

The Absolutist Monarch in Taïa's *Le Jour du Roi* and Laroui's "Tu n'as rien compris à Hassan II": Probing the Limitations of Reader Reception Theory

CHRISTA JONES
Utah State University
christa.jones@usu.edu

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the representation of the monarch in Abdellah Taïa's novel *Le Jour du Roi* (2010) and Fouad Laroui's "Tu n'as rien compris à Hassan II" (2004), focusing on the act of reading and the historical context of Hassan II's reign. A close reading of Taïa's novel and Laroui's short story will reveal narrative strategies used to fictionalize sovereignty. Laroui uses humor and irony to criticize the regime of Hassan II, while Taïa uses oneiric elements to capture the arbitrary nature of monarchy and the notion of absolute royal power as theorized by Achille Mbembe. Both writers criticize Hassan II's repressive reign and assert their own sovereignty as writers, while discrediting an oppressive political regime. Both authors write about their native Morocco from a position of exile (Paris and Amsterdam). This geographical distance shapes their understanding of their roles as writers and educators who reveal and criticize sovereignty and abuse of power.

INTRODUCTION

Focusing on the royal figure in Abdellah Taïa's novel *Le Jour du Roi* (2010) and Fouad Laroui's short story "Tu n'as rien compris à Hassan II" (2004), this article examines the act of reading and the historical context of the reign of Hassan II, pointing to the limitations of reader response theory. In his chapter "Intention Lectoris: The State of the Art" in *The Limits of Interpretation*, Italian semiologist Umberto Eco revisits reader reception theory and the active role played by readers in the interpretation process, stressing the importance of the context and the

role played by the addressees and the way receptors comprehend, actualize, and interpret texts:

In other words, the addressee-oriented theories assume that the meaning of every message depends on the interpretive choices of its receptor: even the meaning of the most univocal message uttered in the course of the most normal communicative intercourse depends on the response of its addressee, and this response is in some way context-sensitive. (45)

In reading Taïa's and Laroui's texts, I examine the reading experience and the role played by readers or, as Eco calls them, receptors in the interpretive process of the two narratives. Reception theory has been shaped by Hans Robert Jauss's *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectation), which allows readers to build on what they have already read, since no literary work appears to be entirely new, nor set in an "informational vacuum" (Jauss 23). Gerald Prince's distinction between real readers (the actual readers), virtual readers (the readers the author *thinks* he is writing for), and ideal readers (who understand the text perfectly) is a good starting point for assessing their role in the interpretation of the royal figure in the two texts. One might indeed wonder what kind of readers Taïa and Laroui are targeting. Given that both texts were first published in France by prestigious publishers, Seuil (Taïa) and Julliard (Laroui), one might conclude that the targeted readership is primarily French or Francophone. However, it should be noted that Taïa's readership is more global than Laroui's, since *Le Jour du Roi* has been translated into Arabic, Basque, Italian, German, and Swedish, while Laroui's *Tu n'as rien compris à Hassan II*—the title of his short story book as well as the eponymous short story discussed here—has yet to be translated. Regardless, non-Moroccan (actual and virtual) readers might find interpreting these multilayered texts challenging if not frustrating. Undoubtedly, ideal readers—that is readers who are familiar with Taïa's personal background and the autobiographical character of his novels—or specialists of Francophone Maghrebi texts will expect certain recurring topoi in *Le Jour du Roi*, including the *hammam* (Taïa, *Jour* 144–47); prostitution (the narrator's mother is a former prostitute); homosexuality (the narrator is involved in a same-sex relationship with his middle school classmate and close friend, Khalid); the importance of dreams, magic, and transformative rituals (Taïa, *Jour* 149–55); and the belief in the evil eye and malevolent spirits (*djinn*s). Likewise, Laroui's ideal readers will expect a hefty dose of irony, satire, and sarcasm in his text. However, the royal figure of the King per se as a central literary figure is unexpected in both texts, and it is also somewhat less common in the wider corpus of North African Francophone literature.¹ In both texts, royal power is part of what Mbembe has called the order of caprice: "Ghostly violence is also of a capricious nature. *Caprice* here is primarily an exercise in the arbitrary" (14). Both texts focus on the capricious nature of sovereignty and its unpredictable, potentially deadly consequences. The monarch, Hassan II, engages in an "economy of ghostly violence" (Mbembe 14), his power mostly invisible but menacing as it enters the characters' psyche in dreams and conversations.

In the chapter "Interaction Between Text and Reader" of his study *Prospecting*, reader response critic Wolfgang Iser has theorized the interpretative

activity of readers in the reading process, arguing that in order for communication between text and readers to be successful, the readers' activity must be controlled by the text (33). However, how can a reading experience be "conclusive" or successful if the text itself is manipulative and encourages multiple interpretations? We will see that Laroui's text in particular challenges the assumptions of traditional reader response theory, given the "uncooperative" attitude of the narrator, which makes a successful decoding of the story impossible. Turning his attention to the role of readers, Stanley Fish, in his seminal essay "Interpretive Communities," stipulates that interpretation is a stable activity because readers essentially deploy interpretive strategies aimed at reproducing the "same text," which is "... the product of the possession by two or more readers of similar interpretive strategies" (219). But do they really? I would like to suggest that it is rather improbable that readers will read the text the same way, even more so if the narrator does not take into consideration—as stipulated by reader response criticism—the audience, also referred to as implied readers. The latter are likely to take away different meanings depending on their familiarity with the authors and the sociocultural background of North African Francophone texts.

Both Taïa's and Laroui's texts invite readers (actual, virtual, and ideal) to discover, imagine, reimagine, and reinvent the historical figure of Hassan II. Readers are summoned to partake in the creative process and to try to "figure out" Hassan II. Readers might wonder: was he foremost loved, respected, or feared? Which key political events and affairs shaped his reign? It seems far-fetched to claim that different readers use similar interpretive strategies in approaching these texts. The actual readers might have heard about well-publicized events that marked the reign of Hassan II, such as the 1981 and 1984 bread riots. They might know the ins and outs of the Ben Barka affair (see Dalle 506), perhaps have seen the movie *J'ai vu tuer Ben Barka* (2005), or they might have heard about the affair surrounding General Oufkir (see Dalle 344; Daoud 168–77). They might know about the diplomatic battle that raged over the Western Sahara and the 1975 Green March, during which demonstrators called for the return of the Moroccan Sahara, or be familiar with the Western Sahara War. However, a historian specializing in postcolonial Moroccan history will certainly have a better grasp of these texts than readers who have never encountered the historical figure of Hassan II. As for the symbolism linked to the royal figure himself, Western (actual or virtual) readers are likely not ideal readers. They will undoubtedly not be able to detect all of the subtleties of the texts to the same extent as would Moroccan (actual or virtual) readers who grew up listening to the monarch's speeches on the radio (on Hassan II's proverbial eloquence, see Dajani 21–13), or watching him on television every evening (for the numerous references to the nightly royal appearance on television in Taïa's novel *Le Jour du Roi*, see 9–10, 17, 24). To better understand Laroui's and Taïa's texts and to come closer to becoming ideal readers, he or she is therefore well-advised to carry out some research into the authors and the historical figure of Hassan II—often referred to as "monarque et guide suprême" 'Monarch and Supreme Guide' (Bouabid 20)—and the legacy he left. A short presentation of the two authors and of Hassan II will lead to a discussion of their texts.

ABDELLAH TAÏA: NOVELIST AND UP-AND-COMING FILMMAKER

Abdellah Taïa was born in Rabat in 1973 and grew up in Hay Salam, a neighborhood in Salé, with his parents, Mohamed and M'Barka, and siblings: his younger brother Mustapha, his older brother Abdelkébir, and his sisters. He spent the first twenty-five years of his life in Morocco. After earning a *Diplôme d'Etudes Approfondies* (DEA) in Geneva, he moved to Paris in 1999. To date, Taïa has penned a number of autobiographical novels or *autofictions*, including *Mon Maroc* (2000), *Le Rouge du Tarbouche* (2004), *L'Armée du Salut* "Salvation Army: A Novel" (2006), which he also adapted for the screen, and *Une Mélancolie Arabe* (2008; published in English in 2012 as *An Arab Melancholia: A Novel*). All of these earlier novels recount his coming out in an open letter to his mother published by the Moroccan magazine *Tel Quel* following the publication of *Le Rouge du Tarbouche* in 2006, as well as his move to France and his upward trajectory as a novelist. More recently, he has turned the focus of his attention away from autobiographical-inspired writing to fiction, notably with his novels *Le Jour du Roi* (2010), *Infidèles* (2012), and *Un Pays pour Mourir* (2015). Taïa has proclaimed his coming out publicly, in Morocco, France, and the United States. In an interview published online in the *New York Times Sunday Review*, titled "A Boy to Be Sacrificed" (see Edgar Gauvin), he recounts the humiliation he felt growing up a homosexual in a relatively poor family in Salé. The constant insults and threat of gang rape at the hands of older boys sparked his sense of rebellion and sharpened his intellectual acuity, which ultimately led him to write about homosexuality in Morocco.

FOUAD LAROUI: SHORT STORY WRITER AND NOVELIST

Fouad Laroui was born in Oujda, Morocco, in 1958. At age ten, he started attending the *lycée français* in Casablanca and he received all of his schooling at the Mission Université Française, an education to which he attributes the fact that he writes in French rather than Arabic (Laroui, "Fiction" 106). Laroui earned a degree in engineering from the prestigious Paris-based *École des Ponts et Chaussées* and worked as a researcher in Paris from 1982 until 1985. He returned to Morocco in 1986, where he held an executive position in a phosphate mine group in Khourigba, until he moved to Europe in 1989, first to Brussels where he worked for the European Commission for a year, then to the United Kingdom (Cambridge and York). He then earned a doctoral degree in economics and started teaching econometrics and environmental science at the University of Amsterdam while pursuing a flourishing career as a writer and critic. Laroui is also a regular contributor to the weekly journal *Jeune Afrique*. His studies and research activities have taken him to many places, including Paris, Amsterdam, Cambridge, York, and Brussels (Laroui, "Fiction" 106). He became a Dutch citizen in 2005 and he also writes in Dutch. Laroui sees himself as a "nouvelliste qui écrit des romans" 'a short story writer who writes novels' (Rousseau X). His first book, *Les dents du topographe*, appeared in 1996 and was awarded the Prix Albert Camus. A prolific writer, Laroui has been awarded a number of literary prizes, including the prestigious Goncourt de la nouvelle in 2013 for *L'Etrange Affaire du pantalon de Dassoukine* and the Prix Jean-Giono

for *Les Tribulations du dernier Sijilmassi: Roman* in 2014. *Tu n'as rien compris à Hassan II* was awarded the Prix de la nouvelle du Scribe and the Grand Prix SDGL (Société des Gens de Lettres) de la nouvelle.²

Fouad Laroui was eleven years old when his father disappeared, probably incarcerated in the jails of Hassan II, as he told a journalist from *Le Monde*: “Je suis la dernière personne à l’avoir vu. C’était le 17 avril 1969. Il est sorti de la maison pour aller acheter le journal, et nous ne l’avons plus revu. Je n’en ai jamais parlé à personne, puis, quand j’ai commencé à écrire, certains de mes personnages disparaissaient . . .” “I am the last person who saw him. That was on April 17, 1969. He left the house to go buy a newspaper, and we didn’t see him again. I have never talked to anybody about this; then, when I started writing, some of my characters disappeared . . .” (Rousseau X).³ The sudden disappearance of his father has been instrumental in his writing career. Laroui sees himself as an *écrivain engagé*:

J’écris pour dénoncer des situations qui me choquent. Pour dénicher la bêtise sous toutes ses formes. La méchanceté, la cruauté, le fanatisme, la sottise me révoltent. . . . Identité, tolérance, respect de l’individu: voilà trois valeurs qui m’intéressent parce qu’elles sont malmenées ou mal comprises dans nos pays du Maghreb et peut-être aussi ailleurs en Afrique et dans les pays arabes.

I write to denounce situations that I find shocking. To detect stupidity in all shapes and forms. Maliciousness, cruelty, fanaticism, stupidity revolt me. . . . Identity, tolerance, respect for the individual: these are three values that are interesting to me, because they are violated or misunderstood in our North African countries and perhaps also elsewhere in Africa and in African countries. (Laroui, “Fiction” 106)

And indeed, writing under the repressive, non-democratic regime of Hassan II was a heroic act, as noted by Zakya Daoud (a pseudonym), who worked as a journalist for thirty years, including for the weekly journal *Lamalif* (1966–88), where she covered the lead years. Daoud has published some of her articles in her book *Maroc: Les années de plomb, 1958–1988: Chroniques d’une résistance* (2007). As she suggests, writing is a transgressive activity: “Écrire, c’était résister. L’absence de liberté suscite le désir exaltant de la conquérir. . . . On apprend jour après jour à ruser avec l’adversité. L’écrit, même contrôlé, retrouve sa valeur subversive, chaque petite avancée est vécue comme une grande victoire . . .” “Writing meant resisting. The absence of freedom kindles the exhilarating desire to conquer it. . . . Day after day, you learn to trick adversity. The written word, even controlled, retrieves its subversive value, every small step forward feels like a big victory . . .” (332). In the case of Laroui, the comfortable geographical distance from Morocco undoubtedly makes it easier to voice criticism regarding his native country, and it is certainly easier to denounce abuse of (royal) power, corruption, and despotism *after* the fact. Nonetheless, Laroui has been outspoken about challenges Morocco faces today, such as explosive demographic growth, misogyny, nepotism, poverty, the denial of individuality, the widespread existence of prostitution, and the custom of arranged marriages. Laroui’s understanding of literature as *littérature engagée* echoes, we will see, Taïa’s instrumentalization of literature to further the cause of the LGBTQ community. Taïa has used his novels to bring to the fore issues that are taboo in Morocco, in particular homosexuality, which remains a punishable

offense in the kingdom. More recently, his novel *Un pays pour mourir* (2015) has addressed controversial contemporary social issues such as prostitution, gender realignment, and migration in France and Morocco.

MOROCCO'S MONARCH HASSAN II: FATHER OF THE NATION AND COMMANDER OF BELIEVERS

Who was Hassan II? The son of Mohammed V (who reigned from 1927 until 1961) and direct descendent of the prophet Mohammed (see Tozy 62), King Hassan II ruled from March 3, 1961 to his death on July 23, 1999. As Moroccan politician and intellectual Abdallah Laroui points out in *Le Maroc et Hassan II: Un témoignage*, Moroccan people have been "... un peuple protégé, c'est-à-dire mineur" '... a protected people, that is to say a minor people' (9), a fact that the young prince Hassan II was well aware of, even before he took the reins of the country after the death of his father, Mohammed V, in February 1961: "Selon les circonstances, il passera avec habileté d'un registre à l'autre ... il gardait de sa formation première une conception idéologique, presque mystique de la monarchie, distincte à la fois du légalisme opportuniste de l'islam malékite et du constitutionnalisme de l'Europe contemporaine" "Depending on the circumstances, he [the prince] gracefully switched from one register to another ... he kept from his first training an ideological, almost mystical understanding of monarchy, distinct at once from the opportunistic legalism of Maliki Islam and contemporary European constitutionalism' (Laroui, *Maroc* 9–10).⁴ As soon as the young prince came to power, he reinstated the *bey'a* (see Tozy 56–58; Dalle 552–53), an allegiance linked to sharia law that ties all Moroccan subjects to the king. By 1970, the new constitution gave him powers that made him an absolute, quasi-divine monarch (Dalle 558). The cult surrounding the image of the monarch, the Father of the Nation and Commander of Believers, pervades *Le Jour du Roi*. Readers might wonder about the meaning of the book's title. Does "the king's day" refer to the *fête du trône*? This annual event instituted in 1979 aimed to reassert royal authority by giving the king's subjects the opportunity to swear allegiance to Hassan II (see Dalle 553). If so, it would be significant to note that Omar Fakhri, the teenage first-person narrator in *Le Jour du Roi* and his friend Khalid El-Roule, who are first standing in the midst of a huge crowd of people patiently awaiting the King's procession, refuse to pledge allegiance to the King. Instead, they start making out, strip naked, and disappear into a forest, where things spiral out of control and Omar kills Khalid. Their transgressive behavior on the King's day is outrageous, but could also be interpreted as an act of teenage rebellion.

Reader-response criticism, with its focus on the author's attitude toward various readers (actual, virtual, and ideal), "mock readers" (Gibson 2–3), and the role played by readers in the interpretive act, mirrors the equally complex relationship between the king and his subjects and that of the characters (narrator and narratees). All of them engage in a verbal "exchange of world views" (Tompkins X), as they are trying to make sense of the others' speech acts. The interpretive process consists in fabricating meaning. As Roland Barthes famously put it in his essay "The Death of the Author": "... A text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into a dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation: but there is one place where this multiplicity is

collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader . . ." (12). Barthes's essay surely could not have escaped the attention of Taïa, whose narrator in *Le Rouge du Tarbouche* expresses his admiration for Barthes (57). The readers' interpretative work can be frustrated due to their unfamiliarity with Moroccan cultural practices such as the royal hand kiss. In real life, the doors of the king's palace were open to everybody, as the monarch was accustomed to say. When he visited with his subjects, the obligatory hand kiss (*baise-main*)—a symbol of allegiance and submission—took on a highly symbolic value (Abdallah Laroui 25).

Indeed, the hand kiss appears in *Le Jour du Roi*, where Omar dreams that he is released from a prison cell and given the honor of kissing the royal hand. Omar is terrified because he does not know the proper protocol: "Le Roi tend la main vers moi. . . . Baiser la main de Hassan II: c'est le rêve de presque tous les Marocains. Je suis devant ce rêve qui se réalise. Mais comment l'embrasser, la baiser, cette main royale, propre, tellement propre? Comment? Qui peut me le dire?" "The king extends his hand to me. . . . Kissing the hand of Hassan II: that is the dream of almost every Moroccan. I'm in this dream that is coming true. But how to embrace, to kiss this royal hand, [which is] clean, so clean? How? Who can tell me?" (Taïa, *Jour* 16–17). Ideal readers will know about the importance of dreams, which are widely believed to be of a prophetic nature in Islam (see Marlow 1–21). Western readers might be confused by the lengthy and detailed recurring descriptions of Omar's dream that progressively turns into a nightmare, which ends with the king slapping the boy on both cheeks for failing to instantly remember his family name and the date of his enthronement before dismissing him by dropping him into an underground prison cell. Those readers who are unfamiliar with the symbolic importance of the traditional Moroccan hand kiss might find the recurrence of the word "baise" in the text (and its vulgar sexual connotation in French) provocative, which was indeed the interpretation of a journalist who interviewed Taïa on TV5 Monde and who asked him if he intended to be confrontational by repeating the word. The journalist's irritated reaction, a mix of confusion, anger, and bemusement, reminds us that "the ideal reader" (he or she) does not exist, and that ". . . even the greatest of literature is radically dependent on the concurrence of beliefs of authors and readers" (Booth 140) and, I might add, cultural knowledge and an intimate familiarity with language, history, politics, religion, traditions, and value systems, in short a knowledge that eschews widely accepted beliefs and entrenched clichés concerning North African culture, politics, religion, and people.

In Taïa's text, the royal figure is portrayed as an overpowering, intimidating, opaque, and godlike father figure. He is the Father of the Nation, admired but mostly respected and feared. This royal image appears to be a fairly accurate depiction of the historical figure of Hassan II, who has been described as complex and ambiguous, both as a person and with regard to his politics. Journalists took note of his dual personality, half Arabic and traditional, half Western and modern, between 1965 and 1974 (Abdallah Laroui 50). In his lifetime, Hassan II reiterated that his intention was by no means to be a friend of France—as could be assumed at first glance by the title of Gilles Perrault's *Notre ami le roi*, published by Gallimard in 1990—but rather, that he always considered Morocco to be "... comme un trait d'union entre les cultures et les civilisations, en particulier entre l'Islam et l'Occident" "... like a link between cultures and civilizations, in

particular between Islam and the West' (Dalle 578). Consequently, Hassan II's foreign policy was pro-occidental in the 1960s and 1970s (Stora 29), while his political stance was traditional at home. He declared Islam the state religion and, from 1965, became more conservative at home. Hassan II displayed a penchant for folklore and reinstated traditional clothing (*burnous*) and cultural practices such as *fantasias* (Abdallah Laroui 49).

His private physician, a Frenchman called François Cléret, has described Hassan II as an extremely complex individual: courteous, pleasant, always smiling, charming, and very persuasive, on one hand, but erratic, moody, unpredictable, and cruel (Dalle 619), on the other, and, as the following anecdote reveals, we might add sadism to the list. In dealing with the king, Cléret recounts a particularly terrifying episode, titled "Enfermé dans la chambre forte du roi" 'Locked up in the king's strong room.' One morning, Hassan II locked Cléret in a room underground, a safe full of jewelry and documents, and ordered him to sort through his important documents and jewelry. Apparently, the king "forgot" to release him from the room. Meanwhile, Cléret feared for his life: "Fallait-il prendre cet incident pour une farce ou une mise en garde? J'eus quand même la désagréable impression que je revenais de loin" 'Was this incident to be taken as a practical joke or a warning? All the same, I had the unpleasant feeling that I came back from the dead' (Dalle 623). Only very late at night did Hassan II unlock the armored door and free him.

Before purchasing *Le Jour du Roi*, which was awarded the prestigious Prix de Flore in 2010, informed and actual readers will most certainly pay attention to the paratext to make their final decision. They will read the synoptic marketing blurb on the back of the book and this is what they will learn:

Nous sommes en 1987.⁵ Dans un Maroc qui vit encore dans la peur, sur une route entre deux villes, Rabat et Salé, le roi Hassan II va passer. Perdue au milieu de la foule, deux amis, Omar et Khalid, un pauvre et un riche, l'attendent. Le riche a été choisi pour aller baiser la main du souverain. L'autre est jaloux. La guerre des classes est déclarée. Elle se terminera au milieu de la forêt, dans le sang.

We are in 1987. In Morocco, a country that still lives in fear, on a street between two cities, Rabat and Salé, [where] the king Hassan II will pass through. Lost in the middle of a crowd, two friends, Omar et Khalid, one poor and one rich, are awaiting him [the king]. The wealthy one has been chosen to kiss the sovereign's hand. The other one is jealous. A war of classes is declared. It will end bloody, in the middle of a forest.

The blurb defines the time period, location, basic plot, and introduces the main characters: Omar and Khalid. It creates suspense (through an indirect reference to a crime linked to jealousy, blood, a forest) without giving away the outcome, which, readers are led to believe, will be tragic. By highlighting the importance of emotion, jealousy, and fear (fear of the king and death), while vaguely alluding to a social class war, it presents the novel primarily as a work of fiction, while silencing the impact its publication had in Morocco, where the book was considered transgressive and forbidden. Clearly, readers (actual, virtual, and ideal) are invited to focus on the basic plot, a crime of passion and jealousy, which ultimately makes Omar kill his lover, friend, and classmate Khalid. Taïa has stated in an interview

that *Le Jour du Roi* was originally banned in Morocco until a prestigious literary award swayed public opinion and the ban was lifted:

My novel *Le Jour de Roi* about King Hassan II was banned in Morocco. It's a novel about how Hassan II changed everything in the minds of the Moroccan people, about his dictatorship, and the social war between classes in Morocco. It's a story of the friendship and love between Omar and Khalid, a rich boy and a poor boy. When it received the 2010 Prix de Flore in France, the ban was lifted. My books are now translated into Arabic and are available in Morocco, a sign that things are changing. (Taïa, "A Conversation")

The marketing blurb invites readers to savor the exoticism and excitement of the novel, which promises a powerful mix of crime and power, rather than reading it as a critique of the Moroccan monarchical dictatorship and the significant disparity and income gap between the rich and poor.

In the same television interview on TV5 Monde mentioned earlier, Abdellah Taïa discusses the dichotomy between French (the language of power and hence that of the wealthy Moroccan elite) and Arabic (language of the uneducated poor masses, a language that carries no political weight whatsoever). He states that *Le Jour du Roi* is a highly political book because it draws attention to marginalized strata of society (the poor, homosexuals, maids, prostitutes, and illiterate Moroccans), who have no voice in the patriarchal monarchy of Hassan II, the Father of the Nation. Literature, he points out, *can* be powerful and serve to defend difference in terms of class, education, gender, race, sexual orientation, and so forth. According to Taïa, literature can be used as a weapon to defend oneself and to counter-attack in the event of violence.

In Taïa's novel, the reader's work of seeing and understanding, of fabricating meaning through the close-reading process mirrors that of the character Omar, who is searching for himself and defines his identity as lacking in beauty, heteronormativity, intellect, wealth, power, respect, and social standing, in opposition to his privileged friend Khalid and the royal figure of the king. The king's sadistic, unpredictable, and cruel personality comes through in Omar's dream/nightmare (see Calargé 113–28 for a close reading of the dream and a discussion of patriarchy), from which he wakes scared and drenched in sweat. In his dream, he meets face to face with king Hassan II in one of the monarch's many palaces, surrounded by beautiful women. Mesmerized, Omar watches the king undress until he is completely naked. As part of a conversation that will determine whether or not he will become the king's jester, the king asks Omar a question he cannot answer. Omar's inability to utter the name of the father is seen as a sign of disrespect of monarchic authority. How is it possible to forget the name of the father? Consequently, the sovereign's initially friendly demeanor changes abruptly as he tries to strangle Omar:

Il répète, sans se fâcher: "Quel est mon nom de famille?"
 Je ne le sais pas. Je suis toujours muet. Où suis-je? Que faire, maintenant?
 Je lève la tête. Je suis en train de regarder le Roi. Je suis un héros.
 Il n'a pas l'air méchant. Il a l'air humain, pas un monstre royal. Il est calme. Un peu amusé. De plus en plus amusé. Par moi? Par la situation?
 Il tend la main vers moi, sans m'atteindre, comme pour me caresser la tête et la nuque. Il les caresse.

Je ferme les yeux. Je les ouvre.
 Il s'est rapproché de moi. Ses deux mains sont autour de mon cou, qu'il serre de plus en plus fort.
 "Mon nom de famille? Vite, vite ... Mon nom de famille? Vite, j'ai dit ..."

He repeats, without getting mad: "What is my family name?"
 I don't know. I am still speechless. Where am I? What should I do now?
 I lift up my head. I am looking at the King. I am a hero.
 He doesn't appear to be a mean person. He comes across as human, not as a royal monster. He is calm. A little bit amused. More and more amused. By me?
 By the situation?
 He extended his hand to me without reaching me, as if he wanted to stroke my head and neck. He pats them.
 I close my eyes. I open them.
 He has come closer to me. Both his hands are placed around my neck, his grip tightens more and more.
 'My family name? Quick, quick ... My family name? Quick, I said ...' (Taïa, *Jour 11*)

The king's attitude toward Omar changes from kind to menacing because Omar fails to remember Hassan's name, which the monarch interprets as an act of disobedience, an act that challenges his sovereign power. Clearly, by failing to remember his name, he negates his authority and his power. As Calargé points out: "... oblivion, fear and the quasi-inability to remember the name of the king's family recall ... the writings of [Jacques] Lacan, notably [his writings] about the imaginary and symbolic orders, the individual's entry to language and his or her alienation by the no/name [le non/m] of the father" (116). Indeed, Lacan's emphasis on the symbolic dimension is manifest in Taïa's text through Omar's obstinate, recurrent memory lapses and his gradual remembering or, rather, "un"-forgetting of the king's identity, which is that of the "other." As Wolfgang Iser pertinently states, "So we might assume that the 'imaginary' is dually coded; it has a psychoanalytical and a literary reference, both of which have to be translated into symbolic language if the 'imaginary' is to be fathomed. Such a translation means the entrance of otherness into what is identical with itself" (*Theory* 93). Readers will discover that binarisms, and in particular the concept of otherness and the confrontation with the other—oppositions between self/Omar and other/Khalid, self/Omar and King/Hassan II, and man (Omar's biological father)/woman (Omar's mother), etc.—are central elements of the novel.

The text itself functions as a mirror, as "other." Confrontation with otherness mirrors the relationship between readers and text and that between unity and identity, as theorized by Norman N. Holland: "... unity/identity = text/self" (121). In addition to the narrator's obsession with the other, the reading of Taïa's novel is complicated by the fact that its first-person narrator is unreliable, as explicated by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: "It is true that most of the great reliable narrators indulge in large amounts of incidental irony, and they are thus 'unreliable' in the sense of being potentially deceptive" (159). Thus, Omar occasionally lies about his age and other details of his life. Omar's self-doubts and his identity instability reflect a limited knowledge and experience of the world, which is in part attributable to his young age. He is also a highly creative character who constantly mentally invents and reinvents the world he lives in, which further destabilizes

the text and makes any reliable “concretization” (Iser, “Reading Process” 50) of the text or any attempt to find unity in it very difficult. The instability of Taïa’s text mirrors that of other literary texts that challenge sovereign power (see González Echevarría) or any kind of order and authority for that matter. Omar has ambitions to become a poet: “J’ai rêvé. J’ai volé. J’ai tout imaginé et vu de ma ville, ce matin-là. Je suis devenu écrivain. Et même un poète” ‘I dreamt. I flew. That morning, I imagined and saw everything of my town [Salé]. I became a writer. And even a poet’ (Taïa, *Jour* 42). In this reference to the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, Omar’s demiurgic and visionary qualities challenge royal power.

In their lengthy daily conversations, Omar and Khalid discuss the royal figure and perform a ritual that allows them to exchange identities and become “other.” This dangerous game reflects the transformative, interpretive reading process, in which readers immerse themselves in a fictional world and try to look at it with different eyes. For Khalid, the transformative ritual leads to a sacrificial death. At the end of the novel, Khalid demands to be pushed off the so-called *pont cassé* “broken bridge” into the Bou Regreg river, where he drowns: “Je l’ai poussé. Il a plongé. Le fleuve Bou Regreg l’a accueilli, embrassé, trop aimé.... Je l’ai poussé. Je dois le répéter. C’est lui qui me l’a demandé.... Il a plongé. Rapidement. Il a coulé. En un clin d’œil. Il a disparu. Le fleuve l’a gardé. C’est ce que je voulais.” ‘I pushed him. He plunged. The Bou Regreg river, welcomed him, kissed him, loved him too much.... I pushed him. I have to repeat this. He asked me to do this.... He plunged. Quickly. He sank. In the blink of an eye. He disappeared. The river kept him. That is what I wanted’ (Taïa, *Jour* 167–69). *Nomen est omen*: the place of the tragic dénouement hints at the impossibility of overcoming identitary otherness and in particular the social class binary that separates Omar from Khalid. The broken bridge prefigures the tragic dénouement, a battle that is waged metaphorically over the royal figure, which becomes a pretext to discuss the real problem Morocco faces: the abyssal disparity between rich (an educated elite, symbolized by Khalid) and poor (the uneducated masses, symbolized by Omar), two parallel universes that cannot find a common ground, as the doomed friendship between Omar and Khalid reveals.

If anything, the politics of Hassan II aimed at increasing the gap between the rich and poor rather than creating a large middle-class, as illustrated by his famous formulation: “*Enrichir les riches sans appauvrir les pauvres!*” ‘*Making the rich richer without making the poor poorer*’ (Daoud 149). The king’s glamorous image is linked to Khalid’s world, that of power and influence, a world that Omar will never gain access to, given his modest origins: “Il était toujours ailleurs, de l’autre côté du fleuve, parmi les gens importants, les riches qui ne pensaient jamais à l’argent. Ses yeux voyaient Hassan II. Les miens étaient dans le noir” ‘He [Khalid] was always elsewhere, on the other side of the [Bou Regreg] river [which separates the capital, Rabat, from Salé, the city of pirates], among rich and important people who never think about money. His eyes saw Hassan II. Mine were in the dark’ (Taïa, *Jour* 166). Omar’s acute, subconscious sense of separation from Khalid, his desperation, anger, and frustration, eventually gain the upper hand over the feelings of friendship and sexual lust he has for Khalid.

Readers will also struggle with the loose structure of the text and its many blank spaces that illustrate the *non-dit*, or implied meanings. The text privileges images of lightness and darkness and oneiric elements including dreams that

forebode the imminence of violent acts, in this case Omar's nightmare with the king, which prefigures his own killing of Khalid, and psychology to capture the "essence" of royal power, which is fascinating, frightening, threatening, and irrational. The king has the power to make people disappear, a power that is visualized by the many blank spaces on the page, the many unexplained silences and absences, notably the silence surrounding the unexpected disappearance of Omar's mother and younger brother. The king's absolute power, expressed by his authority to decide over the life and death of his subjects echoes the concept of sovereignty as stated by Achille Mbembe in his seminal essay "Necropolitics":

... the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live, constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power. (11–12)

Several characters, including Omar's mother, brother, a black servant, and cook called Hadda, leave on their own accord. And in the end, it is Omar who will make Khalid disappear, an act that underlines the transgressive nature of the narrative, as he usurps the monarch's power to kill.

In his nightmare, Omar experiences the king's wrath. When he fails to state the correct enthronement date, he is punished severely: the ground below him opens up and he falls into an abyss, when he awakens from his nightmare. Readers then learn that Omar's mother, Zhor Bent Fatima, and younger brother, Othman, left three months earlier, leaving Omar's father in a state of distress and childlike stupor. Father and son consult Bouhaydoura, a sorcerer who had just been released after spending four years in the jails of Hassan II, in the hope that his supernatural power will bring back Zhor Bent Fatima. The sorcerer is but a shell of his former self: "De près, il n'était pas seulement mince, il était très maigre. Les quatre années passées en prison avaient laissé des traces" 'Seen close up, he was not only thin, he was very thin. The four years spent in prison had left marks' (Taïa, *Jour* 48). Readers are to infer that Hassan II does not tolerate any other figures of authority. Royal cruelty is symbolized by multiple references to prisons and imprisonment, allusions to detention centers, and the victims of the lead years, who died in prisons such as Tazmamart or from torture, such as the emblematic Human Rights activist Saïda El Menhebhi (1952–77) who died in prison after a hunger strike.⁶ Bouhaydoura's prison stay has stripped him of his healing power:

"J'ai perdu ma force... J'ai beaucoup perdu en prison. Ils m'ont beaucoup pris, là-bas. Ils étaient plus forts que moi, je dois le reconnaître... Je ne peux rien pour ton père. Il faudra me pardonner. Je ne suis plus le même. J'ai changé, moi aussi. J'arrêterai tout bientôt. Très bientôt peut-être."

'I have lost my strength... I have lost a lot of things in prison. They have taken away many things from me there. They were stronger, I must admit it... I cannot do anything for your father. You must forgive me. I am not the same person. I have changed as well. I will soon stop everything. Perhaps even very soon.'

(Taïa, *Jour* 59)

The sorcerer's lack of power stands in contrast to the king's absolute power. The king is imbued with *zaim*, which gives him power and authority. He is authoritarian, adventurous, and fatalist (Abdallah Laroui 104). He also has the proverbial *baraka* (Taïa, *Jour* 16), monarchic luck, a powerful weapon to silence any opposition to his rule (see Daoud 168). Bouhaydoura's weakness following his imprisonment (he is convinced he has lost all of his healing powers) mirrors that of Omar's father, who feels emasculated after having been abandoned by his wife, Zhor Bent Fatima, a former prostitute who has left for her home village of Azemmour.

The novel discusses the possibility of power reversals in traditional relationships between the father of the nation and his subjects, father and son, husband and wife, and master and servants. Thus, Omar gradually slips into a fatherly role: "Prendre mon père par la main, lui réapprendre à vivre, à manger, à respirer. Veiller sur lui. Préparer, avec l'aide de Bouhaydoura, un sort qui lui amènerait un peu de repos. Le sommeil. L'oubli. Une autre femme" "Taking my father by the hand, helping him to learn to live, to eat, to breathe again. Keeping watch over him. Preparing, with the help of Bouhaydoura, a spell that would calm him a bit. Sleep. Oblivion. Another woman" (Taïa, *Jour* 63). Likewise, the king is stripped of his royal authority and when he suddenly appears naked in Omar's dream, the rich are killed and the dispossessed escape.

In the opening pages of the novel, readers learn that Omar suffers from an inferiority complex due to his family's poverty and that he is jealous and in awe of the social standing and wealth of his boyfriend, Khalid El-Roule. However, Omar feels empowered by his dream of Hassan II. Readers who have read the interview with Taïa cited earlier will understand the reference to a class war: Khalid appears to belong to the *makhzen* class (see Daoud 199–200, 322), which is a privileged class with "une certaine éducation" 'a certain education,' a social class defined by order, law, and discipline, while Omar belongs to a more primitive social class called *jahilyyya*, "état de nature" 'natural condition' (Abdallah Laroui 130).⁷ Omar's mother, on the other hand, has chosen to live in *siba*, a state of anarchical freedom (Abdallah Laroui 130) by leaving her husband and Omar for a life of her own choosing. Likewise, Hadda, the black servant raped by Khalid's father, also asserts her freedom by leaving her masters. Hadda occupies a prominent place in the book. She is empowered by receiving narratorial status as she tells her story of oppression in the chapter "Jeudi," which closes the book and in lieu of all the other women who are not given the power to tell their stories.

Khalid, the *makhzen*, asserts his superiority by belittling Omar, telling him that he is not a good storyteller and by referring to him as the "woman" in their same-sex relationship. Who are readers to believe? The narrator or the narratee? Whose assessment is more reliable? In the course of the novel, Omar gains confidence and begins to stand up for himself. For once, he is determined to force Khalid to listen to him while he recounts his dream of Hassan II again, in his own words:

—Et comment était Hassan II?

—Petit... Grand... Je ne sais plus exactement... Des yeux incroyables... Noirs. Blancs. Beaux aussi, je crois. Beau-riche. Tu comprends? J'étais aveugle presque tout le temps. Je le voyais et je ne le voyais pas... Il me faisait peur. Mais je voulais aller vers lui quand même. C'est le Roi. Tous les Marocains ont envie d'aller vers le Roi, non?

—And how was Hassan II?

—Short.... Tall.... I don't know exactly anymore.... Incredible eyes.... Black. White. Beautiful also, I think. Beautiful-rich. Do you get it? I was nearly blind the entire time. I saw him and I didn't see him.... He frightened me. But I still wanted to go to him. He is the King. All Moroccans want to go to the King, don't they? (Taïa, *Jour 73*)

Interestingly, when Khalid admonishes Omar to tell his story as if he were writing an essay, Omar claims authorship, insisting on telling his dream *in his own words*. He also points out that when he saw the king in the nude, he had the fleeting impression that he was no longer the king (Taïa, *Jour 76*). It is thanks to this momentary loss of royal authority that Omar is able to discern Khalid's vulnerability and in particular Khalid's all too human fear of losing his privileges:

Khalid était riche. Tout en lui me le rappelait. Me le démontrait. Sa façon d'être, d'exister, d'analyser les choses et le monde. Sa façon de manger: De me regarder droit dans les yeux comme s'il était en train de me draguer.
Khalid était riche et il était beau.
Khalid était beau et il était riche.
Il avait tout. *Et il avait peur.*

Khalid was rich. Everything about him reminded me of that. Proved it to me. His way of being, of existing, of analyzing things and the world. The way he ate: [the way] he looked me straight in the eyes as if he were making a move on me. Khalid was rich and handsome.
Khalid was handsome and rich.
He had everything. *And he was afraid.* (Taïa, *Jour 81*; emphasis added)

Fear, as an expression of sovereignty and a mechanism of control, is a recurring topos in the novel: fear of the sun and fear of poverty, fear of loneliness, fear of the king and the powerful image he projects. Finally, there is the underlying apprehension that the social order might change and the possibility that the poor and the wealthy might trade places. The rhetorical battle between Omar and Khalid about the "real person" hidden behind the powerful image of Hassan II takes place in a dark forest called Mamora, "Morocco's largest forest" (Taïa 123), and the even more dangerous forest of Aïn Houala. As so often in fiction, the forest becomes a site of transgression and vengeance, as Omar slowly works up the courage to kill his friend. Taïa's narrative strategy of reversing power relationships reflects the subversive power of his own authorship that provocatively draws marginalized figures such as Omar (and disenfranchised, or homosexual characters in his other novels) into the light and to the readers' attention.

The turning point in the novel occurs when Khalid is chosen by his school principal to represent the school and meet the king in person. After the monarch's procession through Rabat on the so-called "Jour du Roi" 'King's Day,' Khalid will have the honor of kissing the monarch's hand and thus, some of the king's proverbial *baraka* will rub off on him. The entire class will watch the king's procession. Rabat, the capital of Morocco, symbolizes wealth, privilege, and access to royal power for the character Khalid, who has been selected to meet Hassan II in person,

while its sister city Salé, the city of pirates (*corsaires*), symbolizes poverty, social injustice, and rebellion. As the narrator in the novel puts it, Rabat and Salé are inimical cities (157). Omar is mad and jealous. He feels hurt and betrayed because Khalid omitted telling him that he was chosen, even though Khalid already knew that he had been selected when Omar told him his royal dream. Omar vows to take his revenge for this betrayal, and the couple leaves the procession that awaits the king and enters the Mamora forest:

L'heure de la vengeance avait sonné. La forêt n'était plus la forêt. Je n'étais plus dans la peur. Khalid devait payer on jour ou l'autre.

"Qui est Hassan II?"

—Voyons, Omar. . . . Ne fais pas trop l'imbécile.

—Je suis sérieux. Qui est Hassan!!!?

—Mais arrête. . . . C'est le Roi. Le ROI. Arrête avec tes conneries.

—Je veux dire: qui est-il en dehors de sa fonction de roi?

—Qui peut le savoir?

—Toi, Khalid. . . . Toi, tu vas le savoir puisque tu auras demain la possibilité de le rencontrer. . . . Et même de lui baiser la main.

The hour of vengeance had come. The forest was no longer the forest. I was no longer scared. Khalid had to pay, sooner or later.

"Who is Hassan II?"

—Come on, Omar. . . . Don't pretend to be stupid.

—I am serious. Who is Hassan III!?

—Cut it out. . . . He is the King. The KING. Stop your nonsense.

—This is what I want to say: who is he outside of his royal function?

—Who can possibly know?

—You, Khalid. . . . You will find out, since you will have the opportunity to meet him tomorrow. . . . And even to kiss his hand. (128–29)

In the above passage, the initial order in the interrogation process has been reversed: while it was first Khalid who asked all of the questions about the disappearance of Omar's mother, and the monarch in Omar's dream, questions Khalid made clear were the *only* pertinent ones, it is now Omar who does all of the questioning. Omar wants answers. And it is he who kills Khalid by pushing him off a bridge into the Bou Regreg river. In Taïa's novel, the royal figure is a narratological ploy, a pretext that leads to the final tragic dénouement that provides the backdrop that eventually prompts the main characters, Khalid and Omar, to engage in a dramatic ritualistic exchange of power in the Ain Houala forest, at the end of which Omar asserts his sovereignty over Khalid by killing him. The latter has to pay with his life for years of social injustice and humiliation inflicted on Omar and the have-nots he represents.

LAROUÏ'S "TU N'AS RIEN COMPRIS A HASSAN II"

Turning to Laroui's text, we will see that the narrator's refusal to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the person he meets at a café complicates the way he tells the story "Tu n'as rien compris à Hassan II" and highlights the way perception

is shaped by language and how social reality is constructed by it. The story highlights the limitations of reader response theory, if we consider, as Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan write, that literature:

... depends on being read in a certain way in order to be effective and successful. It is written for an audience, and that audience is implied in the text. Reception, response, and interpretation are in a sense preordained by the rhetoric of the literary work, but the audience also plays a role in shaping how the work will be understood and what meanings it will have. Each new generation and each new group of readers in a new setting brings to work different codes for understanding it. (128)

Interpretive strategies applied to “*Tu n’as rien compris à Hassan II*” will vary considerably depending on the nature of the readers (actual and/or virtual and ideal), their familiarity with the humoristic style of the author, and their knowledge of Moroccan history and politics. In other words: various readers will not read the “same” text because their interpretive strategies will differ considerably. Furthermore, the narrator in this narrative deliberately undermines the stability of the reading act by tricking, challenging, and surprising, if not frustrating, his actual readers. The narrator’s nonchalant attitude toward the narratee mirrors the writer’s attitude toward his implied audience: the quip encapsulated in the title, its double entendre, could be directed at the narratee but also at actual readers who are challenged to apply codes for understanding the text. The implied readers will indeed not have learned more about the royal figure after reading the text (through no fault of their own), but, as we will see, rather due to the fact that important information is withheld from them to allow them to successfully decode this text. The synoptic marketing blurb on the back of the book does not discuss the short story. It does, however, provide some valuable information about the author, telling us that he lives in exile and that he writes about the Morocco of his childhood and adolescence: “Fouad Laroui vit en Europe depuis l’âge de vingt ans. Mais c’est dans le Maroc de son enfance et de son adolescence qu’il a forgé cet humour impitoyable et cette intelligence cruelle qui illumine tout ce qu’il écrit” ‘Fouad Laroui has been living in Europe since he was twenty years old. But it is the Morocco of his childhood and adolescence that have forged his merciless sense of humor and this cruel intelligence that illuminates everything he writes.’ Readers learn that Laroui’s writing is humoristic, analytical, and insightful.

The short story “*Tu n’as rien compris à Hassan II*,” which opens the eponymous collection, takes his readers to a café in Montmartre, Paris. In the story, a male character called Hamid is eager to discuss Moroccan politics (the elections of 1963, the 1970s, and 1980s) and the mysterious figure of Hassan II with his friend, who happens to be the first-person narrator of the story. Essentially, the story is a long interior monologue in which a first-person narrator relates Hamid’s monologue about Hassan II. The fact that they converse in French leads readers to conclude that they might be well-educated expatriates or intellectuals. And yet, the narrator suffers from a linguistic deficiency: he is unable (or, perhaps, unwilling?) to name objects properly. Thus, he wonders what the correct words

for bar and bar stool are: "... une femme pousse la porte du café et vient se jucher sur l'un des tabourets surélevés—ils ont un nom sans doute, très technique, mais qu'importe—qui s'alignent le long du comptoir—et je sais qu'on n'appelle pas cela un comptoir..." "... a woman pushes the café's door and takes a seat on one of those raised stools—they undoubtedly have a very technical name, but who cares—that line the counter—and I know that it is not called a counter..." (Laroui, *Hassan II* 7).⁸ Even when the narrator bothers to name things correctly, he is apologetic: he apologizes to his imaginary listeners for using the English word *barman*: "Et le barman—excusez l'anglicisme—bref, l'homme moustachu et ventru qui officie de l'autre côté du comptoir..." 'And the barman—I apologize for the English loan word—in short, the pot-bellied man with a mustache who is in charge on the other side of the bar ...' (Laroui, *Hassan II* 7). The narrator's linguistic nonchalant attitude calls into question his reliability.

As the title suggests, the two men's opinions concerning Hassan II diverge (if the narrator does indeed have an opinion, which is questionable, since he does not openly voice it regarding Hassan II). It might well be that neither of them can adequately judge the legacy of his reign, nor grasp the "true" identity of Hassan II behind the carefully constructed royal image. Evidently bored—the readers are to infer—by this tedious conversation about a dead monarch, the narrator periodically tunes Hamid out and hence readers can only access parts of his interpretation of King Hassan's reign. Due to the narrator's patent inertia, disinterest in the subject matter—communicative laziness—it is up to the readers to fill in the gaps of meaning that arise out of Hamid's highly elliptic monologue. Encouraged by the descriptions of the bar (a cozy, smoke-filled café in Montmartre) and its clientele (which as far as we know consists only of a beautiful young woman and a barman), readers are invited to visualize the ambiance and the situation to fill in the blanks of the text with their own assumptions and projections. Thus, the reader (he or she) is "... drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is *not* said," that which is silenced and could have been said or shown (body language, glances, gestures, tone of voice, music, ambiance, etc.) (Iser, *Prospecting* 33–34; emphasis added).

The narrator in this short story is unreliable, as indicated by the title, "You Haven't Understood Anything About Hassan II." The quip is directed at the narrator who, his friend Hamid suggests, just does not "get" the former king. Hamid's private harangue is based on the assumption of his intellectual superiority over the narrator, whom he calls "little man," suggesting a significant age gap between the two:

—C'est Hassan qui a persuadé Abderrahman de devenir son Premier ministre. Tu crois vraiment qu'un homme comme Abderrahman se serait fait embobiner, s'il n'avait senti la sincérité de Hassan II? Ça, c'est de l'Histoire, mon petit bonhomme, tu ne peux pas comprendre cela. Tu crois qu'un homme comme Abderrahman se serait fait embobiner? C'est une question rhétorique et je me contente de hocher la tête.

—It was Hassan who persuaded Abderrahman [Yousseoufi, Prime Minister of Morocco from 1998 to 2002] to become his prime minister. Do you really believe

that a man like Abderrahman would have let himself get sucked in, if he hadn't felt that Hassan II was sincere? *This is History, buddy, you cannot understand that.* Do you really think that a man like Abderrahman would have let himself get reeled in? It is a rhetorical question, so I just nod ... (10; emphasis added)

Now, how can readers possibly try to understand the intricacies of Moroccan history if the narrator is unable to articulate the historical circumstances that support Hamid's declaration? The title of the short story humorously invites readers to engage in a successful interpretive act and to make sense of the text.

Readers might wonder how it is possible that Hamid, a former opponent of the regime of Hassan II, who paid for his political beliefs with fifteen years of exile, over the years turned into a fervent defender of the king and now even credits the monarch for bringing democracy to Morocco: "—La démocratie—vous parlez tous [*moi?*], vous parlez tous de Mohamed VI, mais c'est tout de même Hassan II qui l'a mise en place, la démocratie, au rythme qu'il fallait, ni trop tôt ni trop tard ..." '—Democracy—you all [*I?*] speak of Mohamed VI, but let's not forget that it was Hassan II who put democracy in place, at the speed that was necessary, neither too soon nor too late ...' (Laroui, *Hassan II* 9; emphasis added). The *I* [*Moi?*] in brackets refers to the narrator, who evidently does not want to be included in this generalized statement. Yet again, he chooses not to clarify his own position on the subject matter. Meanwhile, Hamid goes on to humanize the royal figure by admitting that the king can be forgiven, since his "mistakes"—a euphemism for killings—are human:

"Mais soyons logiques: nous voulions le tuer, il fallait bien qu'il se défende. C'est humain quoi.... Les années soixante-dix, n'en parlons pas. Tu sais bien ce qu'Abdallah en pense? Les torts sont partagés. Bon, Hassan a eu tort de s'entourer de crapules comme Oufkir et Dlimi, mais l'extrême gauche n'a pas non plus à se vanter."

'But let's be logical: we wanted to kill him, he had to defend himself. It's only human ... Let's not even talk about the 1970s. You know what Abdallah thinks about it, don't you? The wrongdoings are on both sides. Ok, Hassan was wrong to associate with crooks like Oufkir and Dlimi, but the extreme left has nothing to write home about either.' (Laroui, *Hassan II* 8–9)

The *non-dits* of this elliptic conversational monologue make it difficult for readers to interpret the text because they know neither who Abdallah is, nor do they know precisely what he thinks. Who thinks that harm was done on both sides: Hamid, Abdallah, or both? Readers will, however, likely know that General Mohamed Oufkir was assassinated in 1972 following a coup d'état and that Ahmed Dlimi became the king's right-hand man after Oufkir's death. Dlimi was further held responsible for the death of Mehdi Ben Barka in November 1965. The circumstances of Dlimi's sudden death in a palm grove in Marrakech in early 1983 remain to be elucidated (see Daoud 260–61).

The challenge in interpreting the short story can be linked to narrative instability, a sign of the narrator's indifference toward royal sovereignty. Essentially, the narrator has no desire whatsoever to discuss the politics and the historical legacy of Hassan II. This explains why he does not engage in this one-way conversation

and why he does not provide readers with the whole story. He is much more interested in the here and now; that is, in observing a beautiful young woman who has walked into the café. Ironically, while Hassan II is posthumously humanized by Hamid, the very real woman is elevated to supra-human status: her physical appearance is idealized. In the eyes of the narrator, she is an angelic apparition, the very incarnation of Beauty. The narrator compares her to André Breton's *Nadja*, a Botticelli painting, and Raphaël's *Fornarina*, or *Portrait of a Young Woman*. Hamid's gibberish about Hassan II is only equaled by the mediocrity of the bartender, who the narrator implies, like Hamid, turns a blind eye to what *really* matters. In his mind, the narrator mimics the barman:

Le barman a vu l'ange—ô épiphanie...—et il entreprend de se mouvoir dans sa direction—je souhaite tranquillement sa mort violente—parce qu'il va nous plomber l'éther de ces plaisanteries ... et c'est ce qu'il commet, la brute—"et pour la p'tite dame, kessass'ra [sic]?"—et Hamid m'explique Hassan II.

The bartender has seen the angel—oh, epiphany ...—and he sets out in her direction—and I quietly wish for his violent death—because he will spoil the atmosphere with his dull jokes ... and this is precisely what he does, the brute—"and what will it be for the little lady, what will it be?"—and Hamid explains Hassan II to me. (Laroui, *Hassan II* 9)

According to the narrator, the barman does not even speak proper French, he can only grumble. The narrator's silent stance is grounded in the belief of the importance of eloquence over wordiness, imminence, and relevance. The only thing that matters to him is to find out why the woman starts crying:

—Voilà que son dos ... est pris de petites secousses, je crois qu'elle pleure, tout doucement, tout doucement ... (elle est prostrée maintenant et je suis le seul à voir ce scandale)...—cette femme me dit quelque chose—je ne sais pas quoi—peut-être me parle-t-elle d'elle-même, peut-être me parle-t-elle de la moitié du monde, si souvent méprisée, opprimée—et Hamid me parle de Hassan.

—Now her back ... starts shaking, I think that she is weeping quietly, very quietly ... (now she is motionless and I am the only one to witness this scandal)...—this woman tells me something—I don't know what—perhaps she is talking about the half of the world that is so often despised, oppressed—and Hamid tells me about Hassan. (Laroui, *Hassan II* 9–10)

While Hamid's political talk only centers on well-known figures of Hassan's political administration, the focus thus shifts to the forgotten half of the population: women. The narrator places more importance on emotion than intellect, as he wants to comfort the woman. Ironically, while Hamid defends the king's "human side" and his purported capacity for compassion with his subjects, Hamid is so engrossed in his speech in defense of the king that he fails to even notice that the woman is crying.

The loose, anecdotal character of the monologue related in the short story mirrors the instability of the narrative stance linked to the duplicity of the narrator, who is uncooperative. He does not answer Hamid and, as a reader, one wonders if he is actually listening to what Hamid has to say or feels belittled by

him asserting his intellectual superiority. Laroui has confessed that he routinely distances himself from his writing and deliberately introduces false referents in his stories, thus intentionally misleading his readers (“Fiction” 106). Furthermore, the use of irony and sarcasm creates a subtext and several layers of meaning, which can be tricky to identify. Here, the presence of the female character in the story obviously takes center stage, relegating the status of the monarch to the background. While Hamid goes on to posthumously “resurrect” Hassan II and justify his politics by presenting him as modern, enlightened, ahead of his times, and misunderstood, rather than a cruel monarch, the narrator has only eyes and ears for the beautiful woman. The narrator makes a slight effort to partake in the conversation and wonders:

En quoi Hassan est-il responsable?

En quoi, en effet. Et qui est responsable de l’apparition de l’ange dans ce café de Montmartre? On voudrait croire en des dieux, pour tomber à genoux. *Et voilà qu’il, et voilà qu’elle*, la créature enfin se passe la main—fine, les doigts effilés—dans ses cheveux dont la couleur—consultez les dictionnaires—a quelque chose du roux, mais c’est moins violent, c’est ce roux qui flamboie, qui tire vers l’or, qui enflamme les âmes, et Hamid me parle de Hassan II:

—Un tango, ça se danse à deux.

C’est quoi cette métaphore? J’en ai horreur. Tout cela m’importune et l’ange ...

In what way is Hassan responsible? In what way indeed. And who is responsible for the appearance of this angel in the café in Montmartre? You would want to believe in gods to drop to your knees. *And now he, and now she*, the creature finally runs her delicate hand—her slender fingers—through her hair whose color—look it up in your dictionaries—has a reddish quality, but it is less violent, [a color] that sets ablaze souls and Hamid tells me about Hassan II:

—It takes two to dance a tango.

What is this metaphor? I can’t stand it. All this disturbs me and the angel ...

(Laroui, *Hassan II* 8; emphasis added)

Who exactly is this angel? Her identity is just as unclear as the identity of Hassan II—both are surrounded by a thick shroud. The narrator’s inability or rather unwillingness to name things correctly, including him or herself, calls into question his sincerity and makes him an unreliable narrator. Thus, he cannot describe the person he finds attractive, other than stating her angelic beauty while demonstrating a lack of respect for the monarch:

... et l’ange désemparé ... appuie son visage sur la paume de sa main droite et voilà que sa chevelure dont la splendeur eût fait taire David et Jérémie—pour des raisons opposées (je n’ai pas le temps de m’expliquer, Hamid me presse, on est déjà en 1981 et Bouabid est en prison sur ordre de Hassan II)—sa chevelure dévale—cascade éblouissante—le long de son manteau *et il / et elle clôt ses yeux dessinés par Botticelli et me parle de H.*

... and the distraught angel ... rests her face on the palm of her right hand and now her hair, the brilliance of which would have silenced David and Jérémie—for opposite reasons (I don’t have the time to explain myself, Hamid is rushing me and we are already in 1981 and Bouabid [on the imprisonment

and disappearance of Abderrahim Bouabid, see Dalle 276–89] is in prison on the orders of Hassan II) descends—a dazzling cascade—descends along her coat *and he / she closes her eyes that were drawn by Botticelli and tells me about H.* (Laroui, *Hassan II* 9)

Is the angelic creature a man or a woman? Does “il” (he) refer to “l’ange” ‘the angel?’ Who precisely tells him about H.? Readers are led to believe that H. is short for Hassan II. What an affront to shorten the name of the monarch to a simple initial indeed. As past and present become imbricated, the narrator’s priorities are clear. He or she nullifies Hassan II, generically referred to as H., while praising the stranger’s beautiful hair and facial features. Readers are to conclude that it is indeed more interesting to find out why the woman is weeping than to evaluate the rights and wrongs of Hassan II’s political actions.

In conclusion, both Laroui and Taïa are expatriates who left their native Morocco as young adults: Taïa lives in Paris, while Laroui lives in Amsterdam. They both publish in French—and Laroui also in Dutch—and many of their works have been translated into foreign languages and are available globally. Their geographical distance from Morocco facilitates their authorship and crucially shapes their understanding of their roles as writers of fiction, critics, in the case of Laroui, and educators who call into question royal performances and abuses of power. A satirist at heart, Laroui uses humor and irony to criticize the regime of Hassan II, while Taïa makes use of oneiric elements to reveal the monarch’s human nature. Both Laroui’s and Taïa’s texts problematize portrayals of royalty. By having his narrator eliminate the *makhzen* Khalid, Taïa asserts his own authorial power through his character Omar who, he explains in the online interview “Le Jour du Roi,” seeks revenge for years of social and political injustice and represents millions of poor Moroccans. The killing of Khalid is criminal and yet it is presented as a legitimizing performance in a democracy, which is supposed to guarantee social equality. Western readers will likely not fully understand the authors’ critique of sovereignty because they have limited knowledge of the sociohistorical context that underpins both texts; neither contains footnotes or a glossary that would help readers navigate them. The narrative instability of these texts creates an unsettling reading experience and mirrors an untouchable and unpredictable authoritarian royal power that is erratic, elusive, and threatening. By daring to make the monarch a character in a text, both writers strip the “real” Hassan II of his quasi-divine, absolutist power. The fictional portrayal of Hassan II allows Taïa’s and Laroui’s narrators/authors to encourage their readers/narrators, Moroccan or not, to put into perspective his importance. Both writers take a political stance: by writing and publishing texts that criticize Hassan II’s repressive reign, *les années de plomb*, they assert their own sovereignty as creators of works of fiction, while discrediting and undermining an oppressive political regime and uncovering its weaknesses.

NOTES

1. The latter is known for its fair share of autobiographical accounts, war narratives, *écriture féminine*, and, in the case of Moroccan Francophone literature, accounts from prison and torture survivors. There are also a number of Moroccan novels that deal with the lead years (*les années de plomb*) by authors such as Tahar Ben Jelloun,

Mahi Binebine, Ahmed Marzouki, Jaouad Mdidech, and Abdelhak Serhane (see Zekri; Orlando).

2. Laroui's œuvre encompasses primarily short stories and novels, including (in chronological order) his trilogy *Les dents du topographe: Roman* (1996), *De quel amour blessé: Roman* (1998), and *Méfiez-vous des parachutistes* (1999); *Le maboul: Nouvelles* (2001); *La meilleure façon d'attraper les choses* (2001); *La fin tragique de Philomène Tralala: Roman* (2003); *Chronique des temps déraisonnables* (2003); *L'oued et le consul et autres nouvelles* (2006); *La femme la plus riche du Yorkshire: Roman* (2008); *Le jour où Malika ne s'est pas mariée: Nouvelles* (2009); *Des bédouins dans le polder: Histoires traqi-comiques de l'émigration* (2010); *Une année chez les Français: Roman* (2010); *L'étrange affaire du pantalon de Dassoukine* (2012); *Le jour où j'ai déjeuné avec le diable* (2012); *Du bon usage des djinns: Chroniques* (2014); *Les tribulations du dernier Sijilmassi: Roman* (2014), and *Les noces fabuleuses du Polonais: Nouvelles* (2015). He has also published essays: *D'un pays sans frontières: Essai sur la littérature de l'exil* (2015), *De l'islamisme: Une réfutation personnelle du totalitarisme religieux* (2006), *How I Learned to Read Amsterdam* (2010), and *Le drame linguistique marocain* (2011); children's literature (*L'eucalyptus de Noël*, 2007); poems (published in Dutch only); and literary and cultural criticism.

3. All translation from the French are mine unless indicated otherwise.

4. The mystical character of the Moroccan king is anchored in a well-known legend, according to which the Moroccan population saw the face of the king on the surface of the moon. The king they claimed to have seen is the father of Hassan II, the sultan Mohammed V, who was exiled in Madagascar from 1953 to 1955 (Abdallah Laroui 20).

5. The year 1987 was not particularly eventful. In 1987, the United Nations sent a delegation to the Sahara. One year later, however, the UN agreed to organize a referendum in the Sahara (in September 1988), and on June 16, 1988, Morocco reinstated diplomatic relations with Algeria, which had been interrupted since March 8, 1976 (see A. Laroui).

6. Menhebhi was involved in the Moroccan Communist movement *Ila Al Amama* (meaning "Forward") and passed away on December 1977 following a hunger strike that lasted over a month. Menhebhi's poems have been published posthumously in *Poèmes, lettres, écrits de prison* (2000).

7. Makhzen is a regime of governance specific to Morocco. "At first, it designated the barn where tax income was stored. Today it designates the State Apparatus. With a negative connotation: brutal and corrupted, often inefficient" (Dalle 667; on the importance of *makhzen*, which characterized the state apparatus during the reign of Hassan II, also see Daoud 199–200).

8. This linguistic instability is a characteristic of Laroui's writing. For a discussion of this topic, see Bornier.

WORKS CITED

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *The Discontinuous Universe: Selected Writings in Contemporary Consciousness*, edited by Sallie Sears and Georgianna W. Lord, Basic Books, pp. 7–12.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. U of Chicago P, 1961.
- Bornier, Evelyne M. "T'as rien compris à Fouad LAROUÏ: Les dents de l'écrivain." *Vitalité Littéraire au Maroc*, edited by Najib Redouane, L'Harmattan, 2009, pp. 231–41.
- Bouabid, Abderrahim. "Acteur de l'Histoire." *Édification d'un Etat moderne: Le Maroc de Hassan II*, edited by Georges Vedel and Driss Basri, Albin Michel, 1986, pp. 17–20.

- Calargé, Carla. "Rébellions avortées: Peut-on dire son nom/n au Père?" *Expressions maghrébines*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2014, pp. 113–28.
- Dalle, Ignace. *Hassan II: Entre tradition et absolutisme*. Fayard, 2011.
- Daoud, Zaky. *Maroc: Les années de plomb, 1958–1988: Chroniques d'une résistance*. Éditions Manucius, 2007.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Indiana UP, 1990.
- Fish, Stanley. "Interpretive Communities." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 217–21.
- Gibson, Walker. "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers." *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins, Johns Hopkins UP, 1980, pp. 1–6.
- González Echevarría, Roberto. *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature*. U of Texas P, 1985.
- Holland, Normand N. "Unity Identity Text Self." *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins, Johns Hopkins UP, 1980, pp. 118–33.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.
- . *How to Do Theory*. Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- . *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1989.
- . "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins, Johns Hopkins UP, 1980, pp. 50–69.
- J'ai vu tuer Ben Barka*. Directed by Serge Le Péron, performances by Charles Berling, Simon Abkarian, Josiane Balasko, and Jean-Pierre Léaud, Rézofilms, 2005.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated by Timothy Bahti, U of Minnesota P, 1982.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits*. Seuil, 1966.
- Laroui, Abdallah. *Le Maroc et Hassan II: Un témoignage*. Centre Culturel Arabe and Presses Inter Universitaires, 2005.
- Laroui, Fouad. *Une année chez les Français: Roman*. Julliard, 2010.
- . *Des bédouins dans le polder: Histoires tragi-comiques de l'émigration*. Zellige, 2010.
- . *Du bon usage des djinns: Chroniques*. Zellige, 2014.
- . *Chronique des temps déraisonnables*. Tarik éditions, 2003.
- . *Les dents du topographe: Roman*. Julliard, 1996.
- . *Le drame linguistique marocain*. Zellige, 2011.
- . *L'étrange affaire du pantalon de Dassoukine: Nouvelles*. Julliard, 2012.
- . *L'eucalyptus de Noël*. Editions Yomad, 2007.
- . *La femme la plus riche du Yorkshire: Roman*. Julliard, 2008.
- . *La fin tragique de Philomène Tralala: Roman*. Julliard, 2003.
- . *How I Learned to Read Amsterdam*. Editions Khbar Bladna, 2010.
- . *De l'islamisme: Une réfutation personnelle du totalitarisme religieux*. Robert Laffont, 2006.
- . *Le jour où j'ai déjeuné avec le diable*. Zellige, 2012.
- . *Le jour où Malika ne s'est pas mariée: Nouvelles*. Julliard, 2009.

- . *Le maboul: Nouvelles*. Julliard, 2001.
- . "Le Maroc comme fiction." *Le Magazine littéraire: Ecrivains du Maroc*, vol. 375, 1999, pp. 105–06.
- . *Méfiez-vous des parachutistes*. Julliard, 1999.
- . *La meilleure façon d'attraper les choses*. Ed. Yomad, 2001.
- . *Les noces fabuleuses du Polonais: Nouvelles*. Julliard, 2015.
- . *Loued et le consul et autres nouvelles*. Flammarion, 2006.
- . *D'un pays sans frontières: Essai sur la littérature de l'exil*. Zellige, 2015.
- . *De quel amour blessé*. Julliard, 1998.
- . *Les tribulations du dernier Sijilmassi: Roman*. Julliard, 2014.
- . *Tu n'as rien compris à Hassan II*. Julliard, 2004.
- Marlow, Louise, editor. *Dreaming across Boundaries: The Interpretation of Dreams in Islamic Lands*. Ilex Foundation and Harvard UP, 2008.
- Mbembe, Achille. "Life, Sovereignty, and Terror in the Fiction of Amos Tutuola." *Research in African Literatures* vol. 34, no. 4, 2003, pp. 1–26.
- Menebhi, Saïda. *Poèmes, lettres, écrits de prison*. Editions Feed-Back, 2000.
- Orlando, Valérie K. *Francophone Voices of the "New" Morocco in Film and Print: (Re)presenting a Society in Transition*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Perrault, Gilles. *Notre ami le roi*. Gallimard, 1990.
- Prince, Gerald. "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee." *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, edited by Jane P. Tompkins, Johns Hopkins UP, 1980, pp. 7–25.
- Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan. "Introduction: Language and Action." *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 127–30.
- Rousseau, Christine. "Fouad Laroui, par les larmes du rire." *Le Monde*, 12 Mar. 2004, p. 10.
- Sedki Dajani, Ahmed. "La personnalité du roi Hassan II à travers trois qualités éminentes." *Édification d'un État moderne: Le Maroc de Hassan II*, edited by Georges Vedel and Driss Basri, Albin Michel, 1986, pp. 21–23.
- Stora, Benjamin. *Algérie Maroc: Histoires parallèles, destin croisés*. Emina Soleil, 2002.
- Taïa, Abdellah. "Abdellah Taïa: La société marocaine est violente." *YouTube*, 23 Oct. 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0HpnN8Z1CY>.
- . *L'Armée du Salut*. Seuil, 2006.
- . "A Boy to Be Sacrificed." Translated by Edward Gauvin. *New York Times Sunday Review*. 24 Mar. 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/opinion/sunday/a-boy-to-be-sacrificed.html>.
- . "A Conversation with Moroccan Novelist Abdellah Taïa." Interview with Joe Edgar, *Sampsonia Way*, 1 Sept. 2012, <http://www.sampsoniaway.org/literary-voices/2012/09/10/a-conversation-with-moroccan-novelist-abdellah-taia/>.
- . *Infidèles*. Seuil, 2012.
- . *Le Jour du Roi*. Seuil, 2010.
- . *Le Rouge du Tarbouche*. Séguier, 2004.
- . *Une Mélancolie Arabe*. Seuil, 2008.
- . *Mon Maroc*. Séguier, 2000.
- . *Un Pays pour Mourir*. Seuil, 2015.

Tompkins, Jane P., editor. *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1980.

Tozy, Mohamed. "Le Roi Commandeur des croyants." *Édification d'un Etat moderne: Le Maroc de Hassan II*, edited by Georges Vedel and Driss Basri, Albin Michel, 1986, pp. 51–69.

Vedel, Georges, and Driss Basri, editors. *Édification d'un Etat moderne: Le Maroc de Hassan II*. Albin Michel, 1986.

Zekri, Khalid. *Fictions du réel: Modernité romanesque et écriture du réel au Maroc, 1990–2006*. L'Harmattan, 2006.

