

## REVIEW ESSAY

## “COMPARER PEUT ETRE RAISON” OR TO COMPARE MAY BE RIGHT

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**Beggar Abderrahman. 2012. *Ethique et rupture bouraouiennes*. Toronto: CMC Editions, 188 pp.**

Abderahman Beggar teaches Mediterranean Studies and Arabic at Waterloo’s Wilfrid Laurier University. After authoring *L’Epreuve de la béance* in 2009, Beggar comes back with another work on Hédi André Bouraoui. The fact that Beggar was born and partly educated in Morocco, finished his doctorate in France and now works in Canada, predisposes him to fully understand the trans-citizenship of the author of *La Francophonie à l’Estomac* and *Transpoétique, Eloge du nomadisme*, Hédi Bouraoui. Thus, he emerges with *Ethique et rupture bouraouienne* to further explore nomaditude / nomadité / nomadanse, which are (trans-)concepts that Bouraoui has added to the characterization of the new-age Human Being. The book centers around three major tasks:

Une première étape invite le lecteur à se rendre compte comment l’errance – surtout à travers la Méditerranée – et les élans vitaux qui la déterminent obéissent à une éthique visuelle, un désir de voir tout en allant de l’avant. Dans un second temps, l’objectif est d’explorer les assises philosophiques d’une telle attitude à partir d’une comparaison avec la pensée nietzschéenne, et avec son époque. La dernière partie explore ce qui résulte d’une telle philosophie de vie.

[The first aim of this book invites the reader to understand migrancy –mainly through the Mediterranean – as well as know that the steps that define it also obey a visual ethics, a desire to discover while moving forward. Secondly, the book explores the philosophical underpinnings of such an attitude through a comparison of Bouaroui’s body of work with Nietzsche’s line and context of thinking. The last aim is to explore the outcomes of such a philosophical commitment] (Beggar 18) [Translation is mine].<sup>1</sup>

The book includes four parts titled as follows: (1) “Ethique et regard” [Ethics and gaze]; (2) “Penser la Méditerranée” [Thinking the Mediterranean]; (3) “Rupture et critique chez F.

<sup>1</sup> Subsequent English translations of French quotations are all mine.

Nietzsche et H. Bouraoui” [Break and criticism in Nietzsche and Bouraoui] ; (4) “Hédi Bouraoui et le concept de littérature-monde” [Hédi Bouraoui and the idea of “littérature-monde”].

The first part of the book deals with the faring of the individual in search for his/her real and hidden self. Beggar writes, “l’objectif de toute éthique est de ramener l’homme au bercail, à la substance de son être” [The aim of any ethics is to bring the human being back home, to the essence of his/her being] (p 21). The individual searches for a part of him-/herself lying both in the past and the future. It turns out that Bouraoui knows well about migrancy for having traveled and dwelt on three continents that he claims as full-fledged parts of his own identity. This is what Bouraoui calls nomaditude or “cette volonté de générer soi-même les lieux du déplacement à tel point que même les mouvements n’ont pas droit au repos [...]” [The willpower to create by one’s own means the spaces of movement to the point where movement itself knows no respite] (p. 25). Here, Beggar sees Bouraoui in Hannibal, the main protagonist of Bouraoui’s trilogy (*Cap nord*, *Les Aléas d’une odyssée*, and *Méditerranée en toute voile*) who travels through the Mediterranean, thereby rejecting fixedness because movement liberates and allows for a vantage point of sighting the world in different ways. By being in a constant migration, or by travelling, the subject acquires a new way of seeing: “Le regard n’est pas destiné à conserver ni à préserver. Il est surtout une force qui recycle. Tout est soumis au besoin de recontextualiser” [The gaze is not meant for conservation or preservation. It is rather a recycling force. Everything is bound to the need to recontextualize] (p.24). The vastness of the Mediterranean therefore reads as an ocean of possible ways of apprehending the reality around the individual. Setting sail is part of the migrancy that recontextualizes what one sees. Bouraoui, according to Beggar, assaults the fixity of identity through the sea of the Mediterranean with art. Here, there is congruence with thinkers/artists who believe in the perfection of the Human and attempt to exact it on their definition of art. There are authors and critics who “ideologize” art and literature by bestowing utilitarian power on it as does Jean-Paul Sartre, and the *engagé* writers/artists who follow the French thinker and writer. There are some writers/artists who find subliminal potentials in art.

According to Beggar, “Le créateur se définit [...] comme projet, ouverture, incomplétude, soif d’horizons” [the creator can be defined as a project, openness, incompleteness, thirst for newer horizons] (Beggar 75). Bouraoui contemplates new venues for the realization of Beauty (the untainted that is yet to come like project, openness, new horizons

etc.) such as conceived by the Human. He thus joins hands with Nietzsche who writes that “in the beautiful, man posits himself as the measure of perfection, in special cases he worships himself in it. [...] At bottom, man mirrors himself in things, he considers everything beautiful that reflects his own image [...]” (*Twilight of Idols* 525). When the artist sees beauty in man and attempts to replicate in the world fraught with suffering and all sorts of turpitudes, art becomes his/her sole resort. Bouraoui’s concept of “créaculture” (“l’homme comme esprit en action” [Begggar p. 70]), which the “transcitizen”/author develops in *Transpoétique, éloge du nomadisme* (2005) must be apprehended along these lines. Creaculture is “cette prise de la parole au sein meme de la folie qui crée la dimension nécessaire à notre survie” [the seizing of the spoken word within the folly that creates the necessary dimensions of our survival] (Bouraoui 2005: 16).

The second part, “Penser la Méditerranée”, partakes of the writer’s intent upon challenging received ideas and concepts. It is the iconoclasm of the artist/writer because “Les concepts sont ces barrages érigés pour contenir et gérer les idées” [Concepts are the walls erected to contain and manage ideas] (p. 85), and “au lieu de prendre le concept pour ce qu’il est, il faut le soumettre à des exigences liées non seulement au besoin de contrôler une branche du savoir, mais surtout à celui de sa soumission à un cadre vital qui dépasse tout, même la pensée” [instead of seeing concept for what is really is, it has to be submitted to the exigencies not only of the need to control a branch of knowledge, but also to a vital frame that supersedes everything, even the thought itself] (p. 91). To think the Mediterranean, Begggar writes, is to bring into being a new conception of the act of writing; it is to seek a “parole autre” (i.e. spoken word by the Other) by adding to art/ writing a component that frees it from the strictures of conventionalities and rigidities that fix meaning and the individual in time and space. The writer has then to become a nomad, which Bouraoui couches, as usual, in the neologism of “écrivain-nomadasant”: “L’écrivain-nomadasant est celui pour qui l’appartenance identitaire n’est pas une source d’affrontement ; il est celui qui fait de son art une glorification de l’innocence qui habite la nature, et ses livres des vergers [...] où se nourrit l’âme” [The writer-nomad does not conceive of his identity as a site of conflicts; rather, he/she uses his/her art to glorify innocence such as seen in nature, and he/she sees his/her books as a garden where the soul thrives](p. 89). Such is Bouraoui’s understanding of ethics, and where the break or rupture begins.

In more ways than one, the third part of the book, “Rupture et éthique chez F. Nietzsche et H. Bouraoui,” is the gist of Beggar’s message in *Ethique et rupture bouraouiennes*. In fact, the comparison between Nietzsche and Bouraoui may reasonably sound paradoxical and even unbecoming. On the surface, the two authors do not operate in similar contexts. Nietzsche, on top of being a poet, a composer and a cultural critic, was a philosopher and a classical philologist. Bouraoui is neither a philosopher nor a philologist; he shares the functions of poet and cultural critic with Nietzsche.

To the best of available knowledge, Bouraoui has never suffered mental illness like Nietzsche from 1889 to his death in 1900. Besides, Beggar finds some similarities in both men’s academic pathways and their trouble with publishing houses, and therefore with the reception of their oeuvres. But more interesting is that what these two men share most in common is not simply the fact that their two conditions reflect “une rupture profonde avec l’esprit de leur époque” [a substantive break from the mindset prevailing in their time] (p 118); they also have a conception of art that is iconoclastic. It is particularly remarkable that they both seek to revert the tables of rules and laws, to disorganize and challenge preconceived ideas, and mostly to “faire sortir la pensée des limites que lui impose l’esprit de l’époque, quitte à se voir marginalisé” [free the mind from the limitations imposed the mindset of the time even at the cost of being marginalized] (p. 119). The radical content of texts like *The Antichrist*, *Ecce Homo*, *The Death of God*, and/or *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, proves well that Nietzsche was in the business of writing and philosophizing for reasons that aimed at unsettling conformity and social conventionalities that precluded his mental/spiritual freedom. Nihilism or the intent of getting rid of God and nothingness, and the impossibility of reaching an objective judgment (or Nietzsche’s perspectivist epistemology i.e. the belief that knowledge is contingent and conditional) make it even harder for this “atypical” philosopher to be accepted by the conservative society of his time. Worse still, assailing the fundamentals of Western civilization (i.e. Christianity), thereby posing himself as some sort of anti-Christ, reveals how revolutionary Nietzsche was.

No wonder, post-modernists and other post- and -isms tie their mode of knowledge production to Nietzsche. He not only sets himself free the strictures of his time, but also attempts to break others loose from the same limitations. This, *par excellence*, is a rupture or disruption of the established order. “Rupture” is therefore an ethics that presupposes

un effort de ‘déterritorialisation’ dans le sens où elle dépouille la création des amarres que lui dicte l’esprit de ce que nous pouvons qualifier d’intellectualisme communautaire, cette tendance à inscrire l’écriture dans autant de ‘ghettos’ stylistiques, ethnolinguistiques [et] nationalistes [...].(p 55)

[an attempt to deterritorialize, that is to free creative work from the rules dictated by community-bound intellectualism or the tendency to inscribe the act of writing into some stylistic, ethnolinguistic and nationalist ghettos]

Therefore, Bouraoui’s rupture is a subversion that defies all: lexicons, grammar, syntactical structures, non-respect of the so-called correct punctuation, and above all, the tearing down of walls between literary genres. His idoloclasm i.e. idol-smashing, iconoclasm if you will, is a conscious endeavor that warrants Beggar’s comparison of Bouraoui with Nietzsche. Ultimately, Bouraoui clearly follows in Nietzsche’s footsteps when his body of work is screened. *Ainsi parle la Tour CN* formally recalls *Ainsi parlait Zarathoustra* (or *Thus spoke Zarathustra*) by Nietzsche. What is more, not only does Bouraoui cite Nietzsche twice (pages 127 and 245), but also Zarathustra is the CN tower, which is personified because of its “prise de la parole.”

The final part of Beggar’s book is a logical continuation of Bouraoui’s commitment to freedom from the shackles of concepts and styles that foreclose his immense migratory potentialities or his self-realization as a poet and artist. “Hédi Bouraoui et le concept de littérature-monde” is a section that reminds of the literary dissidence instigated by 44 Francophone writers who resented and protested against their being discriminated and segregated by the French and Metropolitan literary and cultural establishment. They seek to create a space of diversity and polyvocality that transcend color, geography and what not. Their manifesto was “Pour une littérature-monde en français” was published by the French paper *Le Monde* in March 2007<sup>2</sup> in the run-up to the election former French president Nicolas Sarkozy. The “revolutionary” authors claim what follows:

[L’]émergence d’une littérature-monde en langue française consciemment affirmée, ouverte sur le monde, transnationale, signe l’acte de décès de la francophonie : Personne ne parle le francophone, ni n’écrit en francophone. La francophonie est de la lumière d’étoile morte.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The same year, the authors of the manifesto had contributions to that effect published by Michel Le Bris, Jean Rouaud and Eva Elmassy under the title *Pour une littérature-monde* through Gallimard, a French publishing house.

<sup>3</sup> See “Le Monde des Livres,” *Le Monde.fr*, March 15, 2007, available at : [http://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2007/03/15/des-ecrivains-plaident-pour-un-roman-en-francais-ouvert-sur-le-monde\\_883572\\_3260.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2007/03/15/des-ecrivains-plaident-pour-un-roman-en-francais-ouvert-sur-le-monde_883572_3260.html).

[The coming of age of this world literature in French, consciously asserted, open to the world and transnational, will sign the death warrant of the “Francophonie”: no one speaks a language known as “Francophone”. “Francophonie” is the light of a dead star.]

The new concept antagonizes the concept “Francophone literature” and by extension the French version of Great Britain’s Commonwealth or la francophonie, which these authors believe refers only to writers and people using the French language with the particularity that they are not French nationals. This distinction has ideological implications. Two third of the French language users, and therefore the promoters of the French culture, live outside France and are not nationals of this part of Europe. Because these authors are treated as an underclass of writers in France, this critical move is a “prise de la parole” as Bouraoui would say. In other words, they require recognition.

As early as 1995 in *La Francophonie à l’estomac*, Bouraoui has been denouncing not only the elitism of French literature but also the arrogance of both French publishers and prize-awarding organizations when it comes to the so-called Francophone writers. Bouraoui writes, “c’est en approfondissant les diversités des pays que l’on peut dialoguer, tout en gardant sa spécificité dans l’échange établi” [dialoguing while maintaining one’s particular traits is only possible when one delves into the diversities of the countries involved in the dialogue](Bourouui 1995 : 61-2). It turns out that in Francophonie, there is no dialogue, if there is any, it is one-dimensional and exclusionary. The book, in more ways than one, stands as an attack against Francophonie as we know it. Thus, a faithful English translation of *La Francophonie à l’estomac* would be “Sick of Francophonie to the stomach.” No wonder, this book is unwelcome in spaces where purism and chauvinism are hailed in French language.

Clearly, the authors of the manifesto for a world literature in French intend to create a sort of radical alterity vis-à-vis the use of the English language that has come to pass as the world language. George Steiner speaks of the threat of a monolingual world under the aegis of Anglo-Americans. He writes, “[...] le monolinguisme régnera sur une planète qui subira la domination économique de l’anglo-américain, qu’on nomme déjà ‘l’espéranto du commerce’” [monolingualism will lord it over the world which will suffer Anglo-American economic domination already referred to as “Trade Esperanto”] (Jahanbegloo 147).

The unanswered question is: Do Bouraoui and the multi-hyphenated (African) writers claiming for the French language –since a great deal of them do not want to be associated with their point of origin and call themselves citizens of the world–, will actually succeed in decentering the French language-culture from its assumed French location to make it globalist? This is a very hard battle to fight and win. These writers had better look into their identity as post-Francophone, by exploring new mediums of expression like their local languages. Local languages are the best contribution plurilingual and hyphenated “francographs” –non-French users of the French language as an artistic/political medium of expression– could bring to the global cultural exchange.

Creating new centers adds more to the will to hegemonize the world rather than to bring down the dominating centers and allowing for shared agency among peoples and their cultures, thereby to difference, this assumed threat to the dominant world cultures. A call for a world-literature in French not only shows an irreducible dependence of some non-French Francophones vis-à-vis France, but also it reveals the weakness of creativeness among the new guild of writers. Instead of making possible the coming of age of a new center of dominance –because “world literature in French is a “monocultural diversity” regrouping people of different background using the French language–, the educated and writers of the former colonized spaces where French language is in use should remedy the monolingual tendency by revitalizing local languages spoken in their places of origin. Cultural nationalist, scholar and novelist originally from Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong’O has shown the path with writing a play in his mother tongue before it was translated into English years later.

In sum, advocacy for the “littérature-monde en français” is just another conceptualization that imprisons the individual. That Beggar emphasizes Bouraoui’s contribution to the manifesto for a “littérature-monde en français” proves part of the paradox perceivable in Bouraoui’s will to subvert the elitism, centralism and purism in French letters and art, and in literatures expressed in the French language. It appears that one cannot want to possess the golden eggs without having to actually kill the hen that bears them.

Lastly, for the sake of continuity in comparison, *Ethique et rupture bouraouiennes* could reveal if Nietzsche ever moved towards linguistic pan-Germanism as Bouraoui attempts to rally speakers of the French language in a diversified Francophone space. Failure to problematize this

relation of Bouraoui to the French language and unearthing some similar relation of Nietzsche to the German language somewhat darkens Beggar's fabulous and seminal work in philosophy on an author who just wants to be an artist, someone bent to change the world.

Beggar's books on Bouraoui are changing the way we look at the works of this Tunisian-born transcitizen and tricontinental, who has long been misunderstood and literally pushed to the periphery by critics who only capture value in things exclusively Western and Eurocentric. In this new book, Beggar puts Bouraoui to test and task with a comparison that some would deem untenable. The author compares Bouraoui's approach to writing and/or literature and art to that of Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, the German philosopher, poet, composer, cultural critic and classical philologist. Here, it is about the opinion of these two authors on literature and/or art. Admittedly, the French would say that "comparaison n'est pas raison" [comparing is not always right]. However, it is high time critics of any stripe started breaking the walls of distrust unjustly erected among thinkers as commanded by the global world in becoming. Beggar proceeds with his undertaking in the fine line of the comparatist tradition, i.e., out of "a tour d'idéologie," he leans towards the "inclusion of the Other, be that a marginal literature in its several meanings of marginality" (Tötösy de Zepetnek 13). In fact, as the title of the book (*Ethique et Rupture*) indicates, Bouraoui breaks away from the spirit and mind of logocentrism of his time. Nietzsche did the same thing, thereby estranging himself from the center.

The bottom line is that Beggar could not miss the points of convergence not only between Bouraoui and Nietzsche, but also between himself and the two authors. An artist, the author of *Ethique et Rupture* shows the power of art and the responsibility of the writer/artist throughout the book. He behaves more like an artist than a critic. Steiner believes that the critic "lives at second hand. He writes about. [...] Criticism exists by grace of other men's genius" (Steiner 3).

Readers interested in the philosophy of Nietzsche should read Beggar. His book provides further information and gears towards possible continuation of the task of comparatism he has undertaken. Ultimately, this book is a welcome addition to the bulk of existing literature in comparative studies as well as in Mediterranean studies.

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