

Writing selves as mourning and *Vita Nova*: Abdellah Taïa's *Un pays pour mourir*

Using for the most part Kleinian analysis, this article presents Abdellah Taïa's latest novel *Un pays pour mourir* as a work of reparative mourning. It is divided in three parts: "Mourning the father," "Melancholy gender and mourning," and "Reparative work through characterization." The approach encompasses the sociology of the author and a blend of online interviews, social media, and fictional accounts of "family". The article finds that it is not in (psycho)analysis but within the realm of writing the self/selves, and more specifically the multiple characters invented in the novel, that Taïa the author revisits the relationship with the father, his younger self, sets up a dialogue between his more fluid gender and his more rigid identity, between his younger and his older self, and tries to reach some kind of mutual understanding, on the way to possible reintegration. Taïa accomplishes what Klein sees as a journey of reconciliation since, for the psychoanalyst, it is by reinstating inside himself the "good" parents, and by rebuilding his inner world that the patient overcomes his grief. Taïa has achieved a *Vita Nova* in the sense used by Roland Barthes for this expression: the discovery of a new practice of writing.

En utilisant une approche psychanalytique inspirée en grande partie par Mélanie Klein, cet article présente le dernier roman d'Abdellah Taïa *Un pays pour mourir* comme un travail de deuil réparateur. Il est divisé en trois parties: "Le deuil du père," "Mélancolie du genre et deuil," et "Le travail de réparation à travers les personnages." Une sociologie de l'auteur, un mélange d'interviews, de réseaux sociaux et de fictions sur la "famille" forment la base de mon approche. L'article démontre que ce n'est pas en analyse mais dans l'écriture du soi/des soi et plus spécifiquement dans les multiples personnages inventés par le roman que Taïa en tant qu'auteur revoit la relation au père, au petit Abdellah, établit un dialogue entre un genre qui n'est pas fixé et une identité plus rigide, entre le jeune Abdellah et un Abdellah plus âgé, de façon à arriver à une compréhension mutuelle, pour se diriger vers une possible réintégration. Taïa accomplit ce que Klein appelle un voyage de réconciliation car, pour la psychanalyste, c'est en réintégrant à l'intérieur de soi les "bons" parents et en reconstruisant

son monde intérieur que le patient dépasse son chagrin. Taïa accomplit la Vita Nova dans le sens donné par Roland Barthes à cette expression: la découverte d'une nouvelle pratique d'écriture.

Un pays pour mourir, the latest novel published by Moroccan writer Abdellah Taïa, perpetuates his literary endeavor of writing the self. It is a polyphonic novel, adopting the structure of *Arabian Nights*, with three main characters: Zahira a female prostitute, Aziz a male to female prostitute who becomes Zannouba, and Motjaba a gay Iranian activist. Though less autobiographical than his early work, there is a deep autobiographical vein that is still being mined in this novel, namely the author's childhood experiences, but also his experience of arriving to live in Paris in 1999 as an immigrant: "C'est un livre que je porte en en moi depuis 1999" (Taïa, "L'espoir"). Undoubtedly, the primary reading of this text is political. It is a commentary on stateless immigrants in a post-colonial world, on the eve of the Arab Spring.¹ However, I want to pursue my psychoanalytical approach to Taïa's work, having argued elsewhere that his previous novel, *Infidèles*, constitutes a work of reparative mourning, triggered by the death of his mother in 2010 ("Deuil").² I aim to show in this article that *Un pays pour mourir* is equally a work of reparative mourning which concentrates more on the figure of the father and that of the younger self of the author.³ Ralph Heyndels powerfully argues that, throughout his work, by his (fictional) self-representation, the author Taïa tragically abolishes his living self, leading to a death of the self and in turn mourning becomes the deep motive of his entire work ("Abdellah à jamais disparu" 152).

A first incursion into psychoanalytical theory is necessary to foreground my reading. According to Melanie Klein, in childhood development the mother, especially the mother's breast, is seen by the child as the "good" external object that the child internalizes. Whilst using a master theory such as Klein's, I do not intend to reduce mourning to the relationship to the maternal breast. It is *symbolic* of a form of nurturing, which does not need to be gender specific, nor to be fixated on the breast. Klein holds that in infancy there are two positions based on the reaction to the breast (the feeding/nurturing Other) that goes away and frustrates the infant (Mitchell 20). One is the paranoid-schizoid position, where the infant feels aggressive toward the frustrating object and, as a result, fears retaliation. The other position, a position which seems to chime with Taïa's experience as narrated and related in his text and paratext (and as we will see when we develop our

argument throughout this article), is the *depressive position* where the infant, whilst also raging against the mother (we can read: the primary carer), feels guilt and anxiety for having these feelings. In the first posture, the main fear is that of being persecuted; in the second one, the overwhelming feeling is depression (Mitchell 21–2). Generally, the ego feels threatened in its possession of internalized good objects, fearing and being full of angst should these objects die (Mitchell 121). I do not see these two positions as universalizing positions, forever set in stone. In fact, part of the reparative work for Taïa will be to move away from the depressive position through the literary but, as categories go, they serve a useful purpose, especially in view of the following:

Everything has become much more complicated since my mother's death two years ago. I thought the intelligent aspect of me would keep me safe and I protected the child that I was by being intelligent in society. During that process I killed other things in me. After my mother died, all of those problems from when I was a child came back and I realized how alone I was in the world (Taïa, "A conversation with Moroccan novelist").

When I read this interview in 2012, I was struck by the above passage where Joe Edgar asks Taïa if has been able to reconcile his adult self and his childhood self. It made me realize that when his mother died in 2010, it is likely that Taïa was assailed by great pain that overwhelmed him and that possibly caused the collapsing of his inner world, followed by a wish to isolate himself from the world. Couched in Kleinian terms, this declaration becomes (and shows in the process the relevance of using such a master theory): "I was assailed again by the depressive infantile position."

What happens in a mourning situation? For Klein, in "normal mourning", as well as in "abnormal" mourning, the infantile depressive position is reactivated (Mitchell 173). She argues that in "normal" mourning situations, the early depressive position (which had become revived through the loss of the loved object) becomes modified again, and is overcome by methods similar to those used by the ego in childhood whereby "the individual is reinstating his actually lost loved objects" (173–4). Whereas the manic depressive and the person who fails in the work of mourning share a common characteristic: "They have been unable in early childhood to establish their 'good' internal object and to feel secure in their inner worlds" (173); in other words, they have never really overcome the infantile depressive position. Whether little Abdellah was able to establish the "good" internal object and to feel secure in his inner world is something we

will never know. What we have access to is his *recollection* of his relationship with his mother either in fictional work or in the paratext. Hence in an interview: “With my mother, a strong woman, the relation was difficult and strange: she only loved her older son [...] I suffered from loneliness inside of this hive. I couldn’t find a place for myself.” (Taïa, “La tête à l’envers”).

How do we circumnavigate from Taïa’s psychic state as described above to the existence of the novel? Once again, I turn to Klein. She argues that, in the depressive position, when persecution decreases, the pining for the lost loved object is experienced in full force (Mitchell 163). And that pining implies acknowledging a certain dependence on the lost loved object but it is a dependence “of a kind which becomes an incentive to reparation and preservation of the object. It is creative because it is dominated by love [...]” (163). To move from a psychoanalyst to a writer, the creative aspect is taken up by Roland Barthes in his *Journal de deuil* for his beloved mother. For Barthes, the work necessary to come out of crises like love and mourning is only accomplished in and through writing (143). I use “reparative” in the sense given by Rosello: “the reparative is an energy, a process, a specific set of narrative choices that propose to offer a conscious or unconscious strategy to a double process of recapturing and recovering” (22) and claim that the process is for the most part unconscious in Taïa.⁴ As with Barthes, the creative process for Taïa gives birth to the novel and to writing fictional selves; the work of reparative mourning is achieved by the polyphonic characters invented in the novel which in turn allow Taïa to overcome the depressive position. Barthes concludes: “Il y a donc, dans le deuil [...] un apprivoisement radical et nouveau de la mort [...]” (130). I am not claiming that Taïa does therapeutic writing, which is a different concept altogether and something that the author vehemently denies: “Je ne crois pas en la littérature thérapeutique et je n’écris pas pour exprimer ma névrose, même si cela peut arriver, résoudre mes problèmes” (Taïa “Abdellah Taïa: ‘Ecrire c’est s’ouvrir’”).

There are three separate but interconnected elements in the novel which facilitate the reinstating of the internal loved objects; for Klein this constitutes the process of mourning (Mitchell 166). They are all linked to the literary and aesthetic enterprise of writing the self/selves. The first one is the first part of the novel; it opens with a dialogue between a narrator (initially anonymous including in gender and then revealed as being Zahira, a prostitute) and her father, a dialogue which happens after his death, to be explored under the sub-heading “Mourning the father.” The second resides in the story of Aziz, also a prostitute, who is transitioning from

male to female, to be explored in a section called “Melancholy gender and mourning.” The third one is the story of the politics of friendship between Zahira and Aziz, and also between Zahira and Modjaba, an Iranian activist who is a homosexual, to be explored under the title “Reparative work through characterization.”

Mourning the father

A small incursion into Taïa’s biography is necessary in order to paint a fuller picture of his psychic life and to start composing more richly with *Un pays pour mourir*. The death of Taïa’s mother in 2010 has been mentioned but, as we have seen, the character of Zahira narrates the death of her father. Taïa’s father, Mohamed, died at the age of 66 on 22 March 1996 when Abdellah was 22 years old. The first enterprise of writing his father, and therefore starting the process of mourning, falls outside of the fictional, in a book titled *Lettres à un jeune marocain*, which Taïa prefaced and edited. In it, he pens a letter to his nephew, Adnane, the oldest son of his older brother Abdelkébir; the letter takes the form of storytelling. He invites his nephew to sit with him and to listen to his reminiscence. Or, rather than reminiscing, he wants to travel back in time: “Traverser avec toi la mort, un matin encore dans la nuit” (199). Taïa does not have a clear picture of his father, he never really understood him. He invites Adnane to search his memory: he wants to finally be able to ask questions of his father, to reveal him, to understand him. The narrative switches to the present tense and Adnane is transported with Abdellah to the day when his father died. Abdellah reveals a family secret to his nephew to help him understand Mohamed as a broken man: apparently, he may not be a Taïa, for his older brother maintains that he was conceived by another man, outside of wedlock, and he told Mohamed he could keep the family name but had no right to any inheritance. Abdellah paints the portrait of a silent man, nicknamed “the lazy” “le fainéant” (209) who occasionally cried in silence, a de-masculinized man. The son never understood his father because they never really talked – the son waiting respectfully in the best Moroccan tradition for the father to choose to speak, and that time never came. Taïa describes the moment of his father’s death as: “Mon amertume. La fin du monde” (202). He explains how his first reaction was denial: he kept talking to his father’s dead body, praying, hoping for a miracle, he even gave him the kiss of life before breaking down in tears.

Taïa wants his nephew to know that his crying was for himself, not for his father, confessing that he killed his father by neglecting him. From 1992 until 1996 he was ill. The doctors had told the family that his illness could be contagious: the whole family was encouraged to stay away from him. For the last two years of his life, he lived on the third floor of their house, directly above them, in what was literally a building site since the house was not finished. Taïa concludes that under the guise of protecting the children, the enforced isolation of the father transformed them into insensitive criminals (204–5).

C'est là où je suis, Adnane. C'est là où tout s'arrête. Où je suis fixé à jamais. J'ai perdu avant, le père d'avant [...] Je veux retrouver en moi, par tes mots et ta mémoire jeune, la présence physique de mon père sur terre, dans ce monde. Je veux sortir de ce moment qui dure toujours, de cet instant inconcevable et pourtant vrai, ce vendredi matin de mort. Je veux non pas la paix mais une main, la sienne, la tienne, Adnane, la tenir et laisser couler enfin les larmes. (206)

A powerful desire to mourn and to reinstate the father comes out of this passage written thirteen years after his father's death. At this juncture, Klein is pertinent again. Whilst she concentrates on the infant's relationship with the mother, her analysis could be applied equally to Abdellah's relationship to his father: "All his life, however, he had warded off the depression and sorrow about losing [him], which were derived from his infantile depressive feelings, and had denied his very great love for [him]." (Mitchell 171). Taïa tells his nephew he now needs to render his father alive, to get justice for him. Perhaps he is finally ready to own up and then *feel* that he loved him and that he misses him? The idea of reparation is also evoked as Taïa wishes to be able to see his past in a new light (*Lettres à un jeune marocain* 212), maybe even to get his father's approval and recognition, albeit with a question mark: "La bénédiction? Le salut?" (210).

It is now time to turn to the first part of *Un pays pour mourir*, presumably written about five years after *Lettres à un jeune marocain* since the scene being described is a mirror image of the letter to Adnane and this move will also serve as an introduction to the theme of mourning in the novel. Abandoning the epistolary mode, the Moroccan writer turns to fiction. The first part of the novel: "Paris, Juin 2010" opens with a chapter called "A côté," introducing the theme of death, mirroring the title of the novel, and I will argue also the act of mourning. A first-person narrator addresses an unknown person and the novel starts with: "Il est mort jeune." (11), giving his age as 56 (as opposed to 66 for Taïa's father). Although we eventually

find out that the story is narrated by a female narrator, biographical elements abound to show that the story is another way of writing selves, what Heyndels calls à propos *Une mélancolie arabe* whilst applying it to his entire work: “l’écrivain devenant lui-même une fiction dans l’atelier d’écriture ici mis en scène” (“Abdellah à jamais disparu” 151). For readers familiar with Taïa’s life and works – including his film, *Salvation Army* – the exact set-up of his family home where he is surrounded by his siblings is described in accurate details. We will recall that Taïa told his nephew his aim was to rehabilitate his father and that for him there was no need to “kill the father” (*Lettres à un jeune marocain* 210). Here Mohamed is referred to with affection: “mon petit papa doux et furieux” (*Un pays pour mourir* 11). As in the letter, the narrator of the novel relates the father’s illness and his isolation from the rest of the family. The mother is made responsible for this situation (a fact eclipsed in the letter) whilst it is pointed out that she would never admit to it. The narrator says she/he witnessed everything but never said a word, which made she/he almost complicit with the situation: “Ce père déçu, sans virilité, j’ai participé moi aussi à son assassinat. Et pourtant personne ne m’a intenté de procès. Ni hier ni aujourd’hui.” (13). The “insensitive criminals” of the letter have become “murderers” in the novel and the narrator wants to be made accountable (we saw that in the depressive position the infant feels *guilt* and anxiety). Typographically this passage is followed by a space in the text, and then the reader learns that the narrator is... a woman, Zahira. It turns out that she is not as presumed addressing a reader but talking to herself, searching for her father in her souvenirs, much like Taïa was inviting his nephew to do.

Five years or so have elapsed between *Lettres à un jeune marocain* and *Un pays pour mourir* (this more or less tallies with Zahira saying she is 40 years of age which would set the writing in 2013, Taïa being born in 1973). This translates into Mohamed being painted vividly in the novel in contrast to the fumbling souvenirs in the letter. Zahira can hear his footsteps above them at night; these footsteps are the key to unlocking memories and feelings. As the narrative imperceptibly changes to the present tense, she wonders if her father cannot sleep either, comparing him to an old circus lion roaming around in his cage. She can smell the stale odor of his tobacco on her tongue, in her throat. This is the male equivalent of the mother’s breast being internalized,⁵ and it shows that Klein’s theory can be stretched to a non-gender-fixated agenda. As readers we are suddenly transported to the father’s room and to the narrator’s room below it. The story is fulfilling Taïa’s wish expressed to his nephew to render his father alive. From a

psychoanalytic point of view, it goes some way towards reinstating the lost loved object.

This dream-like sequence is then transposed to Paris, one presumes within the time of the novel of June 2010, and the father suddenly reportedly utters: “Zahira. Zahira. Zahira.” (*Un pays pour mourir* 15). This signals a change in the mode of address and Zahira talks directly to her father. There follow gestures of “reparation” where Zahira soothes her father, giving him her hand, encouraging him to talk, whereas this was the biggest downfall and the biggest regret in the relationship between Taïa and Mohamed. Having referred to him at the beginning of the novel as “mon *petit* papa” (my emphasis), here again he is infantilized and she is “mothering” him. In the same vein, she reminds him of the time when he was a child with his sister Zineb who, she tells him, was like a second mother to him (Zineb will reappear at the end of the novel in the last part called “Indochina, Saigon, June 1954”).

Zahira speaking directly to her father is a way of recreating the dialogue that Abdellah and Mohamed never had, echoing what Kaplan calls the resurrection of lost dialogues which are part of mourning rituals (95). Zahira then transports us to the last few days of his life (we have slipped surreptitiously from the present perfect to the present: we are in that house with them) and to his final downfall after he had caught a chill when he went to do his ablutions, complete with reported sounds (“J’ai entendu soudain la braguette et la ceinture qui s’ouvraient [...] j’entends cette eau, son chemin” 20). Again, the father is infantilized in this description: “Tu es un enfant” (21).

Lastly, we get to the crucial moment of death. The narrator relates how after having had sex with a man who gave her a few bank notes to buy some lipstick, she came home and this time an olfactory memory assailed her: “J’ai senti que l’air n’était plus pareil” (24). She learns that her father has been taken away, goes immediately to the washroom and sniffs the air to try and ascertain that he is still there before running out and burning the bank notes and burying them (the sexual act and the lipstick which is never bought are now seen in a context of death as punishment) before saying: “Jour de fin. De tout. Absolument tout [...] Rentrer à la maison? Oui, mais seulement physiquement” (24). This sentence describes someone who is detaching body from mind, for whom life will never be the same again. After a pause, Zahira analyzes: “Tu m’entends, papa ? Je saisis enfin le sens de ce que j’ai vécu, de ce que j’ai perdu” (24). It is a moment of realization, a way for the narrator to own her loss and therefore to start the work of mourning.

The penultimate section of the chapter deals with the last day of the father. Zahira implores her father to respond to her questions, which he does. There follows a dialogue between father and daughter where he says that he lost the will to live and that his wife, by her actions, killed him. Zahira protests but he reiterates that she killed him. Those accusations are not pronounced by Zahira but by her father, and even after they cross his lips, she tries to empathize with her mother, looking for excuses. The last section of the first part narrates the father hanging himself, the narrator hearing a noise (“TAC”) thinking it was a cat passing by (31), which is not a version that has been discussed in the various guises of writing the self that Taïa has published until then. Zahira explains that the family adopted the official version of a heart attack to hide the shame of suicide. Did the father commit suicide? The answer is not crucial to this article, but the *fictional* account of this suicide adds to the guilt of the family who ostracized him, and especially of the narrator, and it is this guilt element that one must stay with. Perhaps unconscious reparation takes place later on in the novel with “L’histoire de Naïma.” It is a story with a happy ending which Zahira relates to Aziz: Naïma ends up finding true love and marrying Jaâfar who is 56, the fictional age of Zahira’s father in the novel when he died, as if he has been given a second life, but a happy one this time, with a loving wife. And right at the end, his beloved sister, Zineb, comes into the narrative, a present from the past as we go back in time to June 1954.

Zahira tells her father in the two concluding sentences of this first section:

Oui, je suis toi, mon père.

Tu es mort jeune. Je suis morte avec toi. (32)

This is an example of projective identification. In children and adults suffering from depression, Klein discovered “the dread of harboring dying or dead objects (especially the parents) inside one and an identification of the ego with objects in this condition” (Mitchell 121). Taïa will say in an interview that, because Zahira was a direct witness, the moment of her father’s death is something that will pursue her throughout the book (“Abdellah Taïa, ‘Un pays pour mourir’” 7 January 2015). After the death of her father, she exclaims: “Malheureuse je suis. Et seule. Si seule à Paris.” (*Un pays pour mourir* 16)

In the letter to his nephew, Taïa had raised the possibility of reparation, albeit with question marks (“La bénédiction? Le salut?” *Lettres à un jeune marocain* 210). Here Zahira tells her father: “Je suis devenue ce que je suis.

C'est ma nature" (*Un pays pour mourir* 19). Indeed she goes on to say she is a prostitute, but there is a double-entendre here if we go back to Taïa's biography. One can sense a craving for acceptance, a desire for a father to bless his child; it is another instance of a lost dialogue. In a radio program, Taïa explains that in the dialogue between Zahira and her father, there is a form of reconciliation possible just before the end of life, even if the meeting between them takes place in the "*après mort*" ("Entre les lignes"). As Rosello writes when analyzing Gisèle Halimi's autobiographical narrative *Fritna*: "One ultimate form of silence is ironically replaced by words that will scrutinize and try to come to terms with other forms of narrativized silences" (156). All the instances of reparation that we have seen so far between Zahira and her father can only take place as a "mother" to the father. This falls within gender stereotyping categories, where the mother can sacrifice herself for others and love selflessly and unconditionally. The reparation is not possible as the daughter (or the son) who perhaps harbors too much resentment.⁶ It is the little lost boy who is touching in the father, not the absent parent, and that little boy perhaps connects with little Abdellah. Whereas Klein finds that, through the work of analysis, the anxieties of destructive and persecuting internal parents diminishes so that patients become able to revise their relation to their parents (whether they are dead or alive) and to rehabilitate them to some extent even if they have grounds for actual grievances (Mitchell 173), Abdellah Taïa the novelist achieves the same result, not in analysis, but in writing fiction from a *different* standpoint, the character of Zahira, using a thinly veiled fictional account, and from the point of view of an adult who feels compassion for "le petit papa." In doing so, he moves away from the infantile depressive position.

Melancholy gender and mourning

In a text titled "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification," Judith Butler speaks about mourning in the context of compulsory heterosexuality. For Butler, gender is part of the "acting out" of unresolved grief, within the compulsory production of heterosexuality, and, following Freud, she defines "melancholia" as the effect of an ungrieved loss (32). Taking as her starting point the fact that forms of gender identification are too rigid, Butler argues that they "spawn forms of [heterosexual] melancholy as their consequence" (31). Gender identifications, the positions of "masculine" and "feminine,"

are thus produced through melancholic identification; becoming a “man” requires a repudiation of femininity (23, 26).

Before moving on to the second part of the novel, we need to make another incursion into Taïa’s biography, and more specifically we need to look at one of the most traumatic events in his life which took place when he was 12 years of age. It is particularly important when studying Taïa’s writing to have this episode in mind as he revealed in a 2014 interview that this is the position where he writes from. Asked to explain the creative process, Taïa elucidates: “J’appellerai ça une capacité à produire quelque chose dans un endroit où on est en retrait mais c’est un endroit qui n’est absolument pas celui de l’adulte que je suis aujourd’hui, c’est un retrait de l’adolescent [...] et rétrospectivement, dans tout ce que je fais, j’ai l’impression que c’est toujours à partir de ce retrait-là du monde” (“La tête à l’envers”).

In a departure from fictional accounts, the trauma is explained in an interview given to the *New York Times* (“A boy to be sacrificed”). Up until the age of 12, Abdellah had been an effeminate little boy who attracted the attention of a range of Moroccan men for sexual favors (including some homophobic heterosexual married men), complaining that society saw him as the perpetrator and them as victims of his effeminate tendencies. This culminated in an incident when Taïa was in his house one summer night in 1985 and some of these men gathered outside his house and started shouting abuse at him, taunting him to come out in order to satisfy their desire, within earshot of all his family and neighbors, and not one person, not even his elder brother whom he worshipped, did anything to defend him. It is interesting in this context that he does not mention his father as a protector: “Everyone turned their back on me. Everyone killed me that night [...] I was never the same Abdellah Taïa after that night. To save my skin, I killed myself. And that was how I did it” (“A boy to be sacrificed”). At that moment in life, Taïa realized that he was alone, that no one could protect him and he decided to change overnight by repressing his effeminate side and withdrawing from the world into the imaginary world of cinema: “I began by keeping my head low all the time. I cut all ties with the children in the neighborhood. I altered my behavior. I kept myself in check: no more feminine gestures, no more honeyed voice, no more hanging around women. No more anything. I had to invent a whole new Abdellah” (“A boy to be sacrificed”).

Reflecting on this episode, Taïa admits: “Today I grow nostalgic for little effeminate Abdellah. He and I share a body, but I no longer remember

him. He was innocence. Now I am only intellect. He was naïve. I am clever. He was spontaneous. I am locked in a constant struggle with myself” (“A boy to be sacrificed”). In the aforementioned interview with Joe Edgar, part of the answer (already quoted) to the question as to whether he had been able to reconcile his adult self and his childhood self carries on as follows: “Suddenly, to be gay became as heavy as it was when I was little. I had convinced myself that the humiliation, the insults, and the killing of a side of myself were not important, but now that’s all coming back” (“A conversation with Moroccan novelist”). These feelings are echoed in other interviews too, as in 2014:

Et je me rends compte à l’âge que j’ai aujourd’hui (donc presque quarante et un ans) que ce que je pensais avoir réglé en le refoulant, enfin ce n’est même pas refoulé, ce n’est jamais parti, c’est en train de revenir avec un immense boomerang que je vois se diriger vers ma figure et je pense qu’à un moment donné si on veut continuer à vivre, il faut faire face à tout ça [...] je parle du petit adolescent” (“La tête à l’envers”)

Taïa is telling us that these feelings came back with a vengeance after the death of his mother in 2010. How can that be? It is possible to make sense of this correlation by making a connection between the mourning for the parents and what was effectively the death of the self at age 12. Turning once again to Klein: “any pain caused by unhappy experiences, whatever their nature, has something in common with mourning. It reactivates the infantile depressive position, and encountering and overcoming adversity of any kind entails mental work similar to mourning” (Mitchell 164).

Two powerful feelings emerge from the traumatic event. One is anger at the world,⁷ and the other is a form of melancholia or mourning; both are transferred onto the character of Aziz in *Un pays pour mourir* as we now turn to the second part of the novel. Aziz is a male prostitute who cross-dresses and who is about to undertake a medical procedure to transition. In the novel, he is in dialogue with his friend Zahira. Aziz is a complex, angry character. He states that his motivation in life is hatred and that by transitioning from male to female he will take his revenge against “them,” before mentioning his clients. He has given them everything; his flesh, his penis, his ass. He has fulfilled all the fantasies of their twisted minds (35). As for melancholia, Aziz relates to Zahira all the intimate times he shared with his sisters before the age of 13, and reminisces about when they used to oil his skin, massage him, dress him up and put lipstick on him. In an interview, Taïa remembers as he was growing up “an easy intimacy with

women, my mother and my many sisters” (“A conversation with Moroccan novelist”) whilst the book’s dedication reads: “Pour mes sœurs, toutes mes sœurs.”

Aziz introduces a story called: “La tentation du rouge à lèvres” (*Un pays pour mourir* 43) which he narrates on the eve of his operation, as the novel still follows the structure of *Arabian Nights*, rooted in oral traditions and with interlocking sub-stories within the main narrative, with multiple narrators telling other characters a story. “Voici le début de tout. De toutes les histoires de ma vie [...] Les identités à dénuder [...] Je remonte le temps. Je reviens aux origines” (43); interpretatively, we are going back to the little boy Abdellah aged 8, before Taïa had to kill one side of his self at 12. “La tentation du rouge à lèvres” is a story of transformation, a sacrificial ceremony where the narrator can bask in gender ambivalence: “J’étais heureux sans honte: un rêve. Je suis le seul garçon sur terre. Je suis la seule fille sur terre [...] Se transformer. Renaître. Revenir à l’origine” (44). Once the transformation has taken place, he describes himself as “Cuvé par le regard libre et bienveillant de mes sœurs [...] je dépasse les limites de ce monde [...] J’étais un petit garçon. Je suis à présent une petite fille. Roi et reine” (45). There is a refused identification in favor of gender fluidity. In the first section for Zahira, the lipstick was synonymous with betrayal and guilt; here the red lipstick makes one think of blood, consanguinity. It shows what the narrator craved and what the nostalgia, the melancholia even, of that time with his sisters represents for him, a time when he was not constrained in a gender straightjacket, and when his sisters were fulfilling the role of the Kleinian “good” object (“Cuvé par le regard libre et bienveillant de mes sœurs [...]”). This nostalgia for “little” Abdellah also represents an act of mourning. The narrator, chiming with the author’s autobiographical vein, informs his readers that these rituals stopped when he was around 13. The contrast in Aziz’s mood could not have been more different after that time: “Je suis seul. Sans joie. Sans magie. Sans innocence [...]”.

In order to explore further the melancholy gender and mourning dimension before returning to Aziz, I want to draw a parallel between this second part of *Un pays pour mourir* and another autobiographical novel published in 2008, *Une mélancolie arabe*, more specifically a text called “Je me souviens.” But unlike the Proustian *madeleine*, what the first-person narrator relates is being the victim of an attempted gang rape by five older boys who identified as heterosexuals. The same pattern described regarding the heterosexual men gathered outside his house applies: it is by feminizing

him as a camp, effeminate boy that the alpha males can reconcile their sexual desire. In this thinly veiled autofictional account where the narrator says “je” and is called Abdellah Taïa, the leader of the gang, Chouaïb, goes one step further than the pattern described above by transforming him into a girl: Leïla. He calls him “petite fille” (14).⁸ “Abdellah” wants Chouaïb to know that he fancies him, that there is no need for violence between them, that he would be happy to give himself if only he would stop feminizing him, that he is neither Leïla, nor his sister, nor his mother but 12-year-old Abdellah. Finally, he wants to regain his gender:

Je voulais lui redire qu’un garçon est un garçon, et une fille une fille. Ce n’était pas parce que j’aimais [...] les hommes qu’il pouvait se permettre de me confondre avec l’autre sexe. De détruire ainsi mon identité, mon histoire [...] Devenir Leïla, non. Jamais [...] Cela aurait été une trahison vis-à-vis de moi-même et de tout ce que j’ai construit de moi depuis la naissance [...]. (21)

Events are precipitated, Abdellah starts to resist and Chouaïb becomes violent, threatening “petite Leïla” with anal rape. The latter shouts: “Je ne m’appelle pas Leïla... Je ne m’appelle pas Leïla... Je suis Abdellah... Abdellah Taïa” (23). When the ordeal is interrupted by Chouaïb’s mother asking him to run an errand, we read:

J’aurais aimé être une femme. Une vraie femme.
J’aurais aimé être un fou. Un vrai fou. (28)⁹

“Je me souviens” has gone full circle, from the narrator resisting the feminization imposed by Chouaïb to a wish written in the conditional tense to become a “real woman”. In order for this wish to be fulfilled in the fictional mode, one will have to wait seven years with the publication of *Un pays pour mourir*. In the first line of part 2 of the book, Aziz addresses Zahira (although this turns out to be a long monologue before Zahira finally intervenes, repeating the pattern of the first part of the novel): “Demain, je la coupe” (*Un pays pour mourir* 33). Aziz is to undertake a medical procedure to transition into a woman and therefore become as the narrator of *Une mélancolie arabe* expresses “une femme. Une vraie femme.”

Before the operation, Aziz hopes: “Me réveiller enfin [...] Je serai autre. Moi-même.” (34). Perhaps he is trying to recapture his state of being during the lipstick sessions when he was 8 so this gesture would be tainted with melancholia. Indeed, he talks about his sisters being a small army realizing “une opération” just like the surgical procedure he is about to undertake (45). So in *phantasy*, he will go back to a time when his gender was fluid:

“Etre une de mes sœurs. Avec elles [...] Me réconcilier avec le petit enfant en gloire que j’avais été. L’écouter. Réaliser son rêve. Sa vraie nature. L’aimer de nouveau, enfin” (50). In an interview, Taïa considers that Aziz (Abdellah?) is a prisoner of the moments of grace and elevation he lived with his sisters when he was a little boy (“Abdellah Taïa. Lire avec Brigitte Kernel”).

Within *fictional reality*, Aziz will not achieve happiness after transgenerating into a woman called Zannouba, even after surgery. Two months after the operation, Zannouba refers to herself as a monster. She only tolerates the presence of one person, Zahira, and then only twice a week (*Un pays pour mourir* 77). It is a total disenchantment: “Je devais me sentir femme. Etre heureuse. Joyeuse [...] Je pleure jour et nuit. Nuit et jour” (78). Even her urine flow does not sound anything like her mother’s and she despairs: “Je suis devenue une femme. De l’extérieur (...) Au fond, tout au fond, il y a encore, et il y aura sans doute jusqu’au bout, un courant de masculinité qui m’a toujours été plus qu’étranger” (79). Zannouba does not understand what is going on inside her. She was convinced she was a girl and not a boy, so that instead of going from being a boy to being a girl, she would simply be the girl she has always been. And now she can feel a virile side to her running through her veins. Neither a woman, no longer a man. Who to turn to?

There follows an exchange between Aziz and Zannouba. He encourages her to call his sisters and to tell them he/she is one of them but she does not want to. She says Aziz was in heaven as a younger self with his sisters and now she is in purgatory (82). A kind of schizophrenic dialogue ensues, with only one of them regretting their penis, but then both of them start being referred to in the feminine mode, and one threatens to kill the other before Zannouba says that she loves Aziz which she/he does not believe, so she explains: “C’est vrai, je t’aime. Tu n’es qu’un petit garçon. Tu n’y es pour rien dans cette tragédie” (85). We have come full circle here and the little sacrificed boy is back. Aziz then addresses Zannouba to tell her that she has killed him and one cannot help but think that through the fictional mode there is some settling of scores between the adult Taïa and the younger Taïa, the child who was in a sense killed is asking his older self to justify his crime (“Tu m’as tué. Tu m’as enlevé de toi. De ton corps. Je ne suis plus rien” 86), but the latter rejects the accusation: “Ce n’était pas un crime. Il fallait que je trouve la paix” (87). In an interview in March 2014 Taïa was still wondering: “Comment tout le monde peut être au courant sans défendre un enfant de treize ans? A quarante ans, je ne suis toujours pas

guéri [...] Et personne jusqu'ici [...] ne m'a demandé pardon. Ni ma famille, ni les habitants du quartier, ni évidemment la société et ses représentants" ("Abdellah Taïa: 'Personne ne m'a jamais demandé pardon"). It looks as though, in the fictional account, he is extending the need for reparation to his adult self.

Zannouba is *trying* to make reparation: "Tu seras toujours en moi, Aziz." (*Un pays pour mourir* 87) but he does not believe her: "Les traces de nous, petit garçon, homme, sont encore là, en toi. Mais, rassure-toi, elles vont bientôt disparaître" (87). Aziz wants to leave permanently but she manages to retain him a while longer by narrating the story of Isabelle Adjani, symbolic of a form of gender fluidity. Adjani is said to embody something as yet unknown, a sort of gender fusion: "L'homme et la femme réunis dans un autre temps" (88). By the end of the story, Aziz appears to have left. Zannouba implores him to come back, saying she needs him, she needs his little boy's hand, dancing and singing, she needs his free spirit and soul, exclaiming:

Reviens. Je ne suis plus rien sans toi.
Plus rien. (95)

To no avail...

For a second time, it is not in analysis but within the realm of writing the self/selves that Taïa the author revisits his relationship with his younger self, sets up a dialogue between his more fluid gender self and his more rigid identity, between his younger and his older self, and tries to reach some kind of mutual understanding, on the way to possible reintegration. There remains however mutual incomprehension, and not yet peace, even if some lost dialogues have been re-enacted and the work of mourning is in process for, according to Rosello: "When the reparative energy succeeds, it is capable of turning the silent victim into an agent" (204). By the same token, the author also overcomes the depressive position in which he is no longer trapped.

Reparative work through characterization

Constituer enfin, le matin d'un jour gris et de grand froid, une armée pour mon salut. Cela ne se ferait pas du jour au lendemain. Au début de la Grande Bataille, les anges, fidèles (musulmans?), seraient là, de mon côté. (*L'armée du salut* 154)

For Klein, mourning can occasionally take an indirect approach: “Relations to people who do not in their minds come too close to the lost object, and interest in things and activities, may absorb some of this love which belonged to the lost object [...] through them the lost loved object [...] is to some extent restored and retained in the unconscious mind” (Mitchell 173). The three main characters invented for this novel (Zahira, Aziz, and Motjaba) make up the army raised for the narrator’s “salvation”. There is a strong sense of solidarity between them, even of love. In a radio interview, Taïa speaks of them as his siblings.¹⁰ Before his operation, Aziz tells Zahira that his final thoughts will not be for his mother, nor for his father, nor for any of the three men he has loved in his life, but for Zahira: “Je te mettrai devant mes yeux” (*Un pays pour mourir* 41). He asks her to give “her” a new name, she chooses Zannouba and Aziz claims to have been baptized (43). Zahira describes the *brotherly* impulse that drove her towards Motjaba, the Iranian who looked lost and in a panic in front of the metro station (98). She takes him to her flat and looks after him. He will stay with her for a month whilst they follow Ramadan. Their intimacy, including bodily proximity, is unambiguous and translates as “une douceur incroyable. Une mer de tendresse. Des rivières d’amour infini” (106). Before he leaves, they spend the night outdoors in the Jardin du Luxembourg, being described as “deux enfants [...] un frère. Une sœur” (112).

Reparative work is still in evidence. Zahira has been left with two letters from Motjaba, one to thank her and one addressed to his mother. He wants her to read the latter before sending it to Iran. In this second letter, Modjaba explains why he fled his country, primarily because he was a political dissident (he was shot at in the street), and he also comes out as gay to his mother, though not in so many words. He reassures her that he never wanted to turn his back on her: “Je me sens dans le vide. Tout est vide. Même Paris est vide.” (116). We witness an attempt to internalize the “good” object: “maman. Je survivrai. Je te porterai en moi et je survivrai” (118); reiterated two pages later: “Maintenant, il y a toi là-bas, séparée de moi, toujours, pour toujours, grande présence en moi” (120). Reminiscent of the end of the dialogue between Zahira and her father, there is a form of reconciliation possible between mother and son, mentioned by Taïa in a radio interview: “Ce qui est touchant, c’est que [...] Zahira serve de messagère pour lui, pour faire parvenir quelque chose encore une fois de l’ordre de la réconciliation dans le post-départ, l’après-départ.” (“Entre les lignes”). We can now understand more fully the importance of this melting

pot of characters and the commonality between them, part of the rich tapestry composing the work of mourning.

Since Klein's premise is that mourning will be successful when "the individual is reinstating his actually lost loved objects" (Mitchell 174), how can we sustain our claim that there is work of reparative mourning in *Un pays pour mourir*? This time we turn to social media for evidence. Taïa's novel was published on 8 January 2015. On 1 January 2015, he greeted his followers on his Facebook page with the following:



(Color figure available online: the frame is painted a deep red.)

Abdellah Taïa

Ma mère, M'Barka. Mon père, Mohammed. Il y a longtemps. Dans mes
mains. Pour toujours...

Belle et tendre année 2015 à vous toutes/tous...

Salam chaleureux,

Abdellah Taïa

1 janvier 2015. (Taïa, "No title," Facebook page)

In *Lettres à un jeune marocain*, Taïa craved to hold his father's hand (206); now he is holding his father in his hand. At the beginning of the novel,

Zahira offers her hand to her father, to comfort him. Later she tries to communicate with him after he has died and, having conceded that, like him, she believes there is no life after death, she now tells him that life does not stop with death: “Aujourd’hui, ma main te le dit. Ecoute-là, confie-lui un message, un rôle, un regard pour moi” (*Un pays pour mourir* 18). The hand becomes the mediator between them, the silent witness and the finitude of death is counteracted by life, echoing the Facebook caption “Pour toujours...,” which ends with what are called in French “points de suspension,” as if time is suspended.

Through the writing of his novel, Taïa accomplishes what Klein sees as a journey of reconciliation since, for the psychoanalyst, it is by reinstating inside himself (“dans mes mains”) the “good” parents, and by rebuilding his inner world that the patient overcomes his grief (Mitchell 174). The fact of holding both parents in his hands, his mother appearing to be younger than himself (he is 41 at the time) and his father perhaps around the same age as he is in 2015, may point to the fact that, like in the novel, it is as an adult rather than as a child that Taïa can hold his parents and reconcile himself with them, even after they have died. After all, he has been telling us in the novel that reconciliation between Zahira and her father is possible after death.

Un pays pour mourir... in some interviews, Taïa is asked about the title of the novel. In all answers, he remains non-committal. In some, when he is asked directly he says that maybe France *is* the country for dying because of the way it treats immigrants as exemplified by the characters in his novel – or not; in others, he explains that this expression is used by Moroccans when they are frustrated by their own country, its restrictions and hypocrisy and say that Morocco is not a country for living but for dying (“L’écrivain Abdellah Taïa nous parle des sans-papiers”), and also transposes this reasoning to France’s hostility towards immigrants (Abdellah Taïa: “Un pays pour mourir” France-Info and also France-Inter). His lack of commitment to a definitive answer resides perhaps in the fact that *Un pays pour mourir* is in fact the novel itself. But Taïa understands death as a new beginning with the possibility of an(*other*) identity:

En fait la mort dans ce roman n’est pas la mort au sens tel qu’on l’entend tous les jours, c’est rencontrer à travers cette porte sur un autre monde, autre chose et une autre identité, un autre destinée, peut-être le paradis ou l’enfer mais en tous cas la possibilité que la construction individuelle, la construction par le rêve puisse donner des résultats autres. (Abdellah Taïa: “Un pays pour mourir” France-Inter)

Taïa has achieved a form of *Vita Nova* in his novel, the project preoccupying Barthes in his last lectures at the Collège de France. Barthes mentions this concept in his *Journal de deuil* when he is mourning his mother and Nathalie Léger explains that this radically new life is a result of mourning the loved one(s) and it refers explicitly to Dante who invented with *Vita Nuova* a narrative and poetic form to write love and mourning (84). This project remained no more than a series of plans since Barthes died shortly afterwards, perhaps a set of plans for a novel as he had announced “A New Practice of Writing appropriate to a New Life.”¹¹ Barthes argues that there can only be a *Vita Nova* by the discovery of a new practice of writing: “Or, pour celui qui écrit, qui a choisi d’écrire, il ne peut y avoir de ‘vie nouvelle’ me semble-t-il, que dans la découverte d’une nouvelle pratique d’écriture (...)” (*La préparation du roman* 29). Judith Herman writes about accepted phases of trauma and “recovery” involving putting the trauma into words and turning it into a story of sorts; Taïa has created a novel with multiple identities.

In a radio interview given in April 2015, Brigitte Kernel sees a trilogy between *Le Jour du roi*, *Infidèles*, and *Un pays pour mourir*. Taïa replies that he conceived these three novels as a trilogy without sharing this plan with anyone; this is the first time he says it publicly before adding:

Mes premiers livres, c’étaient des livres où j’écrivais avec ‘je’, mon propre je, Abdellah. Et je suis passé à d’autres ‘je’ qui sont des personnages et je pense que maintenant que j’ai publié *Un pays pour mourir*, je reviendrai peut-être à l’autre ‘je’, le premier. (“Abdellah Taïa. Lire avec Brigitte Kernel”)

Taïa is telling us his next novel may well go back to the first practice of writing, echoing Barthes: “Je dois sortir de cet état ténébreux [...] où me conduisent l’usure des travaux répétés et le deuil” (*Journal de deuil* 29). but the *new* practice of writing has been necessary for the work of reparative mourning and to come out of the depressive position.

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Notes

- 1 See for instance Taïa (“Abdellah Taïa dans Maghreb Orient Express: Le monde post Charlie”) for a political reading of the novel. What I am not proposing to do in this article is to focus on queer Maghreb studies, nor to link mourning to the nexus of Maghreb/diaspora/transsexuality/sex worker/sexuality. I believe Taïa can

be studied without pinning this identity on him, which can become a predictable straightjacket. I want to study mourning from a literary point of view, with the help of the paratext.

- 2 I will be making full use of the paratext, and especially interviews. It seems that we have a new phenomenon these days in terms of social media (Taïa's Facebook page has posts of all his interviews and selected reviews of his books; this is run by his publisher). Most of these interviews are also accessible online. Whereas when he started publishing, the author was not well known, he is becoming an important literary figure in France and there is a demand for interviews from the media when his books come out. He is also a good interviewee who interacts with the person in front of him and this brings out some interesting information. Having said this, as critics we need to keep some distance with what he says in interviews, and treat it as *one* interpretation offered by the author (see Butler *Giving an Account* 36: "So the account of myself that I give in discourse never fully expresses or carries this living self. My words are taken away as I give them."). As of 1 May 2015, almost four months after the publication of the book, Taïa had appeared twice on television (including the prestigious *La grande Librairie* on France 5), five times on the radio (France-Inter: three programs; France-Info and Radio Télévision Suisse), and he had given five interviews in the press. One of the readers of my article objected that I was using interviews as giving access to the truth (of feelings? emotions?) and then being tempted to bypass the fictionality of the novel. What I think I do in this article is to set up a *dialogue* between the paratext and the text. I would also retort that exponents of queer Maghreb studies should be sensitive to the paratext as a way of empowering their reading. Provencher ("Coming out à l'oriental") demonstrates in the case of the artist 2Fik that his presence in the media is the emergence of a successful performance artist in the Francophone world and a public, semi-globalized coming out, so that his work moves to the mainstream and he begins to manage a public global persona (820). Provencher also makes use of 2Fik's Facebook page (825). Not making use of these interviews would be equivalent to being complicit with the dominant silencing discourse.
- 3 I am not following exactly the trail-blazing approach by Mireille Rosello in her book. Rosello is looking at primary texts that work through the past without systematically looking for a reparative narrative within the framework of memory discourses, whilst I am using a psychoanalytic approach to deconstruct what I see as reparation in the text using the sociology of the author and a blend of online interviews, social media and fictional accounts of "family."
- 4 After listening to my paper on mourning in *Infidèles* at the University of Miami, conference organized by Ralph Heyndels, 3–4 April 2014, Taïa told me he was not consciously aware when writing his novel of the metaphorical thread of mourning which I unearthed.
- 5 I am indebted to Denis Provencher for this analogy.
- 6 Denis Provencher refers to this process as one of transfiliation in "reverse" where the author becomes the reviver or (re)creator of his father. See his forthcoming "Abdellah Taïa's Queer Moroccan Family and Transmission of *Baraka*" in his book *Queer Maghrebi French: Language, Temporalities, Transfiliations*.
- 7 For an interesting perspective on violence and mourning, see Butler, *Precarious Life*.
- 8 This is what Butler calls "girling": "The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm." (Butler, *Bodies* 7). An example of interlocking sub-stories (which I had first read as some sort of digression) would be that of Allal when he is forced by Zahira's mother to be constructed as a racialized

- body: “Va dans le miroir, Allal, et regarde-toi. Tu vois qui tu es. Tu le vois bien? Tu as compris? Zahira ne sera jamais à toi. Pas dans ce monde en tout cas.” (Taïa, *Un pays pour mourir* 129).
- 9 Heyndels reminds us: “La folie en tant que situation-limite [folie amoureuse, meurtrière ou suicidaire] joue un rôle thématique important dans l’ensemble de l’œuvre d’Abdellah Taïa” (“Écrire (dans) la loyauté infidèle” 402 note 6).
- 10 See Taïa, “Choisir la vie avec Abdellah Taïa” and Taïa dans *La grande librairie*: “J’ai envie de vous dire [que Zahira] pourrait être ma sœur au Maroc.”
- 11 For an article on Barthes’s *Vita Nova*, see Knight.

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