

El Moncef, Salah (2015), *The Voice of Exile: El Moncef's Response, The Offering*. Oxford: Penelope Books. ISBN-1500859443. 407 pages.

“Why the Voice of Exile”

In his review of *The Offering*, Wade A Bell Jr makes a cogent analysis of the profound sense of loss and alienation that pervades Tariq Abbassi's tragic life in France, arguing that the radical negativity characteristic of the poet's encounter with European culture revolves around the key question of his existence as a “diasporic body-subject” from North Africa (206). A displaced Tunisian national and trauma victim, Tariq can be seen as an intensified embodiment of the manifold symptoms of shock and dislocation experienced by the Maghrebi diaspora—a poet who adopts the opaque voice of an out-of-place immigrant, with his narrative status eventually becoming a function of the distortions and disjunctions of his mental and corporeal state. While those distortions and disjunctions confront the reader with the daunting challenge of a contradictory consciousness torn between the quest for truth and a radical denial of reality, this selfsame disconnect in Tariq's motives—the unsettling in-between of his double bind—manifests itself in his “fractured” narrative as a potential source of insight for the other (ibid.). When he decides to speak from his space of radical exile (a locus at once of emotional loss and imaginary compensation), Tariq's attempts at a narrative reconstruction of his tragedy turn out to be an ultimate gift to his fellow humans as well as a consuming sacrifice. Faced with the realization that he is out of place both in his native country and in France—marginalized, stigmatized in both societies—he finds himself embarked on one last desperate endeavor to communicate through the written word.

In this brief response to Bell's commentary on the main character of *The Offering*, I would like to start by considering the unusual terms on which Tariq chooses to make this final gesture at communication, namely, his adamant adherence to a self-narrative that defies causality, logic, and even perceptual sense itself. In the poet's account of an existence burdened with unnamable loss, shorn of any notion of home, the untrammelled imagination remains his only consolation—an inner source of energy that sustains his mental life, the latter being the only realm he can claim as his own after having been stripped of most of his social attributes. The reduction of Tariq's being to pure textuality results in the imagination superseding the dichotomy of truth and falsehood as self-narration becomes his main source of inner meaning and intellectual subsistence. In short, with the factual events of his trauma lost in a zone of radical indeterminacy, the implicit narrative terms dictated by Tariq to the reader are a function of the re-articulation of his life into an account that has moved beyond the confines of ordinary communication to become the expressive vehicle of a shattered sensibility giving voice to its pain within a deeply disjunctive novelistic framework: a narrative continuum of pure intensities (emotional, existential, psychological, sensory-perceptual) rather than a linearly structured text governed

by conventional aspects of form, of causal and logical cohesiveness. The voice of a symptom erupting in its raw, radical immediacy. (When viewed within the specific context of Tariq's existential condition, this symptomatic narrative space occupied by the poet seems to be an eerie corollary of his earlier experiences: a singular expressive mode in which the alogical intensity of the exile's voice is proportionate to the extent and severity of his accumulated injuries—the ruthless, ravaging anarchy with which the marks of cultural trauma have come to be inscribed upon the totality of his self, body and mind.) In sum, the elements of intense emotional expression at work in Tariq's self-narration index a hypersensitive man confronted with loss and isolation so ineffable that he ends up articulating the extremity of his grief through forms of emotional exteriorization that transcend the conventional logic of narrative expression— affective singularities that cannot be grasped in terms of such conceptual binaries as truth/falsehood, logic/illogic, reason/unreason. In other words, Tariq's last gesture of communication with his fellow humans is a mode of expression that is as aporetic as his in-between position; an act best understood as the narrative equivalent of a primal scream: the expression—radical, raw, unmediated by logic or causality—of a sense of malaise so deep that it cannot be brought into coherent expression. Paradoxically, it is within this narrative space of profound loss, of grief and powerlessness beyond articulation, that Tariq finds his most eloquent voice as a writer.

Let us recall here that the artist's ultimate exile—his confinement within a heterogeneous text articulated as a field of affective singularities—represents the culminating point of a life marked by real and symbolic exile since his college days in Tunisia. The “road to Brittany” and the trauma center is in this respect the culminating point in a life characterized by a profound sense of homelessness that makes him feel out of place both in his native country and in France—doomed to be marginalized and stigmatized in both societies (Moncef, *The Offering* 407). Faced with these negative aspects of social in-betweenness, Tariq embraces rather than resists his condition—affirming his marginal existence within the artist's inner universe, opting for the imaginary compensation the latter presents. As Bell aptly puts it, even while this radical choice puts the poet in a position of intense solitude, there is a persistent, haunting quality of universality in Tariq's stand, one that suffuses his story with a certain existential genericity, making us apprehend his personal shock as far more than the ethnicity specific experience of a North African man confronted with the challenges of stigmatization and exclusion. This particular characteristic of Tariq's existential state—a feature pertinent to readerly identification—requires further elaboration, for it points to elements of transnational selfhood that extend beyond the specificities of his condition and their expression in narrative form.

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Noting certain aspects of universality in Tariq's narrative, Bell argues that *The Offering* "contains ... elements that are relatable to ... the experiences of others who might share more similar experiences" with him (206). The story's potential for creating feelings of identification among diasporic readers of various identities brings us to another of Tariq's paradoxes: the fact that the symptoms of disjunction and homelessness that have contributed to the disintegration of the man's life are inextricably connected with the principles of tolerance, openness and global identification that have made him, from the beginning of his intellectual and artistic career, the quintessential transnational subject—a "world citizen" endowed with a natural capacity to interface between different modes of belief, different cultural heritages and practices. Notwithstanding Tariq's deeply flawed character, his unusually adaptable identity is ultimately an admirable component of his personality, for it allows him to accept and live by a rather arduous life principle: his firm belief that the transnational life is the only life he wants to live, in spite of the ravages of racist hatred and violence. During his residence in Bordeaux, he faces those ravages with fortitude and chooses to project the universalistic ideal of a fundamental affinity between human beings—a positive urge that makes them seek to develop meaningful ties with one another in spite (or perhaps *because*) of their differences. A genuine Anzaldúan "crosser of cultures," Tariq finds certitude in the ethos of the transnational self that he is, asserting the creative power of difference in the face of intolerance and conformity (Anzaldúa 3). More than a geopolitical reality, the transnational experience that he lives is deeply rooted in his consciousness—a form of second nature stemming from the realization early on in his life that the fact of hybridity and in-betweenness is not a source of existential anxiety but an integral part of his quest to realize his full potential as a thinker and as an artist. Through his cosmopolitan intellectual and artistic choices in Tunisia and in France, Tariq has come implicitly to endorse cultural and social energies that subvert real and symbolic borders—geopolitical, ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural. The trinational family he creates in France with his German wife is proof that he espouses progressive dynamics of hybridity and transnational identifications—existential choices that imply radical transformations, which he undertakes with admirable tolerance of mind and flexibility of character. For a brief period of time in his life, the exile that characterizes his poetic sensibility seems to be, despite the many challenges, an invigorating sign of plurality and innovation rather than a symptom of alienation. While there is an urge in his writings to historicize and narrativize his self as an ethnically and culturally specific form of *being* who exists in a European country, there is a much stronger tendency both in his work and in his sensibility to envision his self as the sum of a *becoming*—a process of transformation, through his relationships and his creative work, into a "plastic man," a synthesizing subject "permeable to [new] principles" and rejoicing in a conception of his existence as the locus of shifting identifications, a space of displacement in a transformative sense (Emerson 965). In sum, although Tariq rarely reflects consciously on his plural identity and identifications, it is important

to note the extraordinary ethical dimension of this achievement from a man whose consciousness ends up evolving over the years into a site of cultural multiplicity. As a tangible indicator of this multiplicity, the dynamics of hybridity and transnational identification at work in the family founded by Tariq and his wife point to the question of immigration in Europe as a potential force of social renewal through diversity: the novel forms and spaces of identity formation that immigration creates within the monolithic logic of the nation-state, deconstructing its reductive myths of nationhood, territory, citizenship, and Eurocentric ethnic identity.

Thus, in spite of the monolithic cultural environment in which he finds himself after Paris, Tariq's unspoken vision of his identity as a transnational artist and as a plastic man who wants to contribute to a new Europe represents both a hopeful force of change and a factor of immense challenge for the artist who has decided to leave the capital in order to make a living and fulfill his literary aspirations in *La Province*. Indeed, what he finds in Bordeaux is the radical opposite of his ideal vision of Europe as an integrative space based on a synthesization of the energies of diverse cultural and ethnic forces. Provincial France turns out to be a space in which the exclusion and stereotyping of Arabs and North Africans is common practice. In spite of the deep existential shock created by the stigmatizing forces that he is confronted with after his separation from his wife and children, Tariq opts not to seek moral support in the Maghrebi community. Rather, he chooses to further affirm the interstitial character of his subject position and life choices. And while this momentous existential decision ends up radicalizing the poet's solitary, individualistic existence in Bordeaux, it also makes his account of his provincial experience suffused by an implicit awareness of his connection to diasporic subjects like him, men and women from different backgrounds who conceive of our postmodern world as a borderless space. It is primarily in relation to his commitment to this borderless world vision that we should envision Tariq's avoidance of a "return" to the North African community; a deeply ethical commitment indeed that helps him maintain the transnational character of his life as well as his art, with both remaining the space of an interstitial articulation between North and South. Considered in the context of Tariq's self-narrative, the double articulation of his identity in terms of European and North African belonging can be seen as the site of an intersection through which the pluralistic vision of the plastic man becomes increasingly linked to his mode of narration. As the account of his interstitial existence between the North and the South, Tariq's story is in this respect an esthetic force that allows him to creatively appropriate different markers of social and cultural commonality: symbols of national identity that he transforms into the subjective referents of a consciousness dwelling between nations and their common social and cultural identifications.

The vision of narrative space as the scene of a transnational self consciously (ethically) cultivating an artistic sensibility of the in-between refers us to a defining characteristic of Tariq's conception and expression of the time-place-affect nexus: his imaginary appropriation and reconstruction of the settings that he

revisits neither in European terms nor in North African terms, but in terms of the voice of the exile—a voice through which socially and culturally overdetermined spaces are apprehended as fluid, shifting sites of existential and affective self-projection rather than as sites of national or even cultural identification/identity. The poet's deeply personal, idiosyncratic way of relating to space through narrative results in a singular conception of temporality, one that is marked by a permanent quality of disjunction whose main characteristic in Tariq's account is the incessant, dizzying interplay of radically different spatiotemporal experiences: impressions juxtaposed into a fluid collage of referents from European and Mediterranean history and heritage—socially and culturally overdetermined indexes of national identity embedded into Tariq's multimedia text as a deeply personal assemblage of topographical, archeological, esthetic, and architectural references. In the final analysis, as the effect of a fluid collage, the meanings and representations that emerge from Tariq's disjunctive text index a sense of spatiotemporality that is determined by his multi-experiential consciousness—a synthetic, plural, and postnational consciousness by definition.



These elements of spatiotemporality in Tariq's narrative—and the particular dynamics of appropriation and transformation they imply—bring us to another paradoxical aspect of the artist's persona: the articulation of his subjectivity in terms of a dialectic of difference that makes it possible for the reader to apprehend his experience as a “third element” born of the North-South encounter and signifying the traumas as well as the potentials of colonial and postcolonial history (Anzaldúa 3). Indeed, while the poet's in-between subject position in France is an index of alienation and marginalization, that selfsame position represents a potential site of intellectual and artistic enrichment thanks to his “different status” as a diasporic subject. It is precisely through Tariq's traumatic experience of stigmatization, marginalization, and alienation that the reader manages to see in his account of life between Europe and North Africa a narrative of great critical promise: a testimony that gestures toward the possibility of reconceptualizing European society into a space operating on the basis of inclusion and synthesization of divergent cultural forces rather than on the basis of the “management” of those forces as “ethnic minorities” in need of “integration.” Ultimately, the story's dramatization of Tariq's in-betweenness as a form of interstitiality that is as radical as it is irresolvable—the articulation of his existence *between* North African and European identities, the marginality of his voice *within* both—refers us to the twin questions of national belonging and citizenly “allegiance,” a central problematic in the life of a man whose identity cannot be defined in terms of conventional citizenship. As the locus of transnational sensibilities and identifications that surpass the boundaries of the nation-state, Tariq's subject position obliges us to reflect on the presence of the immigrant other beyond the local/national terms of belonging and citizenship

(either Tunisian or French) and in the global terms of transnational selfhood (*both* Tunisian and French).

It is in this specific context that Tariq's narrative reveals one of its most significant characteristics as the testimonial text of a diasporic subject-body, indicating its pertinence to the current globalization-migration debate and, by the same token, its function as a potential site of identification and reflection for various diasporic subjects, especially those who are working toward a redefinition of their relation to their cultural heritage outside the reductive framework of national belonging. While this redefinition process is still in its infancy in many countries, the time has never been more propitious for the diasporic subject to negotiate and rethink her identity in terms of an interfacing between various identity categories and a potential synthesization of those categories into a novel form of self—an interstitial, “transcategorical self” (Moncef, “*Übermenschen*” 50 ff.). In short, a new form of plastic womanhood or manhood that refuses rigid adherence to reductive forms of self-definition, finding new existential meaning in the affirmation of interstitiality in all its forms: transnational, transcultural, transidiomatic, transtextual—in short, *transformational*. Ultimately, concretizing this new transformational horizon of the plastic individual—the future subject of the transnational public sphere—remains one of the most urgent questions of our time, pressing us to rethink the irreversible globalization of our world, to reconceptualize its immense possibilities for cultural enrichment and peaceful coexistence as well as its dire potential for culture shock and conflict.

Works Cited

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