

Fawwaz Traboulsi

Statement read on the occasion of the homage to Etel Adnan organized by Lebanese poets and writers at the Theatre Al-Madina in Beirut on May 13th, 2010; read by Fawwaz Traboulsi, writer, essayist, Professor of Political Science at the American University of Beirut.

The first time I heard of Etel Adnan I was still at school, and she had won a short story competition organized by the weekly “*Afrique-Asie*”. I do not remember the story but I have been ever since an addict of Etel’s writing, and a friend of hers and of her companion, the artist and publisher Simone Fattal.

Whenever I like a text by Etel, I translate it. Translation is frequently compared to treason. I have practiced the translation of Etel’s work as an act of love and a desire to possess. Every translator exhibits a repressed desire to take the place of the author because he/she has composed the author’s text in his/her own language. I am no exception.

How to speak about Etel in three minutes, though she herself is the master of compression and concision? Mayakowski speaks about the poet as one who processes thousands of tons of words in order to produce one poetic word. “But”, says he, “compare the glitter produced by this one word to the slow burning of the raw words”. Etel condenses words in a natural, I would even say ‘physical’, way without the need for mining or industrial processing. I will give one example of what I mean by recalling how she once resumed the effect of the music of the great American jazzman Duke Ellington, when we wrote: “he transforms noise into velvet”.

Etel employs the same process of distillation and condensation, in her paintings. Look at her small landscape paintings. They are not merely miniatures. They are a visual paraphrase of the Arab Sufi, An-Nuffari’s, formula: “the more the expression narrows, the more the vision expands.”

Who would have imagined that this child’s face carries that much alertness, cunning, depth, perseverance and courage?

She has always been an engaged feminist writer. Her unpretentious feminism combines sensitivity and strength. She does not dabble in formulas such as ‘in the beginning was the female’ nor is she seduced by anti-male rhetoric. Instead she destabilizes the biblical story: it is the woman in him that man lost since Adam. Woman is the deficit in man. His paradise lost. And he is condemned to struggle for ages in order to regain what he lost. As if Etel here echoes Louis Aragon’s affirmation that ‘woman is the future of man’. But she is not content even with that. She focuses on what is strongest in man in order to feminize him: on his vulnerable and most beautiful moments, the moment of pleasure. As man surrenders to pleasure, he is feminized. And pleasure in Arabic—al-Lazhzhah—is definitely of a feminine gender.

And Etel is an engaged writer with no need of justification. She is the living proof that upholding the values of freedom, justice and equality does not impoverish literature but enriches it. More: such an engagement is liable to produce great transformations

in style and esthetics. There is no rhetoric, or enthusiasm or triumphalism in her world. For experience is richer and painful. Etel is the daughter of a generation that has been shaken by the Arab defeat of June 1967, elated by the victory of Vietnam, has put imagination in power with the student rebels of May 1968, and glorified in Che Guevara the harbinger of the 'New Man'—a generation that shed the shadow of the Palestinian wound before hailing the advent of the *fida'yeen*. Some members of this same generation survived to witness the Israeli occupation of Beirut and the American invasion of Iraq, an invasion so forcefully related in Etel's amazing poem "To be in a time of war" which is part of one of her latest books: "In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country", where dialogue with oneself alternates with repetition and stylistic innovation to construct the daily life of a woman living in the 'belly of the beast', as bombs rain over Baghdad.

Etel is most probably the first Arab poet whom the tragedy of the Red Indian reminded of the uprooted diasporic Palestinian regrouped in 'reservations' called 'refugee camps'. She is also the initiator of the novel form on the Lebanese civil war in her "Sitt Marie Rose". It is Beirut under Israeli occupation, civil war, or the Resistance that did hurl Etel into poetry'. In her masterpiece, "The Arab Apocalypse", she uses the conflict between sun and moon to express the memory of colonial wars and the Lebanese civil wars. "The sun is a pool of blood" she writes: "I have seen mad Beirut writing in blood: death to the moon". "The Arab Apocalypse" is a unique work in the literary rendering of catastrophes and wars. In it the poet challenges language with war and war with language. Language, deconstructed to conflagrate like a bomb, is vaporized like a blown door or volatilized like body parts. To add offense to injury, as it were, words are mixed with symbols, signs and amulets in a web of hieroglyphics that say the failure of language vis-à-vis the apocalypse.

This woman who "prefers waves to the sea" has addressed a message to the poets: "change the world or go home!" a message of defiance that applies equally to all who engage in literature, art or thinking.

Etel, you who exists for love, you know how much I love you.
This is also an occasion for you to meet and hear the many poets and writers who love you and appreciate your talent and your courage. I wish you everlasting love.

-Beirut Theatre, Beirut, May 13, 2010.