

The Dialectics of the Archaic and the Post-modern in Maghrebian Literature Written in French¹

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**“La nostalgie du passé/n’est pas une marche arrière”
—Bachir Hadj-Ali**

One of the reasons for the survival, indeed the flourishing of Maghrebian literature today (whose demise was predicted with the end of the colonial era) is its rootedness in more than one soil, culture and tradition. Since its inception the Maghrebian text written in French has been a synthesis of two creative impulses: the post-modern (acquired and visible) and the archaic (inherited, latent and somewhat invisible). Like its sub-Saharan and Caribbean counterparts, the Maghrebian text in French was and still is the direct beneficiary of a long and rich French heritage, especially in the domains of language and literature. But from its inception, that is since the Second World War, it has defied the canons of literary history. It has emerged fully developed and mature, both in form and subject matter—mature, but also grounded in more than one reality and culture.

Rooted in a rich and long memory, feeding on a shifting and perplexing reality and yet turned inexorably to the future, Maghrebian literature in French was destined to be a literature of syncretism, eclecticism and synthesis that fuses traditional materials and modes of narrative, the archaic, with avant-garde concerns and modes of expression, the post-modern.

Our study of the archaic focuses mainly on cultural, literary and critical knowledge, and centers around two main themes: that of a beginning, that is a search for events in the past that explain the abyss, and that of an excavation, mainly of the (collective) unconscious. As a genealogy symbolic and emblematic of the quest for identity and ontology, the archaic means (in the context of Maghrebian

literature) not only the tapping and using of traditional and ancient materials and forms of expression, but also the resurgence of orality and/or oral literature. As often presumed, the archaic is neither monolithic nor homogeneous. Meddeb acknowledges in *Talismano* (1979) that: "An impossible difference is lodged in the archaic" (4). This difference within the archaic is the blueprint for the post-modern discourse of plurality and alterity.

On the other hand, the post-modern is not only that "moment" of delegitimization of modernity, as expounded by J-F Lyotard and other social theorists of the post-modern knowledge; it is also a project, an esthetics and a theory in the making, that is an epistemology of the future. The question remains: can/will the archaic and the post-modern conquer or, at least, harness modernity?

Catapulted overnight into the post-war historical, philosophical, critical and literary debate prevalent in Europe, the third world intellectuals in general and the Maghrebians in particular found themselves in an impossible situation: either to assume the burden of modernity, as do Western intellectuals, or to demarcate themselves from it. But can one speak of the post-modern without having lived through or assumed the benefits and/or burden of modernity?

Decolonization

When Abdelkebir Khatibi subtitles his novel *La Mémoire tatouée* (1971) "Autobiography of the Decolonized," his impulse is manifestly deconstructive. For him an effective decolonization takes charge of the past (the French colonial experience is part of this) without dwelling on it, by searching for its moments of ruptures and discontinuities. As a process of self-emancipation, decolonization must, in order to be effective, posit the Other in the Self. The French colonial experience is already a part of the Maghreb's past as well as its future. In the discourse of alterity, what Khatibi calls *pensée autre*, as articulated by Meddeb, Ben Jelloun, Dib and others, the Other is within the self, lodged as difference in Maghrebian identity and ontology.

While Albert Memmi, Mohamed Dib and Malek Haddad examined the construction of colonialism and its aftereffects such as alienation and *déracinement* (uprooting) a generation earlier, Khatibi, Abdellatif Laâbi, Nabile Farès, Meddeb and other post-

Independence writers seem to be more preoccupied with its deconstruction. As a paradigm, decolonization posits the deconstruction, in the Derridean sense, not only of Western metaphysics but also Islamic theology. As examples of narratives of decolonization one could cite Farès' *Un Passager de l'Occident* (1973), Ben Jelloun's *Harrouda* (1973) and Meddeb's *Talismano*.

Moreover, as a strategy of writing, Maghrebian decolonization partakes, through a Foucauldian type of archaeological investigation, in the undoing of modernity as an imperialistic and colonialist project, with the view of challenging its (mis)representation of the "Native" and rectifying, as Meddeb does both in his fiction and essays, "the Orientalist consensus." Some writers in the Maghreb, such as Kateb and Farès advocate a more radical decolonization that extends back well beyond modernity itself: "After the decolonization of Algeria," proclaims the narrator in Farès' *Un Passager de l'Occident*, "there will be the Islamic decolonization of Algeria" (75).

A Maghrebian critique of modernity, especially of a diachronic and positivistic conception of History, may be thought of, mainly because of its recent emergence, as appertaining to a second moment of post-modernism that emphasizes the individual at the expense of the collective experience. By referring to himself as "decolonized," as Khatibi does in *La Mémoire tatouée*, the writer does not merely recognize a state of crisis, of disarray and vulnerability, he or she also begins the process of the *prise en charge* of this crisis. It is only natural that the decolonized should begin the dynamics of decolonization by assessing the current situation and by taking stock of the past. It is during this second moment, in which the Other is no longer the target of one's frustration, that the decolonized becomes self-conscious as a person and as a writer.

Back to the Future

The decolonized who lives in a permanent state of crisis, caught as he is in the bind between Tradition and Modernity, can only be the author of a narrative in crisis that conveys a sense of being linguistically, culturally and even stylistically sundered. Haunted by the past and solicited by the challenges of the future, the Maghrebian writer has come to be the living incarnation of a paradox.

For the Maghrebian, the road to the future will have to pass

through the past. This paradox is eloquently illustrated by the title given by Tahar Ben Jelloun to an anthology of Moroccan poetry: *La Mémoire future* (1976). This oxymoron of a title encapsulates the yet-to-be defined project of Maghrebian literature. Such a project cannot be carried out or sustained without theoretical intervention and massive reconceptualization.

Abdellatif Laâbi, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Nabile Farès and Abdelwahab Meddeb have sensed from the beginning of their careers the crucial role of theory for regaining intellectual initiative. Theory, for long the sole appanage of Western intellectuals, has emerged as a powerful and strategic weapon against invisibility and misrepresentation. More especially in the Maghreb, theory has become the symbolic indicator but also problematizer of the *prise en charge*, that is the assumption of the burden of the "abyss." Today, the proclaimed agenda of the younger generation of writers is tantamount to a literary crusade: how to reconquer the intellectual, aesthetic and literary initiative that was lost to the West, to modernity, with the collapse of the Moslem empire in Spain.

If the recent and impressive growth, in quantity but especially in quality, of Maghrebian literary production in French is indicative of anything, it tells us that the Maghrebian has become a full participant in a new, but somehow still undefined horizon of thought. Khatibi, Meddeb, Ben Jelloun, Boudjedra, Farès and a number of other young writers are recognized as major contributors in the current intellectual debate not only in the Maghreb but also in France and elsewhere, and as innovators who write on the very edge of post-modern style and thought.

Like other post-modernists, the Maghrebian writer—the archaeologist of future memory—is very much a trail-blazer. Such is the condition of the post-modernist, as he/she: "is working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done . . . Post-modern," argues J-F Lyotard in the *Post-modern Condition* (1984), "would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)" (81). As Khatibi argues in *Maghreb Pluriel* (1983), in words strikingly similar to Lyotard's, the dynamics of future memory have already been set in motion; it is therefore an ongoing praxis, a perpetual "to and fro" between past and present: "In writing its history, every society writes the time of its rootedness; and through this movement, it projects on the past that which, in the present, remains hidden. Indeed, History is about that

'hidden' and the germination of its multiple identity. And if there is a 'history' for us, it will have been: in the future anterior" (31).

As such, the Maghrebian text in French may be regarded as a product of but also a reflection on what Dib, Khatib and Meddeb recognize as the *célé*, the "hidden." In many respects, the Maghrebian text may be regarded as yet another of the archetypal quest stories of which world literature is so full; in short, a quest for Aladdin's lamp, a quest to unearth the hidden treasure: "This country buried underneath," says Meddeb's narrator in *Talismano* "shines with all the treasures of the world, and not a single person has bothered to tap it, so as to actualize its hidden potentialities" (151).

Some of the contours of this yet to be differentiated and yet to be formulated theoretical Maghrebian corpus need delineation. The problem of writing (*l'écriture*) in and of French, the *itinéraire* as form of a narrative in crisis and the return of the ancestral text are manifestations of the alliance of the post-modern and the archaic to bridge the abyss of modernity.

One of the most dramatic manifestations of the dialects of the archaic and the post-modern and the subsequent *prise en charge* of the abyss of modernity, is to be found in what Khatibi calls the *pensée en langues*. As a discourse of alterity at the antipodes of both Western metaphysics and Islamic theology that is a repudiation of the idea of centrism of any kind including *monolanguage*, this discourse in languages will express therefore the plurality of the Maghreb as a dynamic space *marge en éveil* or margin of difference. Above all, a discourse in languages, as a historical necessity, is a strategy that taps and energizes the linguistic potential of the Maghreb, whose minimalist expression, according to Khatibi, is *bilanguage*: "Perhaps the only discourse that is possible for us now is between two languages" (10). It is implied here that French is part of the linguistic horizon in the Maghreb.

Khatibi shifts the emphasis from *langue* to *langage*, which for him is more *langue + culture* than the Saussurian *langue + parole*. Through this qualitative shift, Khatibi attempts to marginalize the once passionate debate over language. His active advocacy of *bilanguage* is a far cry from the misgivings of the first generation of Maghrebian writers and poets like Malek Haddad who from an early age felt exiled in the French language. Starting as a factor of dispersal and dispossession, French has, ironically, become a means of reappropriating and tapping the potential of the archaic. Ironically

also, from an instrument of alienation, French is being reappropriated as a channel of liberation and especially of emancipation of women: "It was as if suddenly the French language gave me eyes," admits a narrator in Assia's Djébar's novel *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985), "and that it had given them to me to see in liberty" (204).

For Abdellatif Laâbi, however, the question of whether a foreign medium can express a national literature is fundamentally false. The poet's language, he pleads, is above all his own language. As early as 1966, Laâbi warned, in the inaugural issue of *Souffles*, against problematizing the question of French in Maghrebian literature. There is implicit in Laâbi's exhortation to go beyond a now sterile debate over *langue*, an invitation to unleash new, creative and critical energies, and to reconquer the initiative in literature and criticism in the vacuum opened by the advent of the post-modern age, the age that heralds the return of *parole*, of oral literature and traditions; in short, the age of writing: "There are no more novels, no more poems," proclaims Khair-Eddine, "there is writing" (12). For now, the crisis of *langue* seems to have been averted, as the emphasis shifts to *parole*. The Maghrebian writer has to a certain extent, successfully turned a problem (the question of French) into a creative problematic (*Ecriture*, writing).

Writing of/in French²

Recently, writing has emerged as a promising new problematic, particularly in the Maghrebian text in French. It has become the site/scene of a *polemos* between identity (the archaic) and difference (the post-modern). Every poem, every bit of narrative, every discourse is staged as a scene, the scene of writing, with all its accoutrements (paper, pen, desk, writer's block, the obsession of the *page blanche*, etc.) where memory is enacted and played out before the reading public. Khatibi calls this catharsis of memory in *Maghreb Pluriel*, and, in reference to Meddeb's *Talismano*, a story of amnesia, that is "a story of palimpsest, of that which is at work, somewhat, underneath the blank page, the effacement that springs from its trace" (200).

As a quest, the Maghrebian text is, above all, in search of itself, of its form and its ontological trace which was, for centuries, obscured by the discourse of modernity. The recovery of a graphic trace is of

paramount importance in this search, for the Maghrebian writer is not an amnesic calligrapher. In this context, the advent of modernity and colonialism signify, particularly for the Maghrebian, the loss of a calligraphic mode of writing.

A semi-iconic type of writing such as Arabic has lost out to the Gutenberg revolution and to linear typography; it has only survived as a trace. This explains why the contemporary Maghrebian writer is haunted by *l'écriture-trace*, that is the idea of writing as a creative trace.

On the personal level, the loss of calligraphic writing occurs when the child transfers from the Koranic school, the site of archaic knowledge, namely of calligraphy and theology, to the French school, *la gueule du loup* as Kateb called this space of modernity (the lion's den). The passage from one type of writing to another is tantamount to an epistemological break, a trauma that leaves indelible scars on the would-be writer. This plenitude of the relation to writing before the "break" is evoked by the quasi totality of writers with both fondness and nostalgia: "Practice calligraphy, the Fqih would tell us, because it leads to Paradise." Calligraphy, as Khatibi recalls in *La Mémoire tatouée*, is not a simple writing exercise, it is an existential experience: "To be able to write on the wooden tablet, it was necessary to sharpen a piece of reed, dip in a deep writing desk, and copy patiently the Koranic parables until blissful ecstasy" (28–29).



(Abdelkebir Khatibi, Mohammed Sijelmassi, *L'Art calligraphique arabe*, 28)

The final blow to handwriting and calligraphy came when the *calame* fell in disuse in favor of the ball-point. I suspect that when Mohamed Aziza speaks of his scriptural experience, his “corps à corps avec la langue française” (312), he is not merely struggling with his angst, or *affres de la création*. His pronouncement strikes me as a “literal truth.” He is writing against the grain, in the opposite direction. One could imagine the physical pain involved in the act of learning to write French: the hand moves from left to right when the mind (or ontology) is racing in the opposite direction: “The emblematic figure of the calligrapher, observes Aziza in *L’Astrolabe de la mer* (1979), allows the expression of the angst of creativity even when one trades, with insouciance, the traditional *calame* for the ball-point pen” (15).

Meddeb’s declared ambition is precisely to write such an impossible book, that is an open-ended book, a book that could be read horizontally and vertically, from left to right and vice versa: “A couched text, dreamed upside down in the Book, allographic fire which disorinates sensibility, transcribed from left to right while body and eyes follow the meditative meanderings reading the text from right to left, in the same horizontal continuity the reversed sense becomes clear” (276).

Meddeb’s text is typical of recent Maghrebian writing, where language reflects upon itself not only as a language but also as a trace. The new Maghrebian text in French is a doubly self-conscious text, in form and subject matter. As a text it seems to be as much concerned with the *mots/maux* of the tribe as with its traces. Boudjedra, Farès, Khatibi and Meddeb are conscious of the power of the written word and their status as writers to the point of narcissism and megalomania. Unquestionably, an important dimension of Maghrebian writing today is its emergence as a scriptural activity, an effect/affect which demands to be understood quite literally and letterally.

It was Jean Sénac who coined the now fashionable appellation “Littérature maghrébienne de graphie française” in his *Anthologie de la jeune poésie algérienne* (1971). Initially, the term was meant to de-emphasize the cultural content of the French language, marking a necessary distance vis-à-vis its connotative and symbolic function. Because it conjures up for many Maghrebian writers images of neo-colonial hegemony and cultural and political imperialism, the term francophone seems to meet with universal opprobrium.

More recently, *graphie française* or francography—how else to

translate this neologism?—that is, writing in and of French, has become, in and of itself, a creative problematic.³ Hence the desire to fathom not only the potentials of language but also of the graph as a new mode of writing.

An Arabesque of and in Words

Khatibi and Meddeb, especially, view their texts as arabesques. This figure, which is similar in its function to Henry James' "figure in the carpet," integrates and harmonizes heterogenous and sometimes antithetical forms. This arabesque of and in words has become the trademark of recent Maghrebian writings. As an aesthetic form rescued from archaic knowledge and Maghrebian memory, the arabesque expresses a yearning for the fluidity and circularity of the Arabic script and movement away from the constraining linearity of French. The arabesque offers, aesthetically at least, an integrated vision of the world, spatial and temporal, the coming together of signifier and signified, as well as the coming together textually, but also sexually, of French and Arabic, whose concomitant use is tantamount, especially in Meddeb's and in Khatibi's oeuvre, to an erotic experience.

The titles of Maghrebian texts reflect a preoccupation with writing as a creative trace and its concretization. Hence the profusion of titles that connote absence and presence, material and palpable inscriptions: *Grains de peau*, *La Mémoire future*, *La Mémoire tatouée*, *La Blessure de nom propre*, *Le Livre du sang*, *Talismano*, *Mémoire de l'absent*, *Corps négatif*, *L'Enfant de sable*.

Concretism in literature, especially in poetry, is neither new nor original. One may argue, nonetheless, that the Islamic tradition, because it inhibits the representation of all that is human, has advanced the dynamics of the graph. One need only look at the various editions of the Koran to appreciate the compositional dynamics of the graphically executed page.

The Algerian poet Bachir Hadj Ali was among the first Maghrebian writers to avail himself of this time-honored aesthetics by breathing a new presence onto the page through, what Eric Sellin cogently notes as: "a new compositional balance in the page of the text, eschewing the mixed media of the calligram and exploiting the artistic potential of letters and words without recourse to iconography or pictures" (291).

Sometimes this archeo-graphology takes the form of an etymological and philological investigation of cognate words. Boudjedra's protagonist in *La Répudiation* (1969) ridicules his French mistress for not knowing that such words as *razzia*, *algarade*, *alcool* are of Arabic origin. Chraïbi attempts in *La Mère du printemps* (1983) a musical rendition of his nostalgic return to his birthplace.

This palimpsestic obsession is emblematic of the quest for a linguistic identity and for a *monolague*. In the impossibility of attaining a *monolague*, the writer can only aspire to its problematization. The Maghrebian text is doomed therefore to be a game on and of language, at best, as Khatibi suggests in *Maghreb Pluriel*, the playing out of a simulacrum, that is a "splitting, a rupture of the *monolague* and its deportation, its movement of transference from one language to another (in every sense of 'to transfer')" (193).

This game of simulacrum is a palimpsestic game where an occulted identity, the submerged, unwritable mother tongue, strains to be present in the text. The words of the mother tongue are no longer relegated to an index, as was the case with Ahmed Sefrioui's and Mouloud Feraoun's novels, but incorporated organically and graphically in the text.

In our post-modern age where the word, written and spoken, is being lost to the image/picture, the Maghrebian writer, a newcomer to epistemological investigation, recognizes the validity of a certain archaic and classical knowledge with respect to the questions of the sign, the written sign in particular. Although belatedly, Maghrebian semiology has increasingly been gaining critical attention and recognition. In a brief text entitled: "Ce que je dois à Khatibi," Roland Barthes underlines some of the directions of Maghrebian semiology: "Khatibi and I are interested in the same things: images, signs, traces, letters, marks. And at the same time, because he shifts these categories as I conceive them, because he carries me into his realm, away from myself, to my very limits, Khatibi teaches me something new, shakes me up in my own knowledge."⁴

The Maghrebian Text as Itinerary

For many, the post-modern is the age of the "me" generation which privileges individual utterances, or *parole*, at the expense of social systems and constructs, or *langue*. The self-conscious, personal and idiosyncratic narrative expression (*parole*) has returned

with a vengeance. Hence, the interest accorded by the post-modernist to oral traditions and literature. The post-modern writer today, whether his name be Salman Rushdie, John Barth, Tayeb Salih, Gabriel Garcia Márquez or Tahar ben Jelloun, is a twin brother of the storyteller at Marakesh's famous square, Jema el Fena. The text becomes a narrative performance where the writer, like the storyteller, digresses, interjects, reflects and fabulates at will.

The performative aspect of narrative has given birth in Maghrebian letters to a plethora of new roles and functions of the writer. Still, whether the Maghrebian writer refers to himself as a "nomadic writer" (Kateb), a *sédentaire faussaire* (Meddeb), "scribe" (Boudjedra), *scripteur* (Khatibi), *écrivain public* (ben Jelloun), or "autodidacte" (Khair-Eddine) he remains, at heart, a fabulist. He is a narrative megalomaniac, a *refoulé textuel* who commits textual violence in abundance and with vengeance. Rachid Boudjedra, Mohammed Khair-Eddine, Driss Chraïbi, Yacine, Youcef Sebti, Hédi Bouraoui, to name only a few, have wrought havoc on the French language.

Through the use of disjointed syntax, Sebti, Khair-Eddine, Boudjedra and Meddeb, in particular, express their dissatisfaction (which is more a strategy, a founding gesture, than a negative reaction to French) with the grammar, logic and construction of French and its inability (hence their frustration) to accommodate a different ontology and discourse. By using audacious and problematic images, the Maghrebian attempts to render a multiple imagination and a fragmented reality. By displaying a disdain for chronology, historical accuracy, recognized punctuation and established genres, the Maghrebian writer in and of French, yearns for a mythic, but also mythologized past, for the uninterrupted (but also unpunctuated) flow of the oral utterance (*parole*) and aspires to the ideals of a poetic, that is an all-encompassing knowledge.

When Khair-Eddine proclaimed the advent of *écriture* in the Maghreb, his intention was to make of the Maghrebian text a space of experimentation, indifferentiation (of genres as well as gender) and freedom; freedom to label one's writing as one pleases, to be one's own critic. The critic and the student have thus been effectively bypassed (or incorporated) by the writer. Here are a few examples of authorial interventions: Khatibi's refers to his brand of writing as *écriture plurielle*, Boudjedra prefers *écriture démentielle*, Farès is *écriture-délire*, Bouraoui speaks of *écriture éclatée*, Dib of *écriture onirique*, whereas Sebti advocates *écriture-cri*, etc. This profusion of

highly personalized genres of writing, in reaction to the established and recognized literary genres, has given rise to a proliferating lexicon: *poème-cri*, *corpoème*, *roman-poème*, *poème-essai*, *roman-collage*, *péripétie*, *itinéraire*, etc. This proliferation is inevitable; it is the natural development of any narrative form that exceeds its limits.

The Narrative as a Collage

As a product of decolonization and of the post-modern age, the Maghrebian text naturally comes to reflect the writer's increasing sense of advocacy, moral and political, and activism in all sorts of causes. As a consequence, the Maghrebian text in French is rapidly becoming a proteiform text. Not only does the Maghrebian writer conceive in all genres; he or she is also engaged on all intellectual battlefronts: journalism, film, theater, politics, and polemics. This fragmentation of creative energies in the name of plurality and the increasing sense of being linguistically and culturally sundered are reflected in the narratives themselves, through a collage type technique.

With Chraïbi, Khatibi, Farès and Meddeb, the Maghrebian text has become a collage of sundry narrative elements and the repository of a festival of signs and of musical, pictorial and calligraphic illustrations. Collage as a pictorial and narrative technique, is a denial of the ideals of mastery, perfection and originality.

Collage also means an eclectic and syncretic rather than mimetic approach to reality and knowledge. Like other post-modernists, the Maghrebian has given up on an illusory pursuit of originality. In fact, he takes pride in writing with the discourse of others, ancient, modern and contemporary, and admits to borrowing from a variety of sources and traditions. Hence the importance and usefulness in the post-modern narrative discourse of intertextuality and intersubjectivity as dialogic practices. Khatibi dialogues with the Sufis and the Taoists, Meddeb with Hallaj, Ibn Arabi, Dante and Cervantes, Boudjedra with Ibn Khaldoun and Nafzaoui, ben Jelloun with Borges.

Avowedly the Maghrebian text is a collage of many sundered sensibilities, moods and elements. What Gregory Ulmer proposes in his discussion of *collage/montage* applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Maghrebian text in and of French. Collage is defined as follows: "To lift a certain number of elements from works, objects, preexisting

messages, and to integrate them in a new creation in order to produce an original totality manifesting ruptures of diverse sorts" (84).

Collage privileges two practices: parody and pastiche. In the Maghrebian text, these are often intertwined. Kateb's work is, in its themes and conception, at once a pastiche of *The 1001 Nights* and a parody of the lyrical novel. Khatibi's pastiche of the *Tao Tê Ching* is also a parody of dialectical reason. Fawzi Mellah's *Le Conclave des pleureuses* (1987) is both a parody of the Koranic text and a pastiche of Sartre's *Les Mots*.

In fact, when Meddeb refers to his narrative collage as *péripétie*, he merely corroborates an already established narrative practice. The peripatetic nature of the Maghrebian text in and of French had already been diagnosed as early as 1966 by the founder of the now defunct revue *Souffles*, Abdellatif Laâbi.

Laâbi described the Maghrebian narrative in French as *itinéraire*, that is "a to and fro in the same text between the narrative, the poetic and the discursive." This open-ended narrative zigzag is the truest expression of a fragmented reality, the very condition of the post-modern writer. In his formulation of the Maghrebian narrative to be, Laâbi opposes a *vécu générateur* (generating living) to a *penser organisant* (organizing thinking). This *vécu générateur* is undifferentiated experience, a reality generating its own dynamics while it remains impervious to mental or literary categorization, whereas the *penser organisant*, as epitomized by the New Novel, is emblematic of the separation of the world into nature and culture and the division of the self into an inner and outer reality.

The itinerary of the future will or will have been, according to the paradox of the future anterior, the product of a *vécu générateur*. With regard the Maghrebian text in French, this was inaugurated according to Laâbi, by Kateb in *Nedjma* (1956), but especially in *Le Polygone étoilé* (1966) and reaches its culmination, one may add, with Meddeb's *péripétie*, *Phantasia* (1986): "What interests us, notes Laâbi in a seminal essay in *Souffles*, in the books that will come out of the Maghreb or elsewhere, is precisely the advent of a text whose genesis and logic will no longer be the product of an act of doubling, but that of the irruption of a total and raw living experience, the organic expression of a non separated existence" (15). Given the objective and historical conditions that shape the Maghrebian text in French, this totalizing and organic expression sought after by the Maghrebian writer is not oneness in the theological or linguistic sense

(*monolague*) but plurality and difference. This discourse in languages as a concrete manifestation of the discourse of alterity and difference can only be expressed through collage, recreation and simulacrum.

The Return of the Ancestral Text

One important development in the post-modern is the rediscovery of the pleasure of narration. For the Maghrebian narration (especially oral narration) is part of his or her ontological experience, part of the *terroir*. In this he or she is not only recipient of a rich indigenous oral literature, Berber and African, but also of a glorious archaic knowledge, namely, pre-Islamic poetry, Arab and Islamic philosophy, and literature. These materials have been a boon to the Maghrebian who writes within the discourse of alterity and difference. But it is the rediscovery of *The Nights* that seems to have caught, more than any other event, everyone's imagination.

The Nights is the living proof of the vitality of the archaic and memory as rescuers of the present. It is also the example of how difference is at work in the archaic. For the Maghrebian who has been schooled in the corpus of the Other, *The Nights* is the ancestral text. He/she uses it as foil for the Other's strategy of invisibility and misrepresentation: "Once before your eyes [Occident], I disown," confesses the narrator in Khatibi's *La Mémoire tatouée*, "my 1001 *Nights*, nothing more to say, I have the parchment in my pocket, better still: *The Book of Songs*, ouwah! Ouwah!" (170). Indeed, every reference to *The Nights* is a reminder to the West of the existence of a memory anterior to itself. Moreover, *The Nights* is one of the rare non-Western texts that has permeated the modern consciousness of the West. As such it is a bridge over the abyss of modernity, the sort of bridge that the Maghrebian wants to build on.

But more importantly for the Maghrebian, *The Nights* as the profane text par excellence, is a foil for the other text, *The Koran*. The sacred (orthodoxy, theology, the archaic, identity, ideology, Arabic) and the profane (heresy, eroticism, mysticism, difference, French, the post-modern) and their current avatars are the two main axes in the Maghrebian text.

In an age where the narrative has become a central problem in literature and criticism, *The Nights*, as an expression of mankind's collective memory, is not only an incredible source of narrative

material and knowledge, both modern and archaic; it also looms as the narratological model, as the reference and as the model of the pleasure of narration and of narrative performance. In *Qui se souvient de la mer* (1962) Dib attempted to reinvent *The Nights* by giving it a current and modern form. Ben Jelloun's *L'Enfant de sable* (1985) and *La Nuit sacrée* (1987) are, in many respects, parables of *The Nights*. In Ben Jelloun's narratives the formal structure of the *The Nights* is discernible: there is a framework story enclosing a series of enframed ones, and a similar archetypal cast of familiar characters: Scheherazade, symbol of the female emancipator and aesthete (Ahmed/Zahra) battles and subdues Shahrayar, the patriarch/genocidal figure (Hajji Ahmed).

Ben Jelloun, like his fellow writers, makes wide use of *The Nights*' magical realism and oneiric visions to describe a complex, and sometimes hallucinatory reality. The oneiric and the marvelous function as a shield against the many encroachments of modernity and thus make possible a meeting, in the text, between present and past, reality and fantasy.

A few titles, just those that make a direct reference to *The Nights*, illustrate to what extent this book has permeated and energized Maghrebian literature in French. Nissaboury's *La 1002 ème nuit*, Khatibi's *De la 1003 ème nuit*, Boudjedra's *Les 1001 années de la nostalgie*, Abdallah Bensmain's *Versets pour un voyageur* (Sinbad), and Leila Sebbar's *Shérazade*.

Above all, *The Nights* is a narrative allegory, that is the narrative of both the self and others, an individual and collective work. As a text without any specific referent, and as such for adepts of collage, *The Nights* exemplifies two main aspects of post-modern writing: intertextuality and intersubjectivity. As a free text, it invites, dialogues, recalls other narratives from other parts of the world, claiming thus a true universal appeal; on the other hand, its narrators and characters, fictional and real, interact and interchange freely, for the narrative is constituted by a multiplicity of voices, each bringing to the narrative its life perspective, traits and idiosyncrasies.

In addition to the reappropriation and reinvention of *The Nights*, there is identification with its principal archetypal characters: Scheherazade and Sinbad. Again, the appeal of these two fictional characters to both writer and reader alike is in that they are at once archaic and post-modern.

For the Maghrebian, especially women writers, Scheherazade

has re-emerged as the ancestress of women's liberation. As such, she is perceived as a symbol of regeneration of the oppressed and the disoriented, of the post-modernist artist in general, and especially of the female artist. Assia Djébar's oeuvre revolves around the thematic of "the arable woman," quite a telling pun on the condition of women in the Maghreb and elsewhere. In her most accomplished narrative, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, Djébar's protagonist, hungry for love in a male dominated society, weaves numerous fanciful tales not only in order to survive as a human being but also to redeem her gender and by extension life itself. Scheherazade is reinvented, as suggested by the author's subtitle, as a "17 years old, dark and frizzy hair, green-eyed *Beurette*" (feminine of *Beur*, a second generation daughter of Algerian migrant workers in France). This is the story of a runaway adolescent girl who soon finds herself caught between two worlds, two cultures and two expectations, that of her parents, and that of French reality where she was born and educated. She elopes to Paris—this modern Baghdad—to a life of squatting and wandering. Sebbar draws directly from the ancestral text not only by naming her heroine Shérizade and by appropriating its central theme, survival, but also by adopting its sequential technique.

For both male and female writers, Scheherazade stands for liberation, the triumph of language (life) over silence (death), for creativity, that is for hope and fantasy. If she is the creature of our collective imagination, Sinbad issues from her imagination. In short, Sinbad is a fantasy of a fantasy. Sinbad is the artist's double, his alter ego. He stands for the poet who constantly moves from reality (*terra ferma*) to fantasy (the sea). He is the voyager, the errant through time and space.

Above all, Sinbad is the emblematic *dis/coureur*. The more he navigates, the more stories he tells. Sinbad's voyages are *un va et vient*, between land and sea, between reason and fantasy. They are prototypes of the Maghrebian itinerary. In the context of intellectual decolonization, Sinbad has been resuscitated as a foil for Ulysses. He is the *discoureur* par excellence and the ancestor to all the textually repressed of today.

Conclusion

The (re)actualization and yearning for the archaic and for cyclical time, the persistence of the legendary past as memory or

collective trace, are not only yearnings to conquer modernity, to bridge the abyss, but a desperate attempt to make sense of the present, a constantly shifting, always perplexing present and one therefore impossible to enunciate, let alone articulate.

If the predominant thematic of early Maghrebian writing in French dealt with the *maux de la tribu*, the seeds of dispersal and alienation, the dialectical response to that would be, or more exactly, will have been, that of reappropriation, (self)preservation and gathering.

Through the tenuous alliance of the archaic and the post-modern, the Maghrebian writer has, despite the many ruptures and vicissitudes, retrieved a semblance of continuity with the collective self. As the Maghreb prepares for the challenges of the twenty-first century, not only does Maghrebian literature written in French continue to explore the hidden potentialities of the past and reflect the many complex realities of the present. It also stands as a harbinger for all the changes and mutations, in short the politics of the future, that will have to be faced and experienced.

Notes

1. The term gains clarity from being hyphenated; it is the bridge over the abyss, a stance vis-à-vis modernity. The Maghrebian text written in French, a product of two different impulses, falls naturally under the rubric of the hyphenate.
2. Ronnie Scharfman gives, with regard the Maghrebian text in French, a felicitous rendition of the ambiguous term "écriture in/of French" (41).
3. It would be interesting, elsewhere, to see how the reference to this literature has evolved as against its content, from "Littérature d'Afrique du Nord," to "Littérature francophone d'Afrique," "Littérature maghrébine d'expression française," "Littérature de langue française," "Littérature de graphie française," and "Littérature maghrébine d'écriture française."
4. An excerpt from Barthes' text is reproduced in the "Prière d'insérer," in *Le livre du sang*, reproduced also on the back cover of *Love in two languages* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1989) translated by Richard Howard.

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