

Albert Cossery's Revolutionary Poetics of a Poetics of Revolution

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“To see where this revolution happened, and all that it has meant to the world, is extraordinary for me. [...] We don't have an opinion. [...] We have a clear message of support for what the Egyptians decide is in their own best interest.”

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton

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*This article is part of a larger work on Albert Cossery and (Egyptian) Revolution. My argument in this paper is that the current Egyptian revolution is **structurally bound** to confirm, not challenge, the existing power structure because, as Foucault says in “Useless to Revolt,” “the age of ‘revolution’ [. . .] constituted a gigantic effort to domesticate revolts within a rational and controllable history.” The “rational” discursive element will be traced back to stories of revolutions and revolutionaries told by the Egyptian francophone writer and philosopher of revolution Albert Cossery. By intersecting Cairene multiplicity with authority, capitalism and progress, Cossery showed the impasses of traditional and/or post-industrial radical and non-radical revolution against all forms of personal and/or collective violence done in (the name of) the State (apparatuses). These revolutionary impasses are explored in numerous paradigms of power structures: sometimes in the classical form where power is embodied in the person of the ruler (a tyrant, a governor); sometimes in a liberalist modern form where power is embodied and reinvested in a social contract. In both of these instances, the revolutionary impasse proceeds from an inherent limit within the idea of a revolutionary **logic**, as logic and Reason are perceived as part of an Enlightenment project of domination. My goal is to bring these intersections to the fore and in the process, explore Cossery's answer to the following Egyptian question: can (and how does) a real revolution take place?*

In the opening scenes of Albert Cossery's *A Splendid Conspiracy*,¹ having recently returned to his native Egypt with a fake diploma purchased after spending a few years “studying” in a European capital, Teymour, twenty-six years of age, sits sadly at the newly renamed café “The Awakening.” As he contemplates the “Awakening of the Nation”—a statue in the square around him—representing “a peasant woman in stylized dress,” a carriage makes its way onto the scene (6). Suspended between dream and disbelief, unable to fully comprehend the scene unfolding before his eyes, Teymour watches the arriving group “pulled by a bony horse” and

observes that the carriage is about to “collapse beneath the weight of several females in ceremonial dress . . .” (14) He is soon told that this “mountain of flesh and fabric” is made of young prostitutes taken out for a stroll by Wataniya, the Madam with “a motionless and terrifying face—a hybrid monster, neither man nor woman, covered entirely in white powder as if to erase any and all human expression beneath a plaster mask” (14).

That “Wataniya” means “Nation” or “Homeland” carries a meaning that remains untold by the narrator in a story about revolution, national awakening, popular language—a story that centers on Teymour’s return to and rediscovery of his homeland. Indeed, the shift from the usage of “Qawm” to “Watan” as descriptor of “Country” during the Arab *Nahda* is one of the strong indicators of the nationalist awakening running through the Middle East at the end of the 19th century. Whereas the word “Qawm” was used for a group of people, a collective, the word “Watan” is used at the turn of the century to describe a national and individualized idea. Haykal, author of *Zainab*—a novel in which Haykal combines romantic protest against social pressures, something he takes from Rousseau according to Hassan²—already marks this shift.³ These transformations are never explicitly given or developed in Cossarian novels but constitute the backdrop for his entire body of work.

With the current events sweeping the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arabic Peninsula, the question of Western intervention and the degree and nature of that intervention has taken central stage. The repeated claims and calls for a “natural” transition, for a “revolution from within” led by “the people” insist that the transformation and push for change belong to those suffering under the yoke of their masters. After Cairo’s Tahrir Square (Liberation Square) became the focal point of the Egyptian uprising, politicians, and journalists alike flocked to the site, at once embracing and celebrating the revolutionary spirit of the Egyptian people. Many (if

not most) commentators seemed to echo the words of French documentarist and filmmaker François Hien who, speaking from Tahrir Square where he was registering his impressions and conversations, made the following observation: “If the courage of initiating the movement had been the affair of a courageous few, now it was the whole nation that gathered to celebrate the possible overthrow of its dictator.”⁴ In a similarly euphoric manner, British Prime Minister David Cameron’s much publicized visit to the square and his interaction with the “locals” came as an obvious endorsement of the popular characteristic of the revolution—an endorsement echoed in the words of Ahdaf Soueif: “This enormous revolution that is happening in *our* streets and *our* homes is the *Egyptian people* reclaiming *their* state, *their* heritage, *their* voice, *their* personality.”⁵ There seemed to be a general consensus between participants, observers, and onlookers alike: this revolution was a grassroots movement led by young Egyptians themselves.

The alignment of so many voices highlights the importance of attributing the Egyptian revolution to Egyptians. The revolutionary arena (where Arabic, English, and French were being spoken) showcased its many actors and factions under one black, white, and red flag, all united against Mubarak in one chant: “Mubarak leave! We stay.” Yet, Mubarak’s authority and power were subject to multiple national and foreign interests and were not the stated singularity attributed to his reign. On one hand, Mubarak had many allegiances and political friendships, including American and French that carried significant financial and military benefits in exchange for Egyptian cooperation and compromises. On the other hand, his own camp seemed loosely united (Gamal Mubarak, his son and Habib el-Adly, the Interior Minister) therefore contributing to the complex networks of spoken and hidden agendas within the “commandement.”⁶ In the same manner that Mubarak’s many allegiances forced certain compromises on his government’s part, his rule suffered from disenfranchisement from beneath

because of Egyptian numerous dissident forces. It was unclear whose side the various separate armed forces (the Police force, the Secret Police force, the Central Security Services—Amn al Markazi, and the military's various branches, including the Presidential Guard) would take. Despite these obviously decentralized relationships of dominion, and despite the many other political interests (from clerics, clans, important families, etc.), the images and telling of the revolution posited two opposing singularities: the Egyptian people against the Egyptian ruler.

This essay will attempt to draw out the structural assumptions of this high-profile revolution by revisiting a few short stories and novels by the Egyptian francophone novelist and philosopher of revolution, Albert Cossery. Writing between the late 1930s and the turn of the 21st century, Cossery offered a controversial reading of revolution, focusing his critical lens on his native Egypt. The Egyptian context of the 1930s and 40s informed his reading of revolution—Egypt remained under British jurisdiction;⁷ Arab and Egyptian Renaissance, and specifically Egyptian surrealism; the end of Turkish rule and the strategic location of Egypt during World War II. Cossery eventually moved to Paris at the end of the war, took a hotel room, and died in the same room sixty years later, having gone back to Egypt only a couple of times and having lost his command of Arabic.⁸ A dandy, a highly marginal character, Cossery befriended many of his famous contemporaries—Egyptian writers and surrealists, French novelists, actors and filmmakers, Italian and Greek painters, and American writers. His entire body of work, from the initial collection of short stories (*Men God Forgot*, 1946) to his last novel (*The Colors of Infamy*, 2001), can be read as a thoughtful exploration of revolutionary impasses.

Albert Cossery's first few texts were hailed as populous manifestos both in France—Camus, who befriended Cossery, introduced him to his publisher, Edmond Charlot, who published Cossery's first texts in France—and in the United States—where Henry Miller hailed

him as the voice of the “unalleviated misery of the masses,” a flag bearer calling for higher moral grounds. However, Cossery seemed reluctant to become the *porte-parole* of any political or aesthetic manifesto. Instead, he experimented with poetry as he tried to capture the specificity of Cairo’s urban modernity. This specificity, he soon discovered, was the derisive humor with which the “masses” endured imposed hardships. His first published work is a rewriting of Baudelaire’s tableaux in Egyptian, published as a collection of poems under the title *Les morsures (Bites)*. He quickly followed these now lost poems with a collection of five short stories, *Les Hommes oubliés de Dieu (Men God Forgot)*, first published in 1941, in Cairo. From poetry to prose, Cossery’s tableaux of Cairo’s destitute are, as Henri Miller puts it, vignettes by which Cossery “gives tongues to the speechless ones [who] express themselves in fantasy, a dream language which, in their case, demands no psychoanalytical interpretation.”⁹ Cossery’s writing of Cairo’s modernity is an acerbic critique of the promises on which modernity-as-progress was conceived. Bourgeois ideals such as equality, freedom, and dignity are reclaimed from the universal and reassigned local, spatial values. By measuring the depth of the colonial paradox, Cossery was mostly examining the seeming dead end of revolutionary colonial logic. Can a revolution of self-decolonization not use and not adhere to European ideals? In other words, is an indigenous revolution possible within the colonial context? Robert Young, in his examination of Gandhi’s “counter-modernity” and India’s “stark contrast to the situation in much of the colonial world [where] Marxism . . . never assumed its own local form as the dominant political ideology” insists on Gandhi’s British education. From this perspective, it seems that “much radical postcolonial thought has been produced by diasporic intellectuals”¹⁰ and points to the impossibility of a genuine indigenous revolution.¹¹ Perhaps it was this impossibility that troubled Cossery and kept him from joining any political parties or movements. Albert Cossery

was neither a revolutionary nor a *révolté*—he believed that a lifestyle, a mode of living, could be a highly individualized, revolutionary and creative process, echoing Baudelaire’s own heroism of modern life.

Albert Cossery’s œuvre can be said to have been cast against the idea of progress, against the lure of modernity. He contends that all progress—be it material or political, financial or philosophical—is part of a “universal imposture” making slaves of those who believe in it. This imposture locates mankind’s futility in his search for dignity (*Proud Beggars*, 30). The “evident [and] universal” imposture consists in “taking this world” seriously (158). Cossery writes, of this imposture:

Every country had its shares of imbeciles, bastards and whores. You had to be a fool to believe that bigger and better things were happening elsewhere. The only thing that changed was the language spoken; everywhere the same imbeciles, the same bastards, and the same whores could be found expressing the same things in different languages: the novelty consisted of nothing more (*A Splendid Conspiracy*, 25-26).¹²

The spread and universality of Cossery’s imposture is located in the necessary interconnectedness of a globalized market economy that still speaks in local terms. This repetition of the same globality dressed in local garb touches all aspects of the social fabric—all of the world’s “whores” say the “same things.” Cossery also locates this dissimilar resemblance in the figure of the revolutionary, in the idea of revolution. If progress is an imposture so is its corollary, that is, resistance to it. Both in idea and in practice, resistance is now a manufactured globalized and redistributed product. The internal logic of this reproducibility has consumed the possibility of real revolution, thereby putting to rest, according to Cossery, the old seemingly inseparable couple: authoritarianism-revolt. By exploring the shift from traditional revolutionary to modern revolutionary, Cossery is

evacuating any residual illusions about the prospect of transformation—political, social, and economic—through violence.

Cossery’s philosophy attempts to operate outside of modes or positions of opposition. The contestation is necessary; however, for Cossery this contestation must be non-confrontational because the globalized model’s logic and practices are non-binary. The premise of Cossery’s 1940s revolutionary philosophy resonates all the more in our current *post-*analyses, as it had intuitively anticipated much of the current debates about linguistic hybridity and cultural trans-nationalism. Cossery’s philosophy could be summarized in his own much-repeated remark to the often-asked question of why he writes: “So someone who just read me decides not to go to work.”¹³

A highly subversive character, Cossery insists that one cannot afford to resist oppression using the same tools as those used by the oppressors. What is important here is that, for Cossery, the tools themselves are less significant than the imposition itself: the imposed relationship between oppressors and oppressed. Said differently, the logic of tools—of a relationship between oppressors and oppressed so manufactured that it requires tools for assembly, tools for maintenance and others for repair—is what needs to be contested. The *seal of seriousness*, according to Cossery, is what marks this logic and the relationships it fosters. Anticipating decolonization’s actual and rhetorical violence, Cossery postulates an attitude foreign to 1950s and 60s anti-colonial theoreticians and must be read against *Discourse on Colonialism* and Césaire’s attack on Europe’s ethical decadence using the ‘serious’ as a category of argumentation—“Europe is indefensible. [. . .] That in itself is not serious. What is serious is that ‘Europe’ is morally, spiritually indefensible.” Cossery, by his preemptive denegation of the ‘serious,’ insists on the collusion between Reason and Progress, trying to

demystify in the process the French civilizing mission and behind it the Enlightenment project.¹⁴

This development of a critical and creative response to the challenge of the ‘serious’ as a necessary political and ontological category is elaborated through the examination of the various configurations of revolutionary expressions through different categories of revolutionaries. Cossery’s starting point is with the traditionalist revolutionary, always a local and often miserable character. By traditionalist, Cossery is referring to a pre-industrial society where the classical revolutionary believes that the siege of power is located in the *person of the tyrant-ruler*. Sovereignty is examined from its antithetical position: for every tyrant, another tyrant looms dressed in revolutionary clothes. Cossery simultaneously examines another category—that of the radical urban revolutionary, also a local character but imbued with European ideals.¹⁵ This militant revolutionary, in Cossery’s work, can interchangeably come from the bourgeoisie or from the working class. Either way, this character believes that the siege of power is located in the *state apparatus*—represented by the (elected) ruler. By pursuing these two revolutionary logics to their apparent limits, Cossery is directly addressing the expectations of Egyptian and Arab nationalisms born from the Arab Renaissance or *Nahda*. The failure of these two revolutionary logics can be located in their inability to engage with and challenge *the serious* as one of the inherent conditions of both structures of power, the traditionalist and the modern. Alongside these two revolutionary types, Cossery will introduce a third and final category, that of the radical non-militant revolutionary who believes that power is not located in a *place* but is instituted through imposed *relationships* (financial, social, political, among others), in what Cossery narrators call “the universal imposture” and which will be thoroughly analyzed by Foucault.¹⁶ The Cossery non-militant revolutionary refuses

these serious relationships by proposing other relationships based on different organizing principles.

In *Danger of fantasy*, one of the 1941 *Les Hommes Oubliés de Dieu* (*Men God Forgot*, 1946) short stories, Abou Chawali, professor of mendicancy who runs his own school of beggars located at the end of the Lane of the Pissing Child, is confronted by Tewfik Gad's revolutionary psychological approach to "the art of demanding alms" (*Men God Forgot*, 85). Gad, who "still preserved the instincts of an old bourgeois nourished on prejudices [. . .] and had the scruples of a cultivated man" because he refused to defecate in the open, had discovered a new mendicancy model (104). Gad "had learnt how these creatures [fat and sated beings] disliked being disturbed in their optimistic picture of the world by the deliberate flaunting of excessive misery" (93). Gad "had quite simply suppressed pity as tactical approach [because] pity was a dead sentiment [. . .] Henceforth the poor should no longer provoke pity, but sympathy [which] was a sentiment still unexploited by the begging class" (94). Against the danger of this "progress," Chawali insists on the necessity of "realism":

"Our children must appear as they are in reality, that is to say, soiled and filthy, and they must drag along the streets like a living reproach. The world must fear us; it must sense all around it the nauseating stench of our enormous misery."

"I thought," replied Gad, "that a certain picturesqueness would greatly facilitate the business."

"We do not want to serve as a picturesque element. The picturesque must perish! We want to be a real people, a people that suffer and whose wounds are obvious and tangible. Do you understand, Gad Effendi? That is what I wanted to tell you."

[. . .] "But progress, master, involves modifications in every sphere. I simply wanted to try an experiment."

"Mendicancy will not stand modifications. It must stay exactly as it is or disappear utterly from the face of the earth" (107).

On the one hand, the lure of progress espoused by the local-bourgeois Tewfik Gad; on the other, the necessity of realism and of the status quo espoused by the local Chawali, a believer in tradition. The tension between these distinct poles is exacerbated by the context of their encounter. As the diarrhea-prone Gad runs out of his miserable shack heading to the public lavatory located in the city far in the distance, Chawali, waiting for him outside in the dark alley, decides to accompany him. The scene is suspended in their movement between the Lane of the Pissing Child where “interminable pools of urine [. . .] spread there like obscene traps” and the city with its lights through which “civilization makes itself felt, as lights which it scatters around it to blind the people” (107). It is in this nondescript zone between the alleys and shacks of misery and the walls and bourgeoisie of urban progress that we can locate the first expression of Cossarian ethical and aesthetic dilemma: In what *language and style* does one render the reality of Egyptian miserable masses? Can and should their misery be alleviated and if so, in what revolutionary *manner*?

Chawali and Gad’s disagreement comes from their strategy of resistance, not from the perceived power structure they both want to confront. To the both of them, power is a given reality, meaningful only in as much as it affects their quality of life. Their miserable lives could be attributed, interchangeably, to a tyrant governor, to an elected official, or to a police state. Both traditionalist Chawali and progressive Gad *feel* the burden of their condition: against the backdrop of modern buildings and pleasures, the poor classes (traditionalists and progressives alike) are keenly aware of the dividing lines that separate them from those behind the city walls. Chawali is attached to traditional forms of combating oppression. His goals are embedded in strategies of “fear” and “reality” that will frighten society into recognizing its inherent inequality. His understanding of reality is based on a longstanding classical and binary tradition that

organizes society into two distinct categories of rich and poor. As a proto-Marxist revolutionary, Chawali, and later on the inhabitants of *The House of A Certain Death*, believe in the eventual uprising of a people against their oppressor(s). On the other hand, Gad, a neo-Marxist revolutionary, is a proponent of modern and progressive forms of combating oppression. His strategy seems to have adapted to a new reality based on scientific inquiry. Gad's appeal to experimentation and to "psychology"—as a new method of resistance—claims to be more successful than the traditional revolutionary method whose ongoing struggle signals its ineffectiveness. Progress, according to Gad, is ubiquitous in its reach and must therefore be applied across all branches and in every realm of society—especially in the most basic structure of exchange between beggars and the rich targets of their mendicancy.

These two types of characters are recurrent in Cossery's work. If Chawali, the traditionalist, is nothing but a haggard miserable man in this short story, his traditionalist views are given more voices as they become a multitude of miserable characters in Cossery's 1945 novel *La Maison de la mort certaine* (*The House of A Certain Death*).

The inhabitants of this house express a collective consciousness that identifies itself as the precursor to a national collective awakening. As the short novel comes to an end, Abdel Al, one of the story's many miserable characters imagines the coming revolution: "The vengeance of an oppressed people now rising and whose forward march cannot be stopped. . . . The house will crush us . . . But we are many. Its collapse will not kill us all. The *people*¹⁷ will live and avenge the others" (*Oeuvres Complètes I*, 421). The image of Abdel Al's awakening sows the seeds of a national awakening of a people ready to fight the oppressive injustice. This injustice is embodied in the person of Si Khalil, the real estate developer and landlord. The revolution

and uprising are clearly staged: one identifiable force, claiming a moral imperative of equality, is fighting for the position of power occupied by the opposing force.

Cossery's enthusiastic reception in Egypt, France, and the United States comes from the militant and ethical framing of his stories. As early as 1941, Marie Cavadia identifies Cossery's then recently published collection of short stories as a "moral handbook."¹⁸ There is a direct link between misery, morality, words, and action. Cossery is read as a denunciator of inequalities; his portrayal of Egyptian society is presented as an historical account needing witnesses, judges, and action. Cavadia, Miller, and later Camus will see in Cossery a voice speaking for those unable to speak for themselves.¹⁹

Cossery is aware of the limitations of the traditional model. Traditional revolutionaries come from the least educated parts of society and cannot fully comprehend their own disempowered situation. Their ignorance is the source of their misplaced audacity. As the naïve inhabitants of the house decide to write a complaint letter, they realize that they don't know where to send the letter, as the *State* to whom the letter is addressed has no known address. Their resistance is therefore directed towards Si Khalil, the landlord, and in its limited scope, seems to have little resonance outside the house's neighborhood. Furthermore, the traditional model also seems a priori doomed because its full success ensures the perpetuation of the singularity of power, repeating itself under different names and guises. Finally, Cossery thinks that the traditional model is defunct, as authority had slowly diffused itself into a less reified form and in so doing, had regulated power by 'democratizing' it. Confronted with this impasse, Cossery begins to question why traditional revolutionary forms have become ineffective. In his analysis, the main reason for this ineffectiveness is that traditional revolutionary forms cannot confront a diffused power structure that is no longer located in the person of the tyrant but

emanates from a capitalist society where bourgeois domination is based on economic inequality and upheld by a social contract.²⁰ For Cossery, the history of this new inequality finds its roots in European industrial revolutions' influence, and later on, in colonial struggles.

These roots have grown to become an integral part of Egypt's society, therefore erasing demarcation lines between their constitutive parts. If the "European city" is a recurrent expression in Cossery's texts, it is never a foreign city but rather exists as an integral part of Cairo. Throughout his texts, Cossery collapses a variety of expressions such as "European," "modern," and "progress" when he is speaking of Cairo's more affluent areas such as Zamalek. There is an overt hybridity in the new power structure mixing together European and Egyptian elements. This economic power structure derives from European ideals as Rafik tries to explain to his younger brother in Cossery's 1948 novel *The Lazy Ones*:

"Do you know, my dear Serag, that there are countries where men Wake up at 4 in the morning to go work in mines?"
 "Mines! said Serag. That can't be true, you want to scare me. [...] Who told you?"
 "No one. But I know mankind much better than you do. It won't be long before they turn this fertile valley into a hell. This is what they call progress. You don't know the word? Well, when a man speaks of progress, know he is looking to enslave you."
 (*Oeuvres Complètes II*, 62)

Against the bourgeois ideals of work and progress erected as the new enslaving power structure, Cossery makes way for a revolutionary character capable of understanding the intricacies of the modern state—this character can even be a government worker, as in the case of El Kordi, one of Cossery's *Proud Beggars* main characters.²¹ Cossery never explicitly analyzes the transformation of the sovereign (traditional) form of power, as this transformation is not fully completed and continues to display traceable remnants of tyrannical classical rule still present in what Achille Mbembe calls the "Commandement" in *On The Postcolony*. However, the Cossarian urban revolutionaries have espoused modern ways of combating this

new reality of power. For Gad, appealing to psychology and progress, “sympathy” and not “pity” must be used as the driving force of a new mendicancy. Gad’s revolutionary scientific method of mendicancy is a direct response to progress—his method has new techniques (makeup, clean clothes, smiles . . .) and follows a different principle (“sympathy” not “pity”). The adaptability that Gad demonstrates is at the heart of the new revolutionary manual. To be successful, a modern revolutionary must be able to adapt to changing and changed conditions of his struggle all the while being true to his calling.

Taher, the revolutionary character in *The Jokers* epitomizes this modern revolutionary. Karim, one of Taher’s old comrades sees his old friend following him and realizes that “Taher must have been spying on him for a good while already. What for? Why didn’t he just come up and say hello? But to ask such questions was not to know Taher” (*The Jokers*, 104). Karim and Taher had been part of the same revolutionary circles and “had spent every minute plotting subversive actions; they were arrested together and taken to the same prison” (*The Jokers*, 104). Karim is now a “bohemian” who uses “primitive means” and has forsaken his old revolutionary ways. Taher hasn’t: “He was a smart boy from a family of poor workers who’d forgone food to give him an education. After successfully finishing school he’d refused to take a respectable job, devoting himself entirely to the revolution. His hatred of the power was non-negotiable . . .” (*The Jokers*, 104-105)

Taher and various other Cosserian urban revolutionaries are battling social and economic structures with homemade artisanal bombs in which a whole set of ideals infuses and justifies its own violence. No matter how violent and destructive Taher’s revolt—and by extension other modern revolutionary models in Cossery’s work—the form and content of the resistance must follow protocols and a highly regulated set of rules. Taher’s discontent with

Karim and Heykal (the master bohemian and anti-hero of *The Jokers*) is because of their lack of conformity to the revolutionary idea and ideals. He felt belittled and

outraged at the thought that the police took him for a clown using such primitive means to overturn the government. To impute these types of inanities [Heykal and Karim's] to him was to attack his honor as a revolutionary. It besmirched his entire past as a militant, all his years in prison. He saw himself sinking in the esteem of the police, and he fumed with rage (107).

Taher's idea of the revolution is highly ordered. From within the rules of the modern state, he had taken on the "austere outfit of a low-level office worker" because he thought and believed that "a real revolutionary must dress correctly" (106). As a violent revolutionary—the revolutionary hero of Fanon's decolonization program—Taher's ideals anticipate Fanon's description of the colonial situation:

In its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be first only after a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists. This determination to have the last move up to the front, to have them clamber up the famous echelons of an organized society, can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 3).

These two protagonists of Fanon's text—colonizer and colonized—appear in Cossery's work. They might sound or look different but they are opposed according to the same binary logic of interdependence.

It is no surprise then that the officer investigating subversive activities in the city is highly disappointed by Karim's abandonment of his old revolutionary ways. When Karim reports to the police station, the ensuing confrontation with the officer takes on an unexpected turn. During his interrogation, Hatim, the officer, is struck by Karim's unworthiness of the revolutionary name. The officer "had expected to do battle with a stubborn adversary" because he had admired "the indomitable spirit" that had driven Karim's previous revolutionary ways. Hatim had been "happy at the prospect of measuring himself against him [Karim] once more" as

he wanted to test his knowledge and methods against “these revolutionaries” (95). Hatim had “learned a lot from these revolutionaries” by applying modern techniques of interrogation against “political prisoners” (95). By refusing to participate in this dialectic, Karim was not only denying Hatim the possibility of pursuing his *savoir*, he was also questioning the viability of Hatim’s—and by extension authority’s—raison d’être. Incapable of constituting a case against Karim, Hatim is deeply troubled and cannot help but resent this “grotesque attitude” (95).

Within the modern state, the new power structure is necessarily connected to its own subversive elements; this connectivity in an international globalized market points to a larger conception of the modern state, a supra-national economic logic.²² A staged opposition will ensue, each character playing his part. If the modern Egyptian state is tributary to several interlacing factors such as colonial history, accumulation of capital, and the rise of liberal societies, these realities are hinted at everywhere but never fully developed in Cossery’s texts.²³ No matter what the provenance of the subversive modern revolutionary—a fallen bourgeois in the case of Gad; an idealist such as El Kordi in *Proud Beggars* or a working-class character like Taher in *The Jokers*—the revolutionary enterprises will fail.

The very elements that allowed these characters to understand the new power structure—their education, their work, and position in society—are the very reasons for their inability to mount a serious challenge against it. These urban revolutionaries are fighting a losing battle because they have already accepted the established rules of the modern state.²⁴ Those rules are part of the social contract that assigns roles to the members of its society. Those rules are part of the economic contract that assigns values to objects, places, people, and ideas for the members of its society. Within this capitalist bureaucracy, the Cossarian urban revolutionary must carry arms and use violent means in his struggle. These violent “tools” of

resistance are within the revolutionary framework of post-industrial societies. Their forms, reach, and attributes have been set, as well as “their prior conditions, objectives, and ways of being carried to completion” (“Useless to Revolt,” 450). There is a trafficking of revolutionary images, a comprehensive logic that regulates (or disciplines) the forces of contestation that inhabit it. As Cossery reminds us, explaining the new governor’s attitude towards revolutionaries:

Up to now, he’d been happy to arrest the odd number of the underground revolutionary party, an easy target over the years for whatever governor happened to be in power. Having thus made a show of strength, and having resolved, in the manner of his glorious predecessors, the problem of opposition in the laboring classes, the governor believed his interests to be safe from any damaging propaganda. He was familiar with only one kind of subversive spirit: those scattered individuals who, intransigent in their hatred, sought glory through action and were willing to lay down their lives for the sake of the right and the good. Men who took themselves seriously, in other words, like him (*The Jokers*, 12).

The organizing principle is power. Both for the revolutionary and for the state (the governor), the power structure is mandated by an ontological seriousness: this is not a game—lives are at stake, the future of the state is at stake, the future of society is at stake, and it must be defended. It must be defended through disciplines and knowledges put at the service of a rationalized progress. No matter the who voicing the needed defense, the appeal is made from within the frame of a rationalized seriousness. Within these fundamentally Manichean (cf. Fanon) relationships, both the traditional and the post-industrial revolutionaries are set to fail. The forms of their failure might be dissimilar; the cause, however, is the same. Their failure is a direct result of their understanding of power as a singularity—as a singular tyrant or as a singular logic. Operating from within the rule of “the age of ‘revolution,’” the revolutionary does not want to outwit the capitalist state; his only possible desire is to reverse the order and

value of things hoping perhaps to transform the current society into a dictatorship of the proletariat.

What is the Egyptian revolution's goal? What orders and values does it aim to reverse? Are we to look at the current revolution as traditional or as post-industrial? I argue that in both instances, there remains an impasse: the power structure—whether traditional, and therefore concentrated in the person of Mubarak, or post-industrial, and therefore concentrated in the state economic apparatus—will remain intact. Change doesn't come this easily. We can cite the 1982 Hama massacre in Syria or the ongoing fiasco of the Libyan uprising as two of the more recent examples of failed and bloody revolutionary attempts.²⁵ The seeming impossibility of a modern revolution confirms the logic of liberal capitalism's necessary inequality.

Perhaps, as Jacques Donzelot states, “[p]olitical culture is also the systematic pursuit of an antagonism between two essences, the tracing of a line of demarcation between two principles, two levels of reality which are easily placed in opposition. There is no political culture that is not Manichean”²⁶ (74). Cossery's elaboration of a non-binary revolutionary position aims to move beyond Bakunin's analysis that fails to go beyond the circular and cyclical power structures.²⁷ The Cosserian non-binary revolutionary position is to confront the micro- (and macro-) physics of power.²⁸ This elaboration of a non-binary revolutionary position, to be credible and remain true to its project, needs to bypass the binary, *not transcend it*. It needs to invent a different position as well as different markers of differentiation. In a telling passage, Foucault raises the question of power's integrative and therefore adaptable capabilities:

There is not a series of successive elements, the appearance of the new causing the earlier ones to disappear. There is not the legal age, the disciplinary age, and then the age of security. Mechanisms of security do not replace disciplinary mechanisms, which would have replaced juridico-legal mechanisms.²⁹

There is no sequential move from traditional classical forms of tyranny to more socially acceptable forms of discipline and security; rather Foucault is drawing attention to “systems of correlation” where techniques, institutions, and technologies of power govern individuals and populations.³⁰

The Cosserian European city is located within another larger city (Cairo). This doubling exacerbates even more what Donzelot calls “l’entre-soi sélectif”³¹ of the gentrified portions of urban centers, a term that can be understood as a *selective closed circle of proximity* that is opposed to other forms of closed circles of proximity found in various sites of urban centers. However, where one expects to encounter a poetics of separation and difference marking out the various lines between same and other, local and foreign, traditional and progressive, an unexpected occurrence: the “indolent inhabitants” of these areas are all Egyptians, and not Europeans. What is it that makes this a European city? Is it the lights that the narrator of *Danger of Fantasy* describes as “shining to blind” and that scare away the unwanted people, keeping safe within its perimeter the rich inhabitants? This same safety would then extend to the shops and their luxurious foreign merchandise and to various western consulates operating in proximity. Is it the availability of the sole Greek newspaper sold in Cairo and that El Kordi, in *Proud Beggars*, buys? The purchase of a paper he can’t read is justified because someone else, who could have read it, is now being deprived of that opportunity. This someone else is an *other* as much for his potential *foreignness* as for his education, his *literacy*—both descriptors capable of referring to an Egyptian or to a non-Egyptian in this European city within Cairo.

Cossery's analysis and project are based on a colonial logic that he refuses to isolate into reified categories of colonizer and colonized. By reading Egyptian reality in its interconnectedness—Cairo will eventually resemble New York and not Algiers in Cossery's novels—Cossery is setting up a poetics of revolution. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon looks closely at the opposition between the colonial European city and the neighborhoods abandoned to the local autochthones:

The 'native' sector is not complementary to the European sector. The two confront each other, but not in the service of a higher unity. Governed by a purely Aristotelian logic, they follow the dictates of mutual exclusion: There is no conciliation possible, one of them is superfluous. The colonist's sector is a sector built to last, all stone and steel. It's a sector of lights and paved roads, where the trashcans constantly overflow with strange and wonderful garbage, undreamed-of leftovers. The colonist's feet can never be glimpsed, except perhaps in the sea, but then you can never get close enough. They are protected by solid shoes in a sector where the streets are clean and smooth, without a pothole, without a stone. The colonist's sector is a sated, sluggish sector, its belly is permanently full of good things. The colonist's sector is a white folks' sector, a sector of foreigners (4).

In contrast, the indigenous city Fanon describes appears as a world where bodies are stacked in small-overcrowded quarters. The Fanonian desire for violent revolt is born in this doubly occupied Manichean space of the urban center. In *Men God Forgot*, published some twenty-five years before the Fanon text, Cossery presents a dissimilar image of opposition. The difference is Cossery's European city within Cairo appears as an expansive and endless entity, slowly taking over everything that comes in contact with its universalizing logic. Nothing can escape the slow march of progress exclaim the Cossarian modern revolutionaries. Against this *marche en avant*, a new logic, different and differently posited, must confront the rapacious nature of the globalizing European city, the "glutted monster" that "devoured all" and "spread with a constant rage" (67-68). Against the satiated European monster who, having claimed everything as its own, continues in its unstoppable devouring rage; against the bored and jobless whores along

modernity's tall buildings, Cossery, as if following the contours of the lascivious empty embrace between bodies and concrete, between doubt and the fulfillment of mediocre desires, proposes a revolutionary program that challenges the poor/rich dichotomy and collapses the decolonizing agenda under the larger question of modernity's role in neocolonial liberal societies. Cossery's revolutionary program is espoused and enacted by the various anti-heroes, marginal bohemians, and *saltimbanques*.³² The first aspect of Cossery's poetics of revolution is his revolutionary poetics, his inventiveness and creation of a new language.

Cossery's aesthetic project intertwines Arabic oral vernacular and written French. As a challenge to historical singularity and cultural homogeneity, Cossery's Arabic-French shifting language can be described as what Khatibi will call the *bi-langue*—here an encounter of spoken/written Arabic diglossia and written French given without a hierarchical division; a shifting language that challenges political centrality and codified authority by giving voice to an endless multiplication of marginality and marginal characters.

Cossery does not consider the paradox of French-speaking Egyptians an aberration; rather than *tell* the history of this Arabic-French mixity, reducing it to linear historiography, he brings together oral and written traditions in a playful inventive *bi-langue* of constant translation. Cossery's characters and topoï are recognizably Arab. They act as markers of an otherness unaware of its otherness: Egyptians, first-, second-, and third-rate citizens alike, beggars and philosophers, lazy land owners, kite makers, and prostitutes, together, speaking French and contemplating derision as a subversive philosophy. The Arabic-French Cosserian texts bring into life a language rich in its onomastic diversity, in its referential plurality, and in its cultural mobility.³³ The syntax and modes of address, the vulgarity and idiomatic expressions, and the

use of the informal you ('tu') give the Cossarian universe a unique blend of characters, who feel in a language and think and speak in another:

“Que dis-tu ? Fils de chien ! Une lettre pour moi ? Quel est donc ce maquereau qui s’amuse à m’écrire ? tu peux garder ta sale lettre ou la donner à ta mère, je n’en veux pas. Tu te moques de moi, facteur du diable !” [...]

“Par Allah ! Hanafi mon frère, je ne me moque pas de toi ! C’est bien une lettre à ton nom, et une lettre recommandée encore.”

“Je n’en veux pas, te dis-je, fils de chien ! Une lettre recommandée ; elle n’est sûrement pas à moi” (*Oeuvres Complètes I*, 213).

In “The Postman Gets His Own Back,” the transposition of vernacular Egyptian into written French gives the text a distinct sonority and rhythm forcing the reader into a constant movement between languages. Situated as a bridge between written French and spoken and written Arabic’s uneven diglossia, Cossery’s writing is a *bi-langue* that gives face and voice to donkey drivers swearing in Egyptian dialect with French words, and to hashish-smoking shop owners mocking postal workers in vernacular Arabic written in French. But whereas bridges have construction sites and deadlines, the *bi-langue* is a practice of constant translation dismantled by irony and derision; whereas bridges enter into an economy of traffic regulations mandating certain behaviors and forbidding others, Cossery’s *bi-langue* is inherently transgressive because it bypasses the production of meaning, the writer-reader contract.³⁴ Cossery’s *bi-langue* is not a connector between two message-carrying identities. It is not the site of an encounter of exchanged rhetoric or grammatical forms. It is, rather, the expression of a multiplicity that is multiple from within: multiplicity as a starting point, as an always already multiple. Within this linguistic and cultural architecture, textual windows are opened to allow for the emergence of a representation of this singularized multiple. The dialogic imagination is opened up to a heteroglossia, giving a new dimension to the meaning of inter-textuality. When moments of singularity surface in Cossery’s texts (in encounters with authority, with secular or

religious orthodoxy) the confrontation with the multiple is never acted out. The multiple allows and desires those moments of singularity in order to remain clearly other. It is the traditionalist or modern revolutionaries who hope to destroy political singularity with their own brand of singularity. The first aspect of the Cossierian revolutionary program is the necessity for an artistic creative exploration of revolution through a new language, a *bi-langue*, with its own set of rules.

In one of the most memorable scenes of confrontation, Nour El Dine (Light of The Faith), the police detective in *Proud Beggars*, as the authority figure of a singularity to be confronted by multiplicity—by marginal characters, by linguistic mixity, by cultural indeterminacy—is at a whorehouse for a murder investigation. Confronting the strangeness and seeming gratuity of the prostitute’s murder, the police detective meets El Kordi (The Kurd), a frequenter of the establishment, who shows up to check on a girl he has vowed to save. During their first short exchange, in a scene of seduction, the detective notices El Kordi’s “masculine beauty” and the “exoticism of his bridled eyes,” and suddenly starts speaking English. The conversation, continuing in English, causes the bewilderment of everyone present at the scene as well as the bewilderment of the reader. Irreverent of political and religious codes, located outside official structures, the unstable Cossierian topo-phonie is shifting, seamlessly moving across names and places, across code-switching and language games.

It was the Moroccan writer, Khatibi, in *Love in Two Languages* who had, in a textual and graphically marked opposition, confronted the spacing between words and languages, opposing Arabic and French in a quarrel of lovers: two characters, a bilingual Arabic-French Speaker (un Récitant bilingue) and a foreign French woman. A poetic exploration of the possibilities of self and other outlined in linguistic demarcations, the text makes visible Arabic words in the French therefore reflecting the situation of the bilingual speaker practice of the *bi-langue*. A form of

constant translation, the *bi-langue* is a simultaneous speaking of the multiple. In this translation from “language to language, an event appears then disappears, a unique event [. . .] that we call *bi-langue*, [it is] the otherness of thought as it affirms and denies itself in the act of translation” (*Amour Bilingue*, 76, translation mine). As a distorted and continuously stretched *bi-langue*, Khatibi imagines a language that is built on the border of two bodies of water reminiscent of what Timothy Reiss sees when he describes “Cultural categories [that] mingle and float. ‘Borders’ are more than just porous” (Reiss, 651). Shifting and mixing constantly, the *bi-langue* is an ongoing, living and breathing translation. The underlining duality is given life and, in its newly found mobility, is capable of engaging other influxes such as Spanish and Tamazight. In the same vein, Cossery’s *bi-langue* is a constant back and forth, subtle and shifting, between written French and spoken Egyptian dialect.

To a French reader, Cossery’s texts are familiarly French and still foreign. They are foreign because of their self-marking as foreign through their sonority, rhythm, and code-switching; they are also foreign because they are not entirely decipherable on the symbolic level. Dominique Combe refers to Cossery and to the “omnipresence of an Arab theme that is rare in francophone Egyptian literature [and which] heightens the urgency of the question of the relationship between language and culture” (Combe, 213). The intricate relationships at stake are multiplied, as the shifting between the Arabic and French codes moves along unmarked zones of contact.

Because the textual demarcation, the line between self and other—between what is actually French and what is Arabic transposed into French; between, of the French or of the Arabic, which one is self and which one is other—is not clearly indicated nor seems to suppose that such an indication as possible or desirable, the reader is unsure what cultural code(s) to use

while reading the texts. A case in point is in the opening pages of *The Lazy Ones*. There, we briefly meet Antar, a street boy, a vagabond “working,” using a sling to hunt birds hiding in a tree:

His head was tilted backwards, his mouth open, his whole face shining with a strange excitement. The stone whistled by as it left the sling, getting lost in the sycamore’s branches. The birds in a fit of frightfulness took flight as one. A missed shot. [...] He was ten or so, wide-eyed and filled with ardor, he looked like some precocious assassin. He was dressed in tatters and seemed to have come a long ways for on his body he wore marks from his adventures (*Oeuvres Complètes II*, 9).

Holding this ancient weapon, his origin unknown, his body a hieroglyph, is he the same Antar, one wonders, as the pre-Islamic warrior whose name is forever inscribed in epic poetry? Or are we to read this sling as the signifier of a hidden dichotomy, a conflict of biblical proportions traced back to a different history, to history as historiography, to David and Goliath, to the becoming of a tribe into a nation. The uncertainty of the symbolic code with which to read the text is further destabilized as the hunt for food is unsuccessful and the young boy’s hunger remains. When the main protagonist, Serag, asks for the boy’s name, he finds the “name too ostensible and inadequate for how he wished to remember the child” (27). The reader is doubly challenged: he is to translate constantly a cultural space and reassess the validity of cultural translation as a meaningful practice.

This is the key component of Cossery’s poetics. The deployment of the *bi-langue*—where modernity-as-progress is questioned on the basis of its cultural homogeneity and linguistic singularity—is confronted with an invitation to question the very practice of constant translation. The need and call for constant translation is not held up as a positive philosophy or as a liberating practice. It is not a consolidated *métissage*; nor is it *hybridity*; rather, this constant translation is an exploration of a paradox: can the heterogeneous be meaningful without being encoded by a singular predetermined meaning? Can the multiplicity of languages

and symbols be understood without being explicated? Constant translation, or *bi-langue*, is at once a textual and cultural practice and a questioning of that practice.

This *bi-langue* is marked by a derision and irony foreign to latter movements of anti-colonial positivism. Cosserian texts develop a highly volatile space of linguistic and cultural pluralities that work against modernity-as-progress' dialectic. Working outside essentialist notions of identity through derision and irony, Cossery's *bi-langue* predates yet goes beyond peripheral expressions of anti-coloniality.³⁵

For Cossery, a true revolution is not only a matter of formal resistance through a new grammar, a bi-langue of constant translation. As an ideology, the globalized market economy, or what I call modernity-as-progress, is challenged by a *mise en scène* of texts and textuality in a circular economy of pleasure. Presented as avatars of the 'serious' and of the 'political,' all forms of writing (missives, letters, poems, news clippings, posters, contracts, etc.) are thematically represented as *loci* where modernity-as-progress is challenged.

The instability and shifting between multiple languages and multiple symbolic codes within the texts move beyond the realm of the dialogue, infiltrating the narratives and therefore blurring the narrators' positions. While Cossery's novels remain surprisingly readable, the reader rarely receives any help, explanations, or hints from the narrators. The narrative points of view constantly change in the Cosserian texts (from homo to hetero-diegetic) and further destabilize the reader's ability to decode both the *langue* (Arabic or French) of the *bi-langue* and its point of view (who is narrating the story).

The shifts in points of view are compounded by palpable changes in the narrators' voices. The moving back and forth between narration in the past and narration in the present acts as a constant teasing of the written by the oral. The use of the present as a narrative tense

accentuates the Arabic sonority of the texts and the orality that inhabits them. By shifting to the present, the narrator embraces the role of the storyteller and of Arab oral folklore and poetry traditions and in so doing takes on different assigned or non-assigned roles within the text. In *Sociologie de l'Algérie*, Pierre Bourdieu reminds us that “tradition is communicated by the elders mainly in oral traditions, tales, legends, poetry, songs, all through which an intricate network of values is transmitted” and encapsulates and inspires the people (Bourdieu, 85). The narration in Cossery’s short stories and novels is taken over by a storyteller-narrator who belongs to the universe and to the codes he is telling. The moving between past and present acts as a destabilizing force, a vibration that resonates as vibration.³⁶ This movement between narration in the past and narration in the present is often unmediated and unpredictable as the narrator of *The House of A Certain Death* moves seamlessly between the two:

He rose. The street performer with a monkey also rose. In the alley, the children were singing an obscene song.

Later, close to nighttime, a child began to scream in the courtyard as Si Khalil walked to the house. [. . .] Heavily breathing and raging, Si Khalil stops in front of the porte-cochère. A few children pretend to play in the alley. Si Khalil keeps a suspicious eye on them. He puts nothing above them. But their apparent indifference calms him. He begins to ring his bicycle bell. And then he calls out by name some of the house residents (*Oeuvres Complètes I*, 405).

This constant incursion into a present of narration, into the oral, is an incursion into the reader’s present. In these stories told by Cossery’s storytelling narrators, the readers are confronted by a dilution of temporality’s usual markers as pre and post. The openness of the present, at once immediate and resistant, is all the more palpable as hashish smoke rises from the pages of these short stories and novels. As *Negotium* gives way to *Otium*, as work is abandoned in favor of idleness, as modernity-as-progress gives way to a timeless present, Cossery’s entire project of dismantling reified categories, even those of revolt and opposition, takes shape. Asking what a timeless time would look like, Cossery’s characters and storytellers

“would surely say: ‘time is our form of abundance; all else is accounted for. Give us our vacant time, a brotherly expanse where a moment’s ‘kif’ endlessly reverberates’” (Georges Henein, 4).

Indeed, this ‘moment’s kif’ clearly highlights the value of present time emptied and dilated. Emptied not because it has been made nonproductive but because its product is the art of full presence, of spending time as time, of marginality as a site in its own right. Time is rarely more than repeated time in Cossery’s stories. In the repetition of the quotidian, in the dissolution of seasons and other time markers, in the short discourse time of the stories, a few days at most in *The House of a Certain Death*, much more is happening besides the passing of time. It is the spending of time, the fullness of that economy that is being offered in its dilation, stretched out to accommodate pleasure-seeking characters. This dilation can also be observed in terms of narrative anachrony.

The plot/story doubly opens every narration to possible prolepses or analepses. The Cossarian narratives are rarely outside the present of the main storyline. When narrative anachrony does occur, the distance between the present of the main storyline and that of the secondary storyline is short and of a small amplitude.

When Gohar, the anti-hero of *Proud Beggars*, first awakens in the opening lines of the novel, having slept on a bed of used (foreign) newspapers, and decides to go search for his friend and hashish provider Yéghen, he comes across a homeless man who tells him the following story:

“Haven’t you heard the election story?”

“No. I never read the newspapers.”

“This one wasn’t in the papers. Someone told it to me.”

“Ok then. Go ahead.”

“So, you see, this happened a while back in a small village in Lower-Egypt during mayoral elections. When government employees opened the urns to count the votes,

they quickly saw that the majority of the votes went to Barghout. They didn't recognize that name; he wasn't listed by any of the political parties. Shaken, they started an investigation and were shocked to find out that Barghout was the name of a Donkey very well respected in that village for his wisdom. Practically every inhabitant of the village had voted for this Donkey. So, what do you think of this story?"

"Amazing!" said Gohar. "And how does the story end?"

"Surely, he wasn't elected mayor. Can you imagine, a four-legged Donkey? What they wanted, the powers that be, was a two-legged Donkey (*Oeuvres Complètes I*, 17).

The story takes place a "while back" in some unidentified village in remote Lower Egypt. We don't know the when or the where of the story and neither does Gohar. He doesn't ask and seems not to care about these details. What matters is the telling of the tale. As this secondary story doesn't affect the main storyline, what strikes me in this seeming gratuity is the recurrent image of dilation and duration of the present. The story told by this beggar does not belong to any identifiable chronology. It didn't appear in any papers and is not part of official dated time. Told as a *nukta*, as an Arab joke, the actual occurrence of the event is in itself debatable.

In these dilated presents, Cossarian characters, philosophizing idlers resemble Gohar, a proud beggar who once had a university teaching position that he quit because of the imposturous claims of politicized geography and history. This irreverent attitude of derision is all the more palpable in Cossery's treatment of the 'written' as a category of modernity-as-progress. We have seen that the stories the characters tell each other are outside of written time and belong to the unmarked present of the characters' voice.

In a similar vein, the various representations of the 'written' are at once dismantled and derided as imposturous expressions of a certain kind of modernity, of modernity-as-progress's post offices and schedules, its tram time-tables, its offering of daily papers in a variety of foreign languages. Confronted with this version of modernity, Cossery turns the papers into

sleeping cushions for Gohar, makes the tram conductor a hashish fiend with no allegiance to any time but smoking time, and ridicules the postal worker who is made to deliver registered mail sent by an illiterate to another illiterate. In all of these instances, there is no actual opposition or confrontation. These moves alongside representations of the ‘written’ are in line with the Cossarian posture against modernity-as-progress: the destabilizing effects of a linguistic and cultural *bi-langue* dismissive of its own project; the paradox of the multiplicity of marginal characters and of marginalities as a possible singularity; the disavowal of (manufacturing) (an) economy through the various textual economies of pleasure dilated in a discursive ipseity of *here* and *now*; the unreliable narrative voices as they move about the texts while constantly shifting the point of view, in the process, create an emptied space where the blind spots are authority figures to be ridiculed.

Moves alongside the representations of the ‘written’ are textual moments when various characters are involved with any piece of writing. As mentioned earlier, the pieces of writing take on many forms. There are circulating and non-circulating letters; dithyrambic posters with the picture of the local governor; poems recited in prison cells to illiterate yet appreciative convicts . . . These moments of involvement with a form of the written crystallize the derisive elements of Cossery’s philosophy that claims paradox *as* a philosophy.

Cossery’s first short story, “The Postman Gets His Own Back,” is the tale of Zouba, a somewhat ridiculous postal worker who, being the only literate character in the story, believes in a higher calling. His divine mission is to educate the spiritually inferior Hanafi the ironer for whom he is carrying a registered letter. We immediately find ourselves overwhelmed by heat and looking at Zouba who just stopped in a neighborhood that has a street named “The Pregnant Woman” (*Men God Forgot*, 19). Hanafi, asleep in his empty shop, is finding it hard

to come out of his slumber. Is he sober or has he been smoking? The text never says but we are told that his shop is the meeting place for hashish smokers. Once the postal worker states his case and his business, the story slowly disintegrates in the trails of the disintegrating ethical value of the letter.

Zouba is the only literate character present at the scene. However, he has a “difficult time deciphering” the contents of the letter raising serious questions of narrative reliability. This letter was sent by the butcher, himself an illiterate who had hired “a public writer” to write this long “litany of insults.” Hanafi, the recipient of the letter, is illiterate and cannot verify any of the above-mentioned information. On every contextual level possible, the validity of the text is being questioned. The basic question of *who wrote what* cannot be answered in any degree of certainty. Furthermore, the said contents of the letter are insults and accusations followed by a threat: if Hanafi doesn’t pay back to the butcher what he owes, the shop contents will be seized. This threat is meaningless because of the fact that the shop is already empty, which Hanafi diligently states to Zouba. The only value of his shop comes from it being an empty space where hash can be smoked.

Contextually and textually the letter is denied on its own terms, on its own claims of authorship and authority.³⁷ It appears that it is the letter as a written text that operates as a marginalizing force. It marginalizes the institution it represents. The State, the postal system, by showing an ongoing belief in the written trace, in a form of communication recognizable as such, they are in effect isolating themselves to a conversation among themselves: the public writer would be insulting the postal worker in the name of a butcher and an ironer. The letter also operates as a marginalizing force as it deploys itself as opacity, as an alterity, indecipherable to itself. The postal worker’s difficulty in reading the letter highlights the

improbable truth: the margin is the center. Modernity-as-progress, veiled in education reforms and literacy projects, constitutes a force of self-marginalization. Otherness is programmed by the center for the center.³⁸ Hanafi is outside such considerations.

Indeed, the letter as a system of writing is at once unreliable, opaque, and marginalizing, and yet it becomes something more when Cossery makes it a registered letter. There are two main differences: the stamp price is higher for registered mail and the delivery requires a signature turning the letter into a contractual exchange. When it comes time to sign the receipt of the letter, “after an dumbing discussion that lasted close to a quarter of an hour,” Hanafi “was induced to scrawl a sort of inverted pyramid” as he contemplates how “with such a signature he bugged the administration, this great and proud administration” (22). The inverted pyramid brings immediately into play a cultural self-referentiality. However, it is its inversion that allows the passage to irony. The scribble here accentuates Cossery’s own penmanship. From behind the characters, beyond the symbolic representation, the author’s activity is given a mimicking presence. Cossery-Hanafi are scribbling some incoherent sign and in their signature, they are pointing to the incongruence of the situation: the signature which is to patent authorship is inverted and attached to a meaningless contract written in a indecipherable language.

The necessity of the signature, or, for Cossery, of writing, breathes in a world of active paradoxes. The questions asked to the letter of the short story can be directed to Cossery himself. What public is he addressing? Who is he writing for? Who can decipher this *bi-langue* he is writing? How can we buy into his project if authorship is itself questionable?

These questions echo Emily Apter’s.³⁹ As she looks for a language of “rhetorical parity” Cossery proposes a parity within a linguistic mutiplicity inscribed in its impossibility.

By writing the seams of the multiple, Cossery is also highlighting the process. Cossery's writing process, from his first short story on, is the process of writing multiplicity and in it, giving voice to the impossibility of a written multiple. The seams of the multiple, once written, become part of a larger body of seams. The necessary singularity of the written text, of the written, is being challenged from within the text itself. As constant translation dissolves into questions of authorship we are at last facing a modernity that has lost its faith in progress. Incapable of faith in the written, unsure of its own programmatic project, Cossery's oeuvre is a long meditation on finding a sustainable position within the "epochal crisis" that is at once local and universal, at once singular and multiple.

For Cossery, the sustainable position within "the epochal crisis" and against the globalized market relationships of dominion is necessarily marginal and individualized.⁴⁰ Albert Cossery, who spent sixty years living in the same hotel room in Paris, has always been a marginal figure himself, resisting the temptation to join any movement or group.⁴¹ In 1941, Marie Cavadia, an Egyptian surrealist poet friend of Jabès, writes that Cossery's short stories should be read as "manual[s] of morality." In 1945, the left-wing politically militant Editions Charlot, who had set up shop in Paris, publishes the second edition of Cossery's short stories. In 1947, a year after Circle Editions publishes a translation of Cossery's short stories, Henry Miller describes them as a "terrible breviary."⁴² The same year, in Caresse Crosby's *Portfolio*—a review attached to the famous avant-garde publishing house Black Sun Press of Joyce, Hemingway, Miller, D.H Lawrence, etc.—another of Cossery's texts is published. From 1936 until 1947, various aesthetic and political artists and intellectuals wanting to see militant nationalism in his texts were laying claim to Cossery's work. But Cossery remained uninterested in militant or revolutionary ideals. He was true to his work. His philosophy of

non-confrontation—on the grounds that confrontation *is always already* authored by a singular authority—is carried out in his own life.

As I interrogate the significance, reach, and ultimately the reality of the current Egyptian revolution, I cannot help wondering how Cossery would have reacted. Would he have put aside his revolutionary ideas and embraced the apparent change, even if that change still danced and twirled around the same power axis? Would he have pointed to the rhetoric of revolution heard over radio waves and read in the papers and exclaimed: “the universal imposture is claiming another victory—this particular one is highly orchestrated by all sides, from within and from without.” Can Cossery’s revolutionary poetics of a poetics of revolution exist outside his fictional narratives? Can the Cosseryan dilated present, a system of exchanges outside mercantilism, be implemented in Egyptian modern society? Can contestation exist without binary opposition? Cossery’s texts are a repeated meditation on linguistic and cultural marginality and their possible significance in a world who believes in modernity-as-progress. The lines he draws are not between the colonizer and the colonized; nor are they between masters and slaves. The lines he scribbles are between the ‘serious’ activities of all forms of singularities (including writing itself) and the derision with which these activities must be met. Whereas postcolonial sites mark the exchanges, inversions, and dismantlings of colonial narratives, Cossery’s writing marks inversions, exchanges, and dichotomies as sites of contestable validity. The viability of Cosseryan revolution needs to be closely examined through his revolutionaries’ creative forms of resistance. Only then could our contestation be liberated from old binary categories and perhaps, in the process, disempower power relationships in a manner not so dissimilar from Teymour: buying a fake diploma in Paris;

using it as a relic with which to impress Egyptian custom agents, the guardians of Egyptian borders; dismissing it as a fake and never claiming its validity (*A Splendid Conspiracy*, 5).

¹ For Cossery's *Les Hommes Oubliés de Dieu* (1941), *La Violence et la derision* (1964), and *Un Complot de Saltimbanques* (1975), I will be using the following translations: *Men God Forgot* (trans. Harold Edwards, *Circle Editions*, 1946), *The Jokers* (trans. Anna Moschovakis, *New York Review of Books*, 2010), and *A Splendid Conspiracy* (trans. Alyson Waters, *New Directions*, 2010). Unless otherwise marked, all other Cossery translations are mine and are taken from his *Oeuvres Complètes I* and *Oeuvres Complètes II* (Paris: Losfeld, 2005).

² Kadhim Jihad Hassan, *Le Roman arabe 1834–2004* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2006).

³ “But the two primary subjects of *Zainab*'s critique – the hardships and injustice of peasant life and the social conventions of sexual relationships as they pertain to issues of love, marriage and the status of women – enhance the modern orientation of the novel and help to situate it firmly within an emerging trend of liberal nationalist thought embodied by the Umma Party [...]” Jeff Shalan, “Writing the Nation: The Emergence of Egypt in the Modern Arabic Novel.” *Journal of Arabic Literature*. 33.3 (2002): 221.

⁴ <http://www.rue89.com/2011/02/11/place-tahrir-au-caire-il-traine-dans-lair-un-parfum-de-victoire-190108> (Translation mine).

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12393795> (Italics mine).

⁶ Whereas Achille Mbembe's *On The Postcolony* explores the multiple trajectories and forms of Cameroonian and African resistance against the banality of power or what he calls the colonial and postcolonial “commandement” using such categories as the obscene and the grotesque, the objective of this paper has a more modest scope, as it attempts to deconstruct various revolutionary projects in Cossery's Egypt. His analysis can provide some answers to the current Egyptian revolution and perhaps, in the process, reveal some inherent characteristics of postcolonial power structures. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Los Angeles: UC Press, 2001).

⁷ Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 189.

⁸ Albert Cossery never mastered the Arabic language and was unable, after a few years in Paris, to read Arabic newspapers. The diglossia opposing his spoken Egyptian vernacular and his inability to read and write Arabic is a haunting backdrop to his creative incorporation of spoken Arabic in his French language novels.

⁹ Miller, Henry. “The Novels of Albert Cossery.” *Accent* (1945).

¹⁰ Young, *Postcolonialism*, 318-319.

¹¹ “Nasser's revolution in 1952 against a compliant monarchy had therefore been long in coming. It was relatively slow in evolving: directly influenced by Gandhi's non violence, Nasser refused to authorize the execution of King Farouk on the grounds that ‘a revolution born of blood will die in blood.’” *Ibid.*, 189. The interconnectedness of anti-colonial resistance models suggests that colonialism not only shared similar traits in its rule, but that its corollary anti-colonial resistance developed within those similarities. If Egypt “had been independent since 1922... [it] had long been the emblem of anti-colonial resistance.” *Ibid.*, 188-189.

¹² This idea still has its proponents today. In his new book, *The Age of Deception*, Mohamed ElBaradei, former UN Chief Nuclear inspector, speaking about American foreign policy and its domestic elaboration and political justification, insists on the dangers of thinking that deception is limited to tyrannical regimes and dictatorial states. ElBaradei, *The Age of Deception: Nuclear Diplomacy in Treacherous Times* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2011).

¹³ “Entretien avec Albert Cossery,” *L'Oeil-De-Boeuf*, 7, (Paris: Librairie l'Etourdi, 1995); see also *Conversation avec Albert Cossery*, (Paris: Losfeld, 1984).

¹⁴ In “Cogito et l'histoire de la folie,” Derrida insists that the critique of European idea(l)s and Reason can only be made from within the same idea(l)s and Reason: “Anti-colonial revolution can only free itself from empirical Europe and West in the name of transcendental Europe, that is Reason, and by first allowing itself to be taken over [en se laissant gagner] by Western values, language, sciences, techniques, weapons; a contamination and an irreducible incoherence that no cry – I am thinking of Fanon's – can exorcise, however pure and intransigent it may be.” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 4 (1963): 466.

¹⁵ Homi Bhabha, confronting the intersections of decolonization and globalization, in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* asks: “‘The colonized, underdeveloped man is today a political creature in the most global sense of the term,’ Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, and it is my purpose, almost half a century later, to ask what might be saved from Fanon’s ethics and politics of decolonization to help us reflect on globalization in our sense of the term.” (New York: Grove Press, 2004), xi.

¹⁶ “In a sense, only a single drama is ever staged in this ‘non-place,’ the endlessly repeated play of dominations ... This relationship of domination is no more a ‘relationship’ than the place where it occurs is a place.” Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 85.

¹⁷ “people” in the text.

¹⁸ “Here in Egypt, there isn’t a better moral handbook than *Men God Forgot*. One must immerse his consciousness in human suffering unafraid to soil himself in the process. Later, you will be judged by your reactions to this spectacle. If you are a coward, you will flee to other greener pastures; sensitive, you will shed a few tears before forgetting all of it; cynical, you will laugh ferociously; but if you are real men, you will tenaciously consider the suffering of your brethren so pathetically told in Cossery’s book and, in solidarity of words and action, you will strive with them to end this shameful reality.” Marie Cavadia, *La Revue du Caire* (Cairo, April 30, 1941): 214-215 (Translation mine).

¹⁹ [Cossery] writes exclusively about the unalleviated misery of the masses; about the little men, the forgotten men – men, women and children I should say – forgotten of God. No living writer that I know of describes more poignantly and implacably the lives of the vast submerged multitude of mankind. He touches depths of despair, degradation and resignation which neither Gorky nor Dostoevsky has registered. He is dealing, of course, with his own people, whose misery began before Western civilization was dreamed of. Despite seemingly unrelieved gloom and futility in which his figures move, the author nevertheless expresses in every work his indomitable faith in the power of the people to throw off the yoke. Usually this hope is voiced by one of the characters apparently without hope. It is not a shout which is given forth but a quiet, determined affirmation – like the sudden appearance of a bud in the darkest hour of the night. Henry Miller. “The Novels of Albert Cossery” *Accent*, (New York, 1945).

²⁰ One could argue, alongside Foucault, that when people revolt, it “is enough that they exist and that they have against them everything that is dead set on shutting them up for there to be a sense in listening to them and in seeing what they mean to say.” “Useless to Revolt?” in James Faubian, ed. *Michel Foucault: Power* (New York Press: 2000), 452.

²¹ The fullness of such a contradiction takes on its full measure as we consider that anti-colonial bourgeois nationalism “accepted the very intellectual premises of ‘modernity’ upon which colonial domination was based” (Chatterjee, 30). “The difficulty,” Trouillot argues, “in achieving [a] global perspective may be the Achilles heel of postcoloniality” Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Perspective of the World: Globalization Then and Now,” in *Beyond Dichotomies*, Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, ed., (NY : Suny Press, 2002), 17.

²² Fanon’s Third World collaborating vision would have been shocked back to its senses while reading the recent L.A. Times article about Khadafi’s assets: “The case is a cautionary tale about the limits of sanctions as a tool of foreign policy. It recalls former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein’s successful efforts to circumvent international sanctions, as well as Iran’s apparent ability to defy United Nations resolutions by leveraging trade ties to Third World allies. Several countries that have developed strong economic ties to Libya, including Turkey and Kenya, along with several other African nations, have balked at carrying out the freeze, which was mandated by U.N. Security Council resolutions in February and March, the officials said,” *L.A. Times* (April 24, 2011).

²³ For a thorough analysis on the economic and political constitution of (post)colonial societies see Samir Amin’s *Imperialism and Unequal Exchange* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1976); Giovanni Arrighi’s *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994); and Robert Young’s *Postcolonialisms: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).

²⁴ Fanon’s analysis of colonial struggle and decolonization can be read as an exploration of Cosseryan revolutionary dead-ends. Whereas Cossery did not foresee or believe in the Fanonian idea of “Third World” collaboration, his vision of a globalized market economy as a continuation of colonial rule remains problematic in *The Wretched of the Earth*: “In the colonial context the colonists only quits undermining the colonized one the latter have proclaimed loud and clear that white values reign supreme. [...] During the period of liberation, however, the colonialist bourgeoisie frantically seeks contact with the colonized ‘elite.’ It is with this elite that the famous dialogue on values is established. When the colonialist bourgeoisie realizes it is impossible to maintain its domination over the colonies it decides to wage a rearguard campaign in the fields of culture, values and technology, etc” (8-9).

²⁵ “The Sunni uprising – as ferocious as the Algerian war or Iraq, regime party families slaughtered in their homes – was real enough. So was the brutality of Rifaat’s lads. Up to 20,000 souls were reported killed in the streets and underground tunnels of Hama.” Robert Frisk, “Freedom, democracy and human rights in Syria,” *The Independent*, September 16, 2010.

²⁶ Jacques Donzelot. “The Poverty of Political Culture.” *Ideology & Consciousness* 5 (1979): 73-86.

²⁷ “If you took the most ardent revolutionary, vested him in absolute power, within a year he would be worse than the Tsar himself.” Daniel Guerin. *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (1970): 25-26. For a thorough exposition of the Anarchist revolutionary project, see “Letter to Albert Richard,” in *Bakunin on Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 2002): 177-182.

²⁸ Gordon argues that Foucault’s analysis of power moves from a micro to a macro level: “The same style of analysis [...] that had been used to study techniques and practices addressed to individual human subjects within particular, local institutions could also be addressed to techniques and practices for governing populations of subjects at the level of a political sovereignty over an entire society,” *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991): 7

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

³⁰ “It is as though power, which used to have sovereignty as its modality or organizing schema, found itself unable to govern the economic and political body of a society that was undergoing both a demographic explosion and industrialization. So much so that far too many things were escaping the old mechanisms of the power of sovereignty, both at the top and at the bottom, both at the level of detail and at the mass level.” Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (New York: Picador, 2003): 249.

³¹ Jacques Donzelot, “La Ville à trois vitesses: relégation, périurbanisation, gentrification,” *Esprit* 303 (Paris, 2004).

³² *Un Complot de Saltimbanques* was first published in 1975.

³³ It is important to mention Ramsès Yunan who explored Arabic linguistic limits in Arabic aiming to question and subvert the cultural assumptions associated with the Arabic language: “Ramsès Yunan a livré l’ensemble de son expérience en langue arabe, à une époque où l’expression dans les langues de l’Occident pouvait sembler fournir un ‘raccourci’ commode vers l’universel, alors que ce dont il s’agissait, c’était précisément de forger dans la langue arabe un vocabulaire des limites, apte à exprimer certaines subversions de la culture dont les surréalistes, après Rimbaud, s’étaient fait une spécialité.” *Entre Nil et Sable*, (Paris: CNDP, 1999): 269.

³⁴ “For an utterance to provide this information, however, it is necessary that the grammar according to which the utterance is constructed have the means to convey both kinds of knowledge, informational and metainformational. It follows that the structure of the linguistic code itself must contain unambiguous mechanisms for conveying metainformational knowledge. These mechanisms are legitimate objects of the study of verbal communication: they are regular, for otherwise the addressee would not be able to decode them; their existence is universal in the sense that every grammar, in order to serve effectively for communication, must have them; and the ability to use them is part of what can be called ‘communicational competence.’” Olga Tsuneko Yokoyama, *Discourse and Word Order*. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 149.

³⁵ Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* was published in 1952 while Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* is dated 1955.

³⁶ “L’énonciateur n’est pas un point d’origine stable qui ‘s’exprimerait’ de telle ou telle manière, mais il est pris dans un cadre foncièrement interactif, une institution discursive inscrite dans une certaine configuration culturelle et qui implique des rôles, des lieux et des moments d’énonciation légitimes, un support matériel et un mode de circulation pour l’énoncé.” Charnay, Jean Paul, Jacques Berque, and Pierre Alexandre, *L’Ambivalence dans la culture arabe*, (Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1967).

³⁷ See Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988).

³⁸ This is very similar to the process described by Holden: “Theory thus allows individuals cut off from any effective social action and buoyed by their security as academic professionals to claim solidarity with the disenfranchised. This alienation from real powerlessness (the academic Marxist’s guilt vis-à-vis the worker) can then be compensated for by a posture of powerlessness vis-à-vis representation. But even this strategy sometimes fails. The critic must then self-fashion him/herself through imaginary marginalization” Holden, Philip Joseph, “Between Modernization and Modernism: Community and Contradiction in the Paracolonial Short Story,” *Philippine Studies* 55.3 (2007): 330.

³⁹ Emily Apter, “French Colonial Studies and Postcolonial Theory,” *SubStance* 76/77 (1995): 169-180.

⁴⁰ The term 'epochal crisis' is analyzed in the larger context of postcolonial theory and its relationship to progress in Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism,'" *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 84-98.

⁴¹ For more bibliographical information see Jean-Jacques Luthi. *Introduction à la littérature d'expression française en Egypte* (Paris : Edition de l'Ecole, 1974) and *Anthologie de la poésie francophone d'Egypte* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002); Robert Jouanny, *Espaces francophones de France et d'Europe* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 1996); *Entre Nil et sable: Ecrivains d'Egypte d'expression française (1920-1960)*, Kober, Marc, Irène Fenoglio and Daniel Lançon, (Paris: CNDP, 1999).

⁴² "This terrible breviary, dispatched to us from Alexandria by Lawrence Durrell, is composed of five short stories, one for each season and an extra for the season of poverty, misery and filth, which in Egypt never ends. [...] In the world which these unfortunates inhabit, everything has been taken except the indulgence in fantasy. This power of fantasy rises like a phoenix from the ashes of misery; it becomes sometimes a fat golden hen with the lascivious appeal of a naked woman. It stirs the reproductive organs, populates the sleep of the dead, keeps the soul riveted to the edge of madness. This incurable vice is the last solace of the unredeemed. It gives to the figures in this book an element of poetry which is missing in our Western stories where sociology masquerades as realism. Cossery is closer to Dostoievsky than to Caldwell or Faulkner" (Circle Editions, Vol. 8, 1947).

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