

Revisiting Etel Adnan's *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*

by Stephen Motika

Mount Tamalpais, situated at the heart of Marin County, north of the Golden Gate, is a beacon for the entire Bay area. Although its name is derived from the Miwok word meaning “coast mountain,” we don’t have records of the tribes rituals involving the peak. Since the urbanization of San Francisco in the mid-nineteenth century, the mountain has become an important wilderness and recreation area. It’s also emerged as an important site for artists and writers. In the 1950s, when the mountain began to interest Bay Area poets, including Gary Snyder and Lew Welch, Etel Adnan, a thirty-year-old Lebanese philosophy student, arrived in Northern California. Associated first with the University of California, Berkeley, she began teaching philosophy at Dominican College in San Rafael in 1958. She returned to Beirut in 1972, only to be sent into exile again by the start of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, she settled in Sausalito, where she has maintained a home, with windows facing Mount Tamalpais, for more than thirty years.

When Adnan returned to Marin in the late 1970s, she had retired from teaching and was able to dedicate herself fully to her writing and painting. The early 1980s were a time of great creative productivity, loosely chronicled in *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, published by The Post-Apollo Press in 1986. The book is subtitled, “An Essay,” but resembles something closer to a daybook, the poetic and philosophical thoughts embedded in the daily practice of living. Although this book does not carry specific dates, it shares commonalities with other poet’s daybooks, such as George Oppen. It is her greatest, most explicit meditation on place, but it also conveys openness, a special porosity and vulnerability. This essay is less an analysis of the world around her and more an attempt to describe it. At times the paragraphs give way to bullet-like notes, remnants of “fleeting trajectories of thoughts, questions, intuitions, of inner and outer events.”

The book also represents Adnan’s multi-faceted creative output; here, the paintings of Mount Tamalpais face the prose about the mountain. There are not just paintings, from oil to watercolor, but also ink and pen drawings reproduced here. She writes: “I make paintings and watercolors of Tamalpais. Again and again. Why do I insist?” Tamalpais is for Adnan as Mont Sainte-Victorie was for Cezanne and Mount Fuji for Hokusai. She writes: “I know that the process of painting and writing gives me the implicit certitude.” Through her text and images, she creates an evocative and bold physicalizing of the mountain’s many selves. For Adnan, the mountain stands in for so many things: for beast, space-ship, dream, woman, geographical wonder, and site for experiencing the elements.

The elements—fire and water, earth and air—tie the threads of human activity into the mountain. That activity is represented by the dreams, mythic occasions, philosophical quandaries, poetic manifestations, and aphorisms of Adnan’s interior world. The external world is represented by trips and hikes, visits with friends, and the meeting of the O’Hanlon workshop, run out of the painter Ann (1908-1998) and her husband, sculptor Dick (1907-1985) O’Hanlon’s home in Mill Valley. Adnan writes that “the O’Hanlon house was in itself a living poem.” She stayed there while the O’Hanlon’s were away, experiencing the magical world in metaphor: “The young tree by the bedroom opened up overnight like a Japanese umbrella. Pine trees were

climbing a pyramidal hill.” Beyond their art, Adnan was also struck by Dick’s passion for “astronomical chartes, sundials, civilizations expressed in pyramids, stones, and calculations.” The inflections of ancient world rituals meet the stargazing, UFO-searching Star War obsessions of the 1980s. The book closes soon after Dick death and the reader can’t help but thinking that he is one of the spirits haunting these pages.

The O’Hanlon group “tried to paint and think about painting. We tried to find value to the process of seeing and translating it on some surface. Painting and perception formed an unbreakable dual concept. They become interchangeable.” In *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, Adnan translates the mountain to the surface of the page, with words, with paint. The book reflects her own experiences, but also that of a community of artists and thinkers living near the mountain. In many ways, it is her most situated text, connected to a set of experiences that took place in a specific part of North America. Although her work dwells on the idea of place and places, never before or since has she written so specifically as she has about Mount Tamalpais. For me, it is the place that I associate with her work. When I visited her a couple of years ago in Sausalito, I could not escape the mountain through the windows. Her work desk faced the mountain. Working at the base of the mountain, she told me how well the words flowed, how much she wanted to paint. Adnan’s work is just like her description of the mountain: “a miraculous thing, the miracle of matter itself.”