

Teaching Etel Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse**

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What can I do?

One must begin somewhere.

Begin what?

The only thing in the world worth beginning: The End of the world of course.

—from Aimé Césaire's "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land" (trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith)

Last Monday night I taught Etel Adnan's work for the first time as part of a course I am teaching about the withdrawal of the image in contemporary art and poetry. It is a daunting task, to teach a poet whom you love, but whose work is coming from such a harrowing foreign context. Born out of the first year of the Lebanese Civil War, Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse* forms one of the most important works of literature after the war. Through the class, I have been trying to teach Adnan's book in relation to what Jalal Toufic calls "surpassing disaster, the poetry of Paul Celan (Michael Hamburger and Pierre Joris translations), Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Task of the Translator."

Teaching poetry is never easy, at least it isn't for me. I always come to it with a sense of wanting to master the text (to appear accountable to it) and yet with a desire simultaneously to deny this irritable grasping. When faced with poets like Celan and Adnan of course any hopes one might have of achieving mastery over the language of the text is completely challenged. One can only fail, and produce the best possible outcome in this failure. Interpretation is not enough. Not explanation either.

Like talismans, the night before teaching Adnan I surrounded myself with works by Aimé Césaire, Georges Bataille, and Antonin Artaud. I also reread some of Ammiel Alcalay's *After Arabs and Jews*, in which Alcalay devotes a substantial part of one of his book's chapters to the work of Adonis, Adnan, and others writing after the Lebanese Civil War. Reading around or in relation to a text in preparation to teach, there is a sense of pressure which attends this kind of preparatory reading. I like this pressure. Teaching becomes more like an improvisation through compression—having to find your way through a reading of a text/texts *ex tempore* and in conversation.

Preparing throughout the day to teach, when finally it came time to hold class I was shaking. I had eaten something only an hour before, but still felt nervous and weak. Teaching is metabolic obviously. What (a la Bhanu Kapil's wonderful questionnaires) do you eat before teaching? What do you drink? I asked the students to choose a poem from Adnan's book. *How would you teach this poem to the rest of class? How can we start from particulars to get to something general and recurring throughout the text?* Those are the questions I ask the students before starting. A student has forgotten her copy of the book so I lend her mine. Meanwhile, I still have Bataille, and Césaire, and Artaud with me. I want to address Bataille's text collected in *Visions of Excess*, "The Solar Anus." I know something's there, a connection. What to say about it? I also know that there are correspondences between Césaire's "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land" and Adnan's book that I could do a lot with. What to focus on? How to make these

connections without overwhelming the students? Without neglecting the particularity of Adnan's situation of address/composition?

My students did really well with the material. I encouraged them to admit what they don't understand, what is hard or confusing for them along with anything they feel confident about 'knowing.' This disarms them; I think it disarms them anyway. A student begins by talking about a particular poem, one that—to my mind—most resembles a kind of hymn or prayer. It is a beautiful poem, slipped in among so much cruelty and violence (for those who've not read Adnan's book, it presents a kind of cruel theater in reference to the massacres at two Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon 1975-1976: *Quarantina* and *Tell al-Za'tar*).

I want people to call God "our brother" our "brother" O celestial comrade
born of the Night and of Light ! STOP O celestial comrade receive your
brothers in your eternity O celestial comrade write their name on their
burnt limbs O celestial comrade give water and bread to the hungry O
celestial comrade give fuel to the friendly airplane O celestial comrade
please the widows by evoking their husbands
O celestial comrade allow brides to ignore the sounds of war
O celestial comrade reunite the combatants' dispersed bones
O celestial comrade erase the blackness of mourning and plant rose bushes
O celestial comrade sing a requiem of glory for those whose voice is
sealed in tombs (66)

The word "STOP" appears here, as it appears repeatedly throughout Adnan's book. We talk about this word. The word is telegraphic we decide. But it also introduces, as two students point out, a "neurotic" pace into the text. It is a kind of tic. "STOP" may also be read through a journalistic perspective—stop the war, attend what is going on in Lebanon *now*. Given the title of Adnan's book, to "STOP" also indicates a kind of apocalyptic event, where an apocalypse is what ends or happens at the end of (the) world(s). What stops (the) world(s), as the title of Jalal Toufic's forward to the 2006 edition of Adnan's book has it.

The observation of neurosis gets me thinking about the Beats, whom Adnan is clearly channeling/in dialogue with—if only by common texts (French existentialism, Artaud, etc.). I imagine Adnan's narrator/speaker as a kind of Beat reporter. Allen Ginsberg of "Wichita Vortex Sutra" driving in a car, listening to the radio, dictating his poem into a tape recorder. I think of the mythologized and romanticized speed-induced literary experiments of Kerouac, *On the Road* composed on Benzedrine. But this is civil war; this is barbarity—there is nothing "beat" about that, right? Adnan makes reference to Wichita in her text. Is this a reference to Ginsberg's poem or to the Native Americans from whom the name derives (throughout *The Arab Apocalypse* Native American culture—the peace-loving Hopis in particular—forms a counterpoint to the Christian-Moslem Arab culture of Lebanon)?

The poem has the metabolism of a Beat road poem. I like this about it. But there is something perverse about comparing Adnan's poem to the Beats. Where the Beats reveled in a post-War American economy dependent on the devastation of Europe, and lamented their alienation—the alienation of angry White men in the throes of late Capitalism—Adnan is talking about the suffering of people in an extremely volatile moment, a moment in which she is participating and of which her work is exigent. What

can be done about this?

Reading Adnan's work, I am interested in the many valences it shares with the Beats, and before that, with French Symbolism and Surrealism. To say that Adnan is in correspondence with these traditions is an understatement. But, as with any cross-cultural discourse, there is no easy relationship. The Beats are not Adnan. But Aimé Césaire? Adnan is obviously not Césaire either, but I do find it interesting that both Césaire's "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land" and Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse* take-up a Symbolist-Surrealist tradition in poetry, not merely overturning these traditions, but revivifying and making use of them through their appropriation. This, to me, is what is so interesting about Césaire's taking up of Surrealist discourse through his correspondence with Breton and others whom he met in France in the 30s, and with whom he shared friendship and collegiality. That through Symbolism-Surrealism Césaire recognizes his own condition (and vice versa), and the condition of his historical-ethnic burden (Negritude), and takes up this literary discourse for his own and his people's empowerment (the people of Martinique, but also Black people at large).

Likewise, I wonder, to what extent that which seems "surreal" about Césaire's "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land," is only surreal in appearance. Which is to say: does Surrealism give Césaire the permission to project images from his reality (facts) as dream imagery (imagery supposedly from his/the 'unconscious')? The 'satanic' powers of Rimbaud are fulfilled in Césaire's work, where Rimbaud's dream, his proto-Surreality, is literalized by Césaire's experience of Negritude. His "tightrope" walk across the abyss of the Atlantic. In his "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land," Césaire summons the powers of a terrestrial and vegetative world—a world, if you will, of non-human becoming—and through the immanence of these powers Césaire 'goes down', he returns (and turns and turns and turns) through the hell that is his returning from Europe/France.

I would rediscover the secret of great communications and great combustions. I would say storm. I would say river. I would say tornado. I would say leaf. I would say tree. I would be drenched by all rains, moistened by all dews.

—from *The Collected Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, trans. Eshleman and Smith, University of California, 1983, pg. 43) [footnote and lineation]

Similarly, in Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse*, Adnan's speaker—the ubiquitous "I" of the poem—reports not only about the massacres perpetrated against Palestinians by Lebanese-Syrian Christian militias—but ranges across various time senses, the largest being the sun's lifespan (as Adnan notes, the sun has already lived half of its life, 5 billion years), and others being the time senses of the moon, the earth—the many durations of earth—and of the human-animal species which contributes to all but a very tiny part of its history.

As in the work of Artaud and Bataille, Adnan and Césaire evoke an economy of forces beyond the human. This economy is cruel, one only a kind of schizo-text can bear witness to. The sun—symbol of logos, centerment, and knowledge; but also source of "life," symbol of the procreative—becomes a protagonist of this celestial-terrestrial drama. Compared with Bataille's "solar anus," the sun represents the inverse of the volcanic solar: the immanent explosions, eruptions, and ejaculations of earth expressing itself.

Opposing the volcanic with the solar, Adnan evokes the power of the immanent as a power outshining the light of the sun. This power will produce a kind of interruption—an apocalypse—of the human that may lead to a night of “peace and knowledge” (a wish the book closes with). The volcanic moon will be brought down to earth—its cratered surface (only recently territorialized by US astronauts at the time Adnan is composing her book) a mirror of the earth’s own volcanic surfaces—and through this inversion (both a geological one and a mystical one) an apocalyptic solar night will remember those of the Civil War. An impossible remembrance. The remembrance of occlusion, of occult discourse. A remembrance of the body which experiences the pain of the cosmos—the ears becoming little suns, the eyes becoming little suns. What Jalal Toufic calls “undeath”; undeath as a condition of possibility for remembrance, and for bearing witness to human and non-human (cosmic, terrestrial) cruelty. Toufic in his talk last week at St. Mark’s Poetry Project told me that to deserve the event (the event which is the disaster of the Lebanese Civil War and other all-too-human disasters) requires that one “have collaborators.” Evoking terrestrial forces—calling them “I,” saying “I” brings them forth—both Césaire and Adnan make the earth their collaborator, their texts/persons solar anuses (little suns shooting out of every orifice).

Does this reading make sense to me? I’m not sure. Did it make sense to my students—I am doubly unsure. Meaning, in teaching—how do you convey it? Faced with not just a ‘difficult’ text, but an *impossible* one (there is something impossible about both Adnan and Césaire) what can you do except perform or presence this impossibility? I think this goes back to something Fred Moten was talking about in an earlier post. How in teaching, as well as our work as critics, scholars, and theorists, can we perform a poem’s/text’s difficulty? How might going down—evoking the hellish recourses of schizophrenia or automatic processes—be absolutely necessary to translate (which is to say, bear across) a text’s meaning? Is to enact a text’s meaning to suffer it—to become patient to it—beyond mastery? These questions seem all the more urgent grappling with a text that is meant to bear witness, as both Césaire’s and Adnan’s are.