UNAUTHORING THE TEXT

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In Boumkoeur by Rachid Djaidani and Paul Smail’s Vivre me tue and Casa, la casa, Beur characters undertake initiatory writing projects. For his part, Yaz (Boumkoeur) sets out to write a testimonial account of life in the low-income housing projects where he lives. He decides to use his writing to reflect the environment and to set himself on a new course, one distinct from his peers and his own past. The author-character Paul Smail (Vivre me tue and Casa, la casa) builds his novels on lived experiences, specifically his passage as a Beur to the status of author in the French literary milieu.

Both author-characters are Beurs, or the children of Maghrebi immigrants, whose identity does not match the dominant French one promoted around them. Just as the identity of these characters does not fit the mould of Frenchness, their writing philosophies and techniques differ visibly from the mainstream. Instead of adopting and glorifying the role of truth-holding creators, Yaz and Paul Smail prefer to belie the transcendent role of the author(ity). The characters gesture to unauthor their writing; this is a rebellious act through which they seek new forms of expression and representation.

Artist-apprentice novels, or Künstlerromane, are novels in which the main characters’ maturation process parallels and grows out of the artistic projects that they undertake; bildung (formation, creation, invention, production) takes place through artistic creation. Boumkoeur (1999) by Rachid Djaidani, and Vivre me tue (1997) and Casa, la casa (1998) by Paul Smail are three such novels that have been written by contemporary authors in France. There are many similarities between Djaidani’s and Smail’s characters, Yaz and Paul Smail respectively. They both are approximately twenty-one years old; they do not have work; they have younger brothers who overdosed on drugs; and they are Beurs, the sons of North African immigrants, who live in France. At the critical moment when they should be entering the working world as full-fledged participants in French society, the Beur characters find themselves on the sidelines. Discouraged by a series of failed interviews, training sessions, and menial jobs, the characters Yaz and Paul Smail view writing as a constructive alternative to
delinquency’s downward spiral. As they engage the writing process, these underground author-characters invest the text with commentary on life at the fringes of French society.

1. Becoming/Unbecoming and Authoring/Unauthoring

*Boumkoeur*, *Vivre me tue*, and *Casa, la casa* narrate process: on the one hand, the process of personal maturation (becoming, *bildung*) and on the other, the process of literary creation. It is important to note that what generates these concurrent processes is a reaction on the part of the characters to their environment and the experiences, especially the failures, they have had at the heart of French society. The characters Yaz and Paul Smail both have the examples of their Maghrebi immigrant fathers, who never attained the stability they were seeking in France, and the immediate examples of their brothers who died as a result of drug addiction. But instead of following in paternal and fraternal footsteps, they decide that they will extricate themselves from their existential predicament by initiating a new beginning: writing will engender self-reinvention.

The notion of “beginning” contains an interesting complexity. Here it is useful to return to Edward Said’s distinction between “a beginning” and “an origin.” According this distinction, beginnings are characterized as importantly *active*, origins as *passive*. Said writes: “we see that the beginning is the first point (in time, space, or action) of an accomplishment or process that has duration and meaning. The beginning, then, is the first step in the intentional production of meaning.”¹ A beginning, in this sense, inaugurates a process of development or unfolding. This observation informs the novels by Djaïdani and Smaïl where the characters’ initiation of book projects occurs subsequent to their realization that they could be heading toward an unwanted outcome. The decision to undertake a “beginning” is a decision that initiates a process toward better self-identity, which in turn will lead the characters to derive greater meaning from their existence. These novels illuminate the notion that, unlike an immutable origin, a beginning points both backwards and forwards; in short beginning comprises the double movement of becoming/unbecoming. So the author-characters’ decisions to initiate a new beginning through writing commits each of them to intentionally becoming someone new and to intentionally “unbecoming” at least a part of the person that they have been.

The sort of double movement mentioned here is of course characteristic of all protagonists seeking to reinvent themselves. What is striking about *Boumkoeur*, *Vivre me tue*, and *Casa, la casa* is that for the author-characters Yaz and Paul

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¹ Said, 5.