the same experience when they returned to Paris in 1945: People thought it a bit odd that they were still alive... But that’s Paris! And how I envy you! What time is it?"

"Three minutes to six."

"At what time does the train arrive?"

"At six o’clock sharp, track number 7. Right in front of me. From where I’m speaking, I can see the platform."
"Are you nervous?"

"Yes, a little."

"Isn’t it wonderful?"

"What a funny thing to say! I can see the train pulling into the station..."

"Trains arrive early in France!"

"I’m as proud of the SNCF as my father was!"

"Go now, Paul! Hang up now! I’m so happy you called. Good luck! Happy New Year!"

"Thank you so much. Happy New Year!"

The braking engine softly completes its stop less than a yard from the buffers... pianissimo, pianissimo, the doors of the cars sigh and open automatically. The passengers begin to step down... I walk onto the platform, and I see Myriam in the crowd; she sees me, runs toward me. It’s as simple as a musical phrase.\footnote{Ibid., p. 49.}
Lying next to her, but knowing her so far away, lost in sleep, and yet so close to me, because it’s my name she murmurs, “Paul.”

Am I in her dreams? She’s sleeping peacefully beside me, her head on my shoulder, one hand casually between my thighs. I’m naked and she’s wearing only her Berber bracelets. With her slightest involuntary movement, I shiver at the touch of the cold, hammered silver at her wrist. I’ve got a hard-on despite an urgent need to piss. But I wouldn’t move for the world, for fear of waking her, even if it were to whisper in her ear that coarseness which is nevertheless a tenderness between lovers: *Jbed*?

Her breathing, so regular, so calm, gently moves the hendira I use as a bedspread, one of the few souvenirs brought back from Morocco. Its stripes of sequins glitter in the sunlight like a tranquil sea at noon. What time is it? Noon? One o’clock? The sky on this 1st of January is miraculously blue. The rain stopped around the middle of the night, as though it weren’t supposed to rain in this new year. Beyond the foot of the bed, I see a rocket stream through the blue and explode in a bouquet of sparks... Fireworks left over from the night before, or God knows what. In the big, antique mirror I found at the flea market, the mirror that I still haven’t hung on the wall, I see the two of us as if in a painting. Our love, pictured before me – framed, luminous, shimmering. And so beautiful.

How did we make our way back up Boulevard Barbès at dawn? How did we make it to the sixth floor? I don’t remember. But I do remember that we made love and
that she then fell asleep in my arms. I couldn’t sleep. And I’m still not sleeping. Impossible! I drank too much, smoked too much, danced too much, was too emotional. The blood pounds in my temples, the music still rings in my ears and the words and the refrains and the laughter and the yodels and the cries of joy and the hurrahs – like the sound of the ocean in the seashell our father gave to my brother and me.

"Listen, Queequeg, listen!"

The ebb and flow of the night. The rolling rhythm of the bendirs... Thomas dedicates his oud improvisations, "Fi Khatar, Leila! Fi Khatar, Zaïa!"

For Myriam, at my request, a saxophone rendition of the song from Casablanca. Faudel sings Abadou two times, three times in a row. Rachid Taha, Sweet France:

Yes, I love you
And to you I offer this poem...

We all sing along, but I can never remember the last words of the refrain. Mama picks up little Amina and rocks her in time to the music. Moh informs us that four hundred villagers in the wilaya of Relizane\textsuperscript{308} were massacred last night, the first night of Ramadan. Myriam and I dance, lost in each other’s eyes. Sami rolls the joints. Diop pours champagne over a pyramid of glasses. Nathan drums out his own wild beat on the derbouka. Zaïa serves the bstila, perfuming the air with the scents of curry, cumin,

\textsuperscript{308} Algerian administrative district of which Relizane is the chief city.
cardamom, cinnamon. The Yahias waltz, Oran style, to *Ya Rayah.* Fati laughs like crazy.

"Fi Khatar, Paul! Here's to freindship!"

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The nouba finished with an oud and violin duet dedicated to love. Then we danced to recorded music. Afterward, I walked my mother and my aunt back home. And I quickly returned to the Yahias’, running through the crowds celebrating in the streets. There were cries, shouts, singing, firecrackers, horns and hosts of *Happy New Years!* And we danced some more. And drank and smoked and laughed.

I’d so much like to give in to fatigue and so much wish this giddy exhaustion and drunkenness would subside. I try to disengage my numbed left arm without disturbing Myriam. I succeed, I kiss her — her breathing barely changes. I pull the sheet and hendira up around us. I force myself to lie still, to close my eyes and to think of nothing.

All of a sudden, God knows why, the very last words of the refrain come back to me:

*Yes, I love you*

*In joy or in sorrow.*

Casablanca, August, 1997 – Paris, April, 1998
On the Author and His Works

Vivre me tue, the first segment of Paul Smaïl’s “authobiographical trilogy” quickly conquered the public and critics alike. It was proclaimed “la bonne surprise de la rentrée” by The Nouvel Observateur and awarded the Prix des Lectrices of Elle magazine in 1997.\textsuperscript{310} The work has undergone several reprintings at Editions Balland and has more recently come out in pocket-paperback (J’ai lu publishers). The Franco-German screen adaptation\textsuperscript{311} released just last spring received very favorable reviews and was awarded le grand prix at the Festival du Film Romantique de Cabourg.

In 1998 Casa, la casa appears – same publishers, same Paul Smaïl fayoum. The Nouvel Observateur esteems it “éloquent comme le premier; délicat....” And as in the first work, Smaïl incorporates many of his same literary heros – writers and dramatis persona – as well as music (and languages) which take in every cultural caste and hue. Although often bitter, like Vivre me tue, this second work concludes joyously, with the protagonist’s conviction of better days ahead:

\textit{Le ciel de ce 1er janvier est miraculeusement bleu. La pluie a cessé vers le milieu de la nuit, comme s'il ne devait pas pleuvoir en 98... (Casa 200-201; RTB, 308)}

The reader here in these last pages of Casa notes the happy and meaningful mélange of musics; December 31\textsuperscript{st}, New Year’s Eve:

...le saxo joue la chanson de Casablanca. Faudel chante Abadou... Rachid Taha, Douce France...

\textsuperscript{311} Vivre me tue, dir. Jean Pierre Sinapi with Sami Bouajila, Jalil Lespert, Sylvie Testud, 2003.
The next morning – January 1st, the morning of that bright, cloudless new beginning – Smaïl finds the up-to-now elusive refrain of the Charles Trenet\textsuperscript{312} classic; and with this simple musical phrase, the author ends his narrative:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Oui, je t’aime,}
\textit{Dans la joie ou la douleur.} (203; 311)
\end{quote}

The last words of \textit{Casa} and to be noted, for the first time the irony intoned by Rachid Taha in the \textit{Carte de Sejour} version of the song is wholly absent.

Surely, the “\textit{Christmas on earth}” that has rung out more than once in \textit{Casa, la casa} is envisioned as a possible and much hoped for, reality – a generalized, generic state of Christmas, if you will; an earth upon which “\textit{Noël est pour nous aussi qui ne sommes pas nasrani}.” (185; 296) And neither should Paul’s frequent observations that Hanukkah, Christmas and Ramadan overlap go unremarked (pp. 165; 276, for example), nor the wishful thinking made explicit in a previous chapter:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Il est onze heure du soir, je peux seulement espérer qu’ils réveillonnent, qu’ils célébrant Noël ou H’anouka. Je crois me souvenir cependant que les Fink ne sont pas croyants... Inch’Allah!} (180-181; 290)
\end{quote}

Imagine indifferentism, tolerance, \textit{fraternité}... for one and all – an ideal world, perhaps, but clearly the world as it should be, according to Smaïl.

\textsuperscript{312} To be noted that here, for the first time, the irony intoned by Rachid Taha in the \textit{Carte de Séjour} version of the song is wholly absent.
La passion selon moi (Divan), Smaïl's third publication, appeared in 1999. The author himself best describes this work:

*Ce ne sera pas un roman avec un début et une fin, une histoire, non, mais des petits bouts de roman, des notes, des fragments, des pages de mon journal, des remarques, des souvenirs, des choses vues, du vrai et du fictive, ma vérité, la liberté, la fraternité, la musique, l'amour, le vin, le shit...* (p. 14)

Smaïl’s *Passion* has for the most part gone unnoted. Critics called it disappointing, “*bis repetitam*” – a well-written sentence now and then, but largely recycled materials. True, the author reiterates and remixes many of his same themes and redeployed much of his already-seen intertextualities – poetry, prose, film and music. The “compilation” may perhaps best be likened to a cubo-futurist composition as the *déjà vu* of *Vivre me tu* and *Casa, la casa* is taken up again, rearranged and examined at differing angles and from continually changing points of view. One noted addition is that here the author makes use of Spanish: Spanish writers, Spanish song and the Spanish language. (The Arabic the reader has assimilated in books I and II is now, like the French, unitalicised, no longer foreign.)

The author of *La passion*, a Smaïl-cum-Don Quixote, attempts to right those many wrongs he sees as fundamental. His quest takes him to Madrid and, once more, across the Mediterranean: this time to Ahfir, a Moroccan village situated near the Algerian

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313 (Paris: Robert Lafont).
border. His task, to provide succour to the many Algerians seeking to escape “le bagne” and make their way into “forteresse Europe.” He reports several successes, but laments that there remains so much more to be done. La passion selon moi concludes with a prayer for a world without borders; and, fittingly, this last page sees Paul back at home – Barbès – and back to the books.

Ali le Magnifique, Smaïl’s fourth writing was published in 2001. It has been highly acclaimed by many, trashed and denounced by others. The work is a fictionalized account of a fait divers, the story of the serial killer Sid Ahmed Rezala, known as the “tueur des trains.” The publication of Ali le Magnifique, ready for release in 2000, was held back when its anti-hero Rezala (“Sid Ali”) killed himself in a Lisbon prison while awaiting extradition to France. Smaïl was subsequently asked to revise his work and to omit several of its “characters” – notably Jacques Chirac, Lionel Jospin and Jean Pierre Chevènement. Much talked about before it reached the shelves, the book was, of course, destined to become an immediate best seller. And the questions as to the real identity of its author grew even louder:

...le lecteur se demande qui se cache derrière le pseudonyme Paul Smail. Peu d’écrivains, en effet, possède à la fois une culture classique sans faille et une connaissance de première main de la jeunesse des cités.... Il faut reconnaître que le travail d’archiviste mené par l’auteur est considérable...Paul Smail blotti au fond d’un RER, notant les conversations glanées ou mieux recourant à tout un réseau d’amis pour lui remonter expressions et anecdotes de banlieu.

315 (Paris: Denoël, 2001.)
316 30,000 copies of the first printing; shortly after translated into both Italian and Spanish.
The œuvre of the “jeune français d’origine marocaine” is in turn attributed to Alina Reyes, to Didier Deaninckx, and to Yann Queffélec among other writers. However, the name resounding most often is that of Jack-Alain Léger, an established author with some thirty-seven titles to his credit. In February of 2003, in the ending paragraphs of this latter’s On en est là, Smaïl’s identity is confirmed:


Although familiar with the Smaïl/Léger rumor, it was while completing the final pages of my own “travail d’archiviste” that Smaïl was officially pronounced Léger. The knowledge was initially somewhat disheartening; but then I thought, Why not? After having followed in the footsteps of the author for so long now, carry on. As Léger quite convincingly assumed the role of a second-generation Franco-Maghrebi, so would I. Technically, Léger’s Smaïl succeeds on every level; so much so that two authors of certain Maghrebi origin have been accused of plagiarism, of using copious and highly recognizable Smaïlian turns of phrase and *mises-en-scène* to inject the desired dose of “beursimilitude” into their own works.°

In summary my question (and answer) to the Smaïl/Léger authorship is very much the same as that put forth by critic Didier Sénécal: “*Mais qu’importe les faux papiers*

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°°Yousef M.D. in *Je rêve d’une autre vie*, and, ironically, Y.B. (Yahia Belhouchet), author of *Allah Superstar* to whom Smaïl makes complimentary reference in *Casa, la casa*. 
And I do hope that my own work does justice to the Smaïl-Léger creation.

**Jack-Alain Léger** was born in the city of Toulon, France, in 1949. He received a diploma in the field of Philosophy and Aesthetics from the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes and has since worked as a translator, has written lyrics for Leonard Cohen and composed rock music under both the names of Melmouth and Dashiell Hedayat.

The majority of his literary works appear in his own name; however, he has written under pseudonyms as varied as Eve Saint-Roche and, of course, the lately uncovered Paul Smaïl.

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320 Didier Sénécal, *Lire.*
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