

Etel's Presence

Benjamin Hollander

I once wrote a few words which were to appear on the back of a collection of Etel's stories: "In this, *The Master of The Eclipse*, Etel Adnan names the relations between innocence and power," I wrote. But when the book appeared, the wording was changed:. It read: "In *Master of the Eclipse*, Etel Adnan names the relations between innocence and power."

Perhaps the editorial omission was made to either achieve the direct approach--the need for American economy--or as a correction to my original wording, which, syntactically, tonally, may have seemed odd, foreign, not to the point so had to be, what can I say, *concised*. Perhaps I am imagining these motives.

But the use of this rime—*In This.../ The Eclipse*—which paused the arrival of the place of the eclipse, was also an accent on it, and accent, as Etel once said to me on a summer afternoon in her home in Sausalito, is being lost. There is "a global uniform tonality in the world today," she said, perhaps informed by American reach, the need to streamline, to be efficient, pragmatic, a process in which accent is lost, in which place is lost, eclipsed. Like the language of first home.

Like Dante, Etel knows "Languages start at home", but where is "first home"? Beirut? Paris? Sausalito? Where is "first home's" place when other languages take its place, when they can seem like home but be at odds with it, as if "first home" were always accented. Consider how Arabic, French, and English can appear at home and be at odds with it--within Etel's history, depending on where she is, goes, what she does. When she came to teach in Northern California, Etel said that "a profession which has its own rhythms, brought her back to the desire for writing":

I still considered myself as a French speaking person, even if I was teaching in English. But when I thought seriously about poetry and writing again, I discovered a problem of a political nature. It was during the Algerian war of independence. The morning paper was regularly bringing news of Algerians being killed in the war, or news of the atrocities that always seem to accompany large-scale violence. I became suddenly, and rather violently, conscious that I had naturally and spontaneously taken sides, that I was emotionally a participant in the war, and I resented having to express myself in French. Today I do not have these violent reactions towards the French language because the problem has long been settled. There is peace between Algeria and France. Then, things were different: Arab destiny as a whole seemed to be dependent on the outcome of that conflict. The realm of Arab unity was very much alive then, and Algeria was its symbol.

I realized that I couldn't write freely in a language that faced me with a deep conflict. I was disturbed in one fundamental realm of my life: the

domain of meaningful self-expression.

So she decided to solve the problem through Art. “I didn’t need to write in French anymore. I was going to paint in Arabic.”

“In the domain”—in the home—“of meaningful self-expression,” the painting in Arabic was direct, while the writer was going in an ideal direction: the poet who could use words like a jazz musician in French and English, could then use the Arabic language to paint, as if the language of her work could not breathe or reach its ideal without a history of these several processes being at play at once.

“Among the five prizes provided for in Alfred Nobel’s will (1895), one was intended for the person who, in the literary field, had produced ‘the most outstanding work in an ideal direction’”

Here is some direct American speech of something that no one says but would be lovely to speak and predict: Etel Adnan should win the Nobel Prize in Lit.

I often imagine that Etel and I—her Arabic, my Hebrew-- share a native accent which has lost the vocabulary to speak. Etel recalls copying Arabic, “words after words whose alphabet I understood, but seldom their meaning—never trying to understand what I was writing. I think that I loved the act of writing things I did not understand, and I pretended I was learning a language without effort, by just writing it down...”

“Learning a language...by just writing it down.”

The world to be discovered in the copying of a language we do not know.

The First Moment:

How is it that Etel’s presence among us more than makes up for what she claims is impossible in her writing? “What can I say,” Etel writes, “of the fact that I do not use my native tongue and do not have the most important feeling that as a writer I should have, the feeling of direct communication with one’s audience.”

Yet I have spent too many moments with Etel where, in her speech and manner, this “most important feeling” is there. The first time we met, we talked at length among a throng of people, as we inadvertently isolated ourselves in an alcove on the first floor of a friend’s house, talking about poetry, politics, philosophy, the Middle East, baseball, film, while the so-called real party was going on upstairs. It was then I realized what I was to discover over and over about Etel’s presence: the reality of it, the directness of it, the warmth of it, as we sat down close and bent over listening to each other, her manner, her bearing, her being.—right there, the real thing. “Poets,” Etel once wrote me, “are great realists (even when they see angels, if they do, like Rilke does).”

Etel is a realist of ideal integrity whose love for others radiates outward, whose gestures reveal a poised childlike excitement whenever she speaks, whenever she embraces the

presence of others. She gives herself vulnerable permission to simultaneously inhabit and confront a spectrum of emotions in a moment, joy and sadness at the same time, an inner life which shows itself about her person, which is inclusive, without question.

I am reminded of friends and family I grew up with in Israel and New York.

I am reminded of Emile Habibi's Pessoptomist.

I am reminded of Baraka's Blues People who Baldwin says can live and sing the happy songs as sad songs and the sad songs as happy songs because they have been "down the line," because they have been to "the depths out of which such ironic tenacity comes," where "the force is sensual..." and where "to be sensual... is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be *present* in all that one does.

I am reminded that Etel is and has always been *this present* in all that she does among us.

Benjamin Hollander
San Francisco
July 2011