

INTRODUCTION

PROUD BEGGARS was the third of seven novels written by Egyptian-born Albert Cossery, who moved to France as a young man in the 1940s and remained there until his death at the estimable age of ninety-four in 2008. The book has lost none of its comic freshness since it first appeared in 1955, and Cossery's concern with the struggle between the poor and the powerful is certainly as pertinent as ever. *Proud Beggars* is an excellent introduction to the work of a writer who is greatly admired in France and, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, is garnering interest around the world.

The French title of the book is *Mendiants et orgueilleux*—literally “Beggars and Proud People.” When asked what he had in mind, Cossery replied:

It comes from an Arabic saying. The precise phrase . . . in Arabic means “a beggar who sets his own conditions.” A beggar in Egypt to whom you would give a piaster would say to you “No, no, keep it, you need it,” which means “what’s one piaster to me?” He wouldn’t even want it. That’s where the title comes from. (Michel Mitrani, *Conversations avec Albert Cossery*)

Pride is important to Cossery, for whom the concept cuts two ways. The pride of the powerless is a good thing: among those born to poverty, it shows strength and dignity; among those who enjoy greater prosperity, a principled rejection of the trappings of a bourgeois life—money, physical comfort, social standing, fame of any kind. By

contrast the pride of the powerful and affluent shows nothing but “arrogance,” “haughtiness,” and “condescension.”

Proud Beggars, like many of Cossery’s novels, centers on a small circle of male friends. The friends are three here: Gohar, an intellectual and ex-university professor, hashish lover, and sometime bookkeeper in a brothel; Yeghen, a poet and drug dealer; and El Kordi, a low-ranking civil servant and romantic revolutionary. None of them is an actual beggar—they all have ways of making money, if only a pittance—but they are certainly free of ambition and otherwise indifferent to social convention. They are poor and they live happily among the poor. Early in the book, we get a sense of Gohar’s extraordinary *joie de vivre*:

Gohar stopped instinctively, as though intuiting a peaceful zone, the promise of a delectable joy amid the surrounding din. In front of an empty store, he saw a well-dressed older man sitting with dignity on a chair, with a detached and royal air, watching the crowd pass. The man had a strikingly majestic appearance. “Here’s a man after my own heart,” he thought. This empty store and this man who sold nothing were a priceless discovery.

El Kordi—the romantic revolutionary—has a similar epiphany:

When he was prey to despair, as he was now, he easily imagined the people’s misery and the frightful oppression of which he was a victim; he then enjoyed dreaming about a brutal and bloody revolution. But when he was once again in the street mingling with the crowd, the people’s misery became a myth, an abstraction, and it lost all of its explosive virulence. He felt especially attracted to the picturesque details of this poverty, to the grandeur of its inexhaustible humor, and he immediately forgot his savior’s mission. By some inexplicable mystery, he found such an intense faculty for joy among this miserable people and such a strong will to happiness and security that he

had come to think that he was the only ill-fated man on earth. Where were the ravages of oppression? Where was the unhappiness? . . . El Kordi had to strain to find the pitiful element indispensable to his revolt. Just when he should have been sad and choked with tears, an immense laugh shook him.

As for Yeghen, he lives for poetry and drugs. Scrawny though his body may be, he sits imposingly at the novel's symbolic core. Yeghen turns abjection into art, much as Cossery does, writing his poetry in

the very language of the people among whom he lived, a language where humor flowered despite the worst miseries. His popularity in the native quarter equaled that of the monkey trainer and the puppeteer. He even believed he wasn't as deserving as these public entertainers; he would have preferred to be one of them. In no way did he resemble the man of letters who worried about his career and his posthumous reputation; he sought neither fame nor admiration. Yeghen's poems were composed using simple everyday words, felt with his infallible instinct for life at its most authentic.

Such is the cheerfully unconventional world of our unconventional heroes, which, however, near the beginning of *Proud Beggars*, is abruptly upended by an apparently motiveless murder. Gohar, waking up in desperate need of the hash he depends on, has gone looking for Yeghen, who will give him his fix for free. He thinks Yeghen might be at the brothel, but the only person he finds there is Arnaba, an illiterate young prostitute, who asks him to write a letter to her uncle while he awaits Yeghen's return. Seeing her gold bracelets, Gohar begins to hallucinate:

He felt like he was drowning . . . and that the tumultuous waves of the river in full spate were swallowing him in their depths. He desperately tried to remain afloat, to save a scrap of lucidity. It was hopeless. Nothing remained of his immeasurable

desire for peace. Only his savage wish to steal the bracelets resisted the collapse of his consciousness. In his hallucination, he caught a glimpse of vast fields of hashish spread out under the immensity of the sky beyond the bracelets. The vision was so sharp, so pressing, that Gohar stopped breathing. He dreamt he was going to commit a crime, and it seemed simple and easy. Yes, he had to kill this girl; he saw no other way to get the bracelets. This certainty filled him with a dreadful calm.

And so he kills her, after which he leaves the brothel unobserved. (The bracelets, for what it's worth, turn out to be paste.) It is a shocking moment, and yet what is perhaps even more shocking is that after it Gohar and the novel calmly go their way for some hundred and fifty pages, as if the murder were almost a natural phenomenon and the murderer a mere instrument of fate.

What is the reader to make of this? Not what you might expect. For one thing, as the Egyptian author and poet Georges Henein has noted,

the idea of guilt . . . is completely absent from [Cossery's work]. Gohar is a blend of poverty and poetry. He began by taking his distance, by excluding himself from the usual reasons for living. We believe he is helpless because we see him wandering aimlessly, at the mercy of an ounce of drugs. Yet we must convince ourselves that he belongs to an invulnerable breed that subsists through the grace of innocence and guile combined in one gaze—a gaze that the all powerful adult world is too weak to bear.

Innocence and guile! The same words might describe the response Cossery himself gave when asked why Gohar kills Arnaba. Dismissing the crime as “a blunder, a minor incident,” Cossery explains that he had Gohar commit it “to bring the policeman on the scene, to create a confrontation with a policeman, because the policeman rep-

resents a repressive society.” The policeman Nour El Dine, who now enters, is the book’s other major character, and the ensuing confrontation between him and Gohar and Gohar’s friends will take a number of unexpected turns before reaching its surprising, deliberately anticlimactic finale.

Nour El Dine may be a representative of repressive society, but, like Chief of Police Hillali in Cossery’s 1975 novel *A Splendid Conspiracy*, he is a nuanced figure—not one of those brutish, stupid street cops that Cossery describes as plying their trade “with skillful sadism.” Nour El Dine is in fact one of those whom society represses: a pariah, a guilty homosexual scorned by the world at large and scorned in particular by Samir, the handsome and very straight young man with whom he is hopelessly infatuated. (Nour El Dine’s pitiful and pitiable attempts to seduce Samir are the source of a good deal of humor.) He is also extremely intelligent. Bored by his profession and the petty criminals who surround him, Nour El Dine seeks a higher meaning to life, and his great dream is to come across a crime committed by someone who is his intellectual equal. Now, investigating the crime, he becomes fascinated with Gohar:

it seemed to him that this man was not only what he appeared to be, that is, a failed intellectual reduced to poverty. His ascetic face, his refined speech, the nobility of his attitude—all denoted a sharp and penetrating intelligence. How could such a man have fallen so low on the social ladder? And, especially, why did he give the impression of enjoying it and taking pride in it? Had he by some chance discovered peace in the depths of this extreme deprivation?

Various impediments, some hilariously preposterous, are put in the way of Nour El Dine’s solving the case, but in the end he succeeds. This, however, does not lead to the restoration of order that the reader might anticipate. *Proud Beggars* is not so much a tale of crime and punishment as it is Nour El Dine’s bildungsroman, in which his way of seeing the world and his life are dramatically transformed:

No doubt Gohar was right. To live like a beggar was to follow the path of wisdom. A life in the primitive state, without constraints. Nour El Dine dreamed of how sweet a beggar's life would be, free and proud, with nothing to lose. He could finally indulge in his vice without fear or shame. He would even be proud of this vice that had been his worst torment for years. Samir would come back to him. His hatred would vanish automatically when he saw him dispossessed of his emblems of authority, washed of his prejudice and his slimy morality. He would no longer have to fear Samir's disdain or his sarcasm.

But if Nour El Dine has cast off the shackles of respectability, whether he has it in him to embrace the beggar's life with proper pride remains uncertain: "A beggar, that was easy—but proud? Where would [Nour El Dine] find pride? There was nothing left in him but an infinite weariness, an immense need for peace—simply for peace."

The seven novels and single collection of short stories that Cossery wrote at leisure over the course of his long career constitute a tightly unified oeuvre, a sort of Egyptian *comédie humaine*. "The same idea is in all my books; I shape it differently," Cossery remarked. "The true writer has limited material at his disposal: his vision of the world." Cossery's thinking evolved in various ways over the years, but throughout his vision of the world was based on an abhorrence of abusive power and wealth. And he, unlike the existentialists he lived among, always refused to see man's condition as "absurd." Like Gohar, Cossery

rebelled with all of his soul against the concept of an absurd universe. Indeed, it was under the cloak of this so-called absurdity of the world that all crimes were perpetrated. The universe was not absurd; it was simply ruled by the most abominable gang of scoundrels that ever soiled the surface of the planet.

Indeed, a revolutionary strain permeates all of Cossery's work. In his early books the struggle is violent and moralized. *The House of Certain Death*, from 1944, ends on this note:

The future is full of outcries; the future is full of revolt. How to confine this swelling river that will submerge entire cities? Si Khalil can visualize the house collapsing into dusty ruin. He sees the living arise from among the dead. For they will not all die. They will have to be reckoned with when they rise up, their faces bloody, and their eyes filled with vengeance.

Fifty-five years later, in Cossery's final novel, *The Colors of Infamy*, the attitude has become subtler:

This easy obedience to tyrants, which often verged on devotion, always surprised him. He had come to believe that the majority of human beings aspired only to slavery. He had long wondered by what ruse this enormous enterprise of mystification orchestrated by the wealthy had been able to spread and prosper on every continent. Karamallah belonged to that category of true aristocrats who had tossed out like old soiled clothes all the values and all the dogma that these infamous individuals had generated over centuries in order to perpetuate their supremacy. And so his joy in being alive was in no way altered by these stinking dogs' enduring power on the planet. On the contrary, he found their stupid and criminal acts to be an inexhaustible source of entertainment—so much so that there were times when he had to admit he would miss this mob were they to disappear; he feared the aura of boredom that would envelop humankind once purged of its vermin.

In between, we find our proud beggars, who dream of revolution but love life too much to bother rising up (El Kordi); who rebel by “non-cooperation” and a refusal to “collaborate with this immense

charade” imposed by the powerful (Gohar); and the poets of the world, who resist the allure of money and fame, contenting themselves with friendship, drugs, and the beautiful language of the people (Yeghen).

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

Growing up in a well-to-do Cairene family, Cossery was educated at the Lycée Français and began reading and writing in French at a very young age. The voice of the narrator in all his work is unique, containing a strong, idiosyncratic dose of hyperbole and comic simile, but his French prose is not unidiomatic. As has often been pointed out, the dialogues, however, are on the whole supposed to imitate “literal” translations from the Arabic. They are peppered with “By Allah,” “Peace be with you,” and “This is indeed a day of honey!” or phrases such as the lovely “in its mother’s eyes a monkey has the grace of a gazelle” found in *Proud Beggars*.

Unlike Cossery’s other books, this novel draws the reader’s particular attention to the fact that, although it is written in French, the characters are *not* speaking French, and for me this is one more of its charms. There is a delicious passage that takes place in the brothel where Arnaba worked. Nour El Dine is interrogating El Kordi about the murder, and as he begins to realize he is attracted to El Kordi, he tries to create some intimacy between them:

Nour El Dine gloated over [El Kordi] with a kind of lubricious tenderness, as if on the lookout for a sign of complicity.

Why did he suddenly begin to speak in English?

“You come here often?”

“As often as my physical needs require,” answered El Kordi in the same language.

“It seems that you have a marked preference for one of the girls. You are her lover, or am I mistaken?”

This conversation in English unfolded in solemn silence.

Understanding nothing, the [police] reporter stopped transcribing. At first, thinking he had gone suddenly deaf, he began cleaning out his ear. Then, feeling things were too much for him, he put his indelible pencil down in front of him and assumed a helpless pose. As for Set Amina [the brothel's madam], she believed that the use of this foreign language hid a trap meant to ruin her. She sighed and said, "On my honor! It's the end of the world. Now they're speaking English in my house!"

Nour El Dine resigned himself to resuming the interrogation in Arabic, not to please Set Amina but because the reporter had begun to object to being left out: he was grumbling through his teeth.

The switch to a foreign language spoken only by interrogator and interrogatee to create intimacy, the madam's fear, the confusion of the police reporter are all part and parcel of Cossery's humor, a constant in these pages.

As Robyn Creswell wrote in *Harper's Magazine* in February 2011, Cossery's style is "a style that draws attention to itself rather than its more or less miserable subjects, and sets up an ironic distance between their material poverty and its own lexical abundance." It is indeed this lexical abundance that draws the reader in, and that makes "the task of the translator" particularly appealing and challenging. As the first English translator of two of Cossery's other novels, I have revised Thomas W. Cushing's translation slightly to retain a similar lexicon in all three books, and to attempt to keep the idiosyncrasies of Cossery's style the same. But it remains very much Cushing's work, and fine work it is indeed.

—ALYSON WATERS