

Etel Adnan: An Appreciation

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I first came across the work of Etel Adnan in 1982. The occasion was a poetry reading in Berkeley scheduled to protest the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which, it might be recalled, was dubbed “Operation Peace in Galilee” by the Israeli government, adding but one more sordid chapter in our era’s long litany of doublespeak and lies—accompanied, as usual, by savage brutality and massacre against the civilian population. So the circumstances surrounding my first encounter with Etel Adnan’s writing was one in which the expectation would be to hear expressions of outrage and protest—writing of an agit-prop nature.

So it came somewhat as a surprise, and quite moving, to hear the reading of Etel’s poem, *Jebu*, by two young Palestinian women, who introduced the poem by saying that it had entered into the consciousness of the Palestinian people as part of their cultural response to the oppression and dismemberment they have suffered at the hands of Zionism and imperialism. The poem presented, to my hearing that evening, an epochal grasp of history, spanning the millennia from the point of victory of the abstracted, reified god of monotheism, symbolized by David’s victory over the Canaanites and his capture of Jerusalem, up to the present day. But now, the heretofore crushed and humiliated, “wretched of the earth”, were rising and reclaiming their rightful place in all of creation. And this epochal panorama is presented through the symbolic figure of *Jebu*,—with full cognizance of modern technology, from oil production to space travel—as arising *from the soil*, the desert sands, *felt* as an integral part of nature’s forces. Further, this newly emerging consciousness is no longer dominated by the abstracted, mechanical, oppressive rationality, whose most recent incarnation, the commodity form, has atomized and dismembered the self and disintegrated all internally reverberating referents by the numbing dumbing dazzle of pure exchange, while being held aloft by technological terror, desecration of internal and external nature, and massive destitution and homelessness.

The poem unfolded as a serious attempt at a *whole* vision, defetishized, non-escapist, born out of a suffering that didn’t fall into the all too common excesses of vengeful resentment—of a resentment that usually leads merely to the exchange of one set of oppressors for another.

In short, what I came into being with that night was a *work of art*, a work that was able to evoke a whole range of responses, thoughts, insights, that radiated around the central issues of human history and destiny.

It was several years later when I finally met Etel Adnan and asked her to do an interview, which appeared in the journal *Left Curve* that I edit and publish (*Left Curve* no. 13 [1988-9]). The interview was also included in the anthology, *Art on the Line* (Curbstone Press, 2002), edited by Jack Hirschman. I transcribed the interview from a recorded conversation with Etel that took place at her home in Sausalito. And I think it is worth mentioning that Etel didn’t want to go over the text prior to publication. When I

asked her to do so, she just told me that she wanted me to do it so that it would be a surprise for her. The trust that she conveyed to me by that gesture, I think, rather than resulting in a departure from intended meaning, or one shaped inordinately by my own subjectivity, made possible instead an atmosphere within which the task became to come into being with a space wherein essential truth may emerge out of the disparate processes of live conversation, recorded transcription and final textual editing.

Since that time, my remaining in touch with Etel has been one of the few positive, inspirational reference points in my life. She inhabits a special place of substance within an, all too often, arid surroundings. I find solace in her commitment to the search for truth, steadfastness, clarity and unassuming self: qualities that are increasingly rare to find during these woeful, ever-alarming “end times”.