

ETEL ADNAN
 "LETTER FROM MURCIA"
 FROM *OF CITIES AND WOMEN*
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MURCIA, November 10th, 1990

Dear Fawwaz,

I'm back in Spain again, this time more to the south, for a seminar on Ibn 'Arabi, a commemoration of the 750th anniversary of his death in Damascus.

From the plane I was able to discover the dominant color of Spanish soil: dark brown earth, drifting toward red and black.

We had to land in Valencia and from there take the train to Murcia. I spent my first night in a hotel surrounded by sad buildings, in the Mediterraneo, an hotel which is ordinary and as sad as the postcards sold in its lobby. There is something exciting about entrances and lobbies of hotels, something sometimes threatening in the most transitory room of a place made itself for transitory living.

I wanted to spend the day in Valencia, to look around this city which is by the sea.

Writer and artist Etel Adnan, an urgent poet of both apocalypse and astounding tenderness, was born in Beirut in 1925. She grew up speaking Greek and Arabic, her parents' languages, was educated in French, then pursued studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne, UC Berkeley, and Harvard. Jalal Toufic says of Adnan's magisterial long poem *The Arab Apocalypse*, written during the siege of Beirut, "a poet whose country and its refugee camps were being shattered by explosions during its protracted civil war managed nonetheless, perhaps because she poetically felt, like Judge Schreiber and his solar anus and his singular cosmology, 'a sun in the rectal extremity' and 'a sun in the arms in the anus,' to heed this news 'The radio says History allocated 10 billion years to the sun/ the SUN has already lived half its age,' and while Frank Tipler and other Western physicists were trying to devise long-term emergency measures to deal with the future explosion of the scientific age's Sun, a yellow dwarf of spectral type G2 screamed: 'An Apocalypse sun explodes.'"

I'm copying this amazing passage directly from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, my online go-to, because I haven't finished reading Henri Corbin, the French scholar of the 13th-century Andalusian Sufi's work: "In one of his best known explanations of the nature of things, Ibn al-'Arabi looks at God's creativity as an analogue of human speech. Just as we create words and sentences in the substratum of breath, so God creates the universe by articulating words in the Breath of the All-Merciful (nafas al-rahmân), which is the deployment of existence (inbisât al-wujûd); indeed, existence itself is synonymous with

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mercy (rahma). His most elaborate cosmological scheme (among several) depicts the basic levels of cosmic deployment as corresponding with the twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet, each representing a specific modality of articulated existence." Arabi is one of the writers I hope to read deeply before my life is finished.

Adnan speaks as a painter who knows that pigment is directly meaning.

Her eye is so keen; I'd like her to have seen the sayas of Lima. The casual tone, a letter after all, masks the economy and precision of the lines. It's composed like a painting.

A horizontal regard. She looks flatly out into the rounding horizon, staring "straight into the eyes of this open space." The opening.

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I spent the afternoon on the beach where for hours I sat looking at the horizon which seemed so low and so close one would have thought you could jump in a small craft and reach it easily.

There were a lot of clouds, dear objects that fill the sky and leave bare, here and there, deep spots of blue, joyous abysses, or at least serene ones. Far off to the north, purple hills.

But here I am caught unprepared. Already Picasso arrives, suddenly, rapidly, in the guise of a cavalier riding a gray horse!

It was true. A rider was out with his horse, on a Sunday, going into the waves up to the animal's chest. Instantaneously I recall the drawings that the young Picasso made of cavaliers, on different beaches. Then other cavaliers arrived, real ones, riding through the refreshing air horses of different colors. I look at the sea, the waves, I hear the familiar sound of the Mediterranean, the powerful breathing of an incredible mass of water.

I had a late lunch in one of those restaurants built on the beach and—should I so quickly be filled with sorrow?—condemned to disappear. But I was able to take my time, to eat, to look straight into the eyes of this open space, a privileged place where the free line of the horizon creates a pure pleasure. I tell myself that traveling is very similar to being in love.

Today I'm on the train heading for Murcia. The train stops at little stations that look all alike.

The plain is covered with orchards. There are oranges, and blue grass. Houses. I already dream of coming back

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in the Spring and getting lost in the infinite smell of orange groves.

Spain descends toward the South, and in the landscape, Arab castles follow one after the other (chimerical castles!), ochre, in ruins, tenacious and crumbling, like everything that is Arabic. The plain shrinks, the high peaks stand on each side with miradors still standing guard. These witnesses to the civil wars of Arabic Spain make me think that nothing can destroy an Arab better than another Arab.

The anguish caused by the possibility of an impending war against Iraq inhabits my mind since August 2, and makes me extremely sensitive to this line of fortresses which the Arabs left here behind them.

In the landscape and in the body, time isn't linear. This is one aspect of the temporal dynamic of cosmology.

We leave Montessa Station... it's night and the train (in the vicinity of Alicante) follows the shoreline, the flat sea, the horizon forever near, and the same grays which gradually darken, the difference of tone between the sea and the sky persisting...

We arrive in Murcia an hour late. I leave my things at the hotel and go to a small palace where the Ibn 'Arabi congress is being held. The crowd is attentive, slightly solemn, while listening to professors and specialists explain an esoteric system of thought which is nevertheless in full expansion.

It's already evening and my tardiness thrusts me into a world which is in the throes of an intense fervor.

The first texts we hear throw us into the piercing clarity brought upon the invisible world that characterizes Ibn 'Arabi's thought. We hear his theorems on Divine essence, act, and attribute, and the relationships he

The trickle of a stream in a desert garden is sufficient to convey "the identity of water." No ocean, "however tumultuous," will give a "more exact (and moving) idea of water." Water's identity holds across every scale, which is like the beloved in Giorgio Agamben's "whatever being" (below). I mean, isn't it? Maybe thirst is what the two texts have in common? Adnan's burbling desert fountain reminds me, anyway, of the beloved in Agamben. The beloved—desired without predicates, loved simply for being "such as it is." And the eliding of scale: that a trickle and an ocean manifest equally.

establishes amongst the modalities of the Divine. Also evoked are a kind of oneiric perception, the apparitions through dreams and sleep, the communications through the night which were linking the disciples of Ibn 'Arabi with each other, and they, with the Master. It's as if they were surrounded by an abundance of Revelation.

Revelation in Arabic texts evokes fountains in gardens, in the benevolent and absolute light of Andalusia. No ocean, however tumultuous it may be, can give us an idea more exact (and moving) of water than does the smallest little stream in the gardens of Damascus or Murcia. Because, in order to perceive the identity of water and its effects on our sensibilities, there must be dry ground surrounding it, or hills with deep, vertical folds, like those which enclose Murcia or Granada, cities that thus become a mystical garden and earthly paradise. It is in the midst of this that Ibn 'Arabi came into the world.

This morning, among the speeches, there was one that was of particular interest to me: a remarkable discourse on the role of the Woman in Ibn 'Arabi's thought.

Ibn 'Arabi is the only great theologian of History that has given women absolute equality within the Absolute. Thus, for him, the world is held in balance because it is upheld by a human, living, pole—a *qutb*—who at his death is immediately replaced by another. If this pole were missing the world would falter into definitive chaos. And by affirming that this pole can be a woman, Ibn 'Arabi gives women a primordial function in the essential economy of the Universe.

The image of woman in Ibn 'Arabi represents—in the XIIIth century—a turning point in the genesis of the

notion of “woman” in the Arabo-Islamic world and, by way of influence, in Western thought.

Divine wisdom, thought Ibn ‘Arabi—before Dante, and those who followed him—is feminine; and human love is always a scandal because it is always a necessity, a model of divine love.

When the Arabo-Andalusian poet met a dazzling woman at Mecca, Nizam, a mistress of theology who preached in a mosque, his life was transformed, and he wrote under the charm of this bedazzlement his *Mystic Odes*. The scandal was immediate and the author of the poems was later forced to adjoin purely religious commentaries to his poetry of love and passion.

Ibn ‘Arabi went as far as possible in an exaltation of the woman which elevated her to the most essential functions of everyday life, of rational life, and mystical life.

He starts from actual and concrete love: he writes: “You have to be in love with a beautiful young girl. Through her you have experienced happiness and joy. Offering her beauty the wine of intensity, you have secretly conversed with the suns and discoursed with the full moons.”

“In front of she who radiates solar light when she smiles,” he says, “adieu to the self, and to patience.”

This woman’s word restores life. She is indomitable. Thanks to this human love the vision that unifies all love arises: “Love as love is one, though the objects of this love are different.”

The experience thus lived of Love’s unity leads Ibn ‘Arabi to the vision of the unity of the Whole, making

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There is an exciting body of work that discusses the relationship of troubador poetry (and the culture of courtly love in which it flourished) to the thought of Moorish Spain. The Andalusia of Ibn ‘Arabi was tri-cultural and multi-lingual; Christian, Jewish, and Arab thought developed there in tandem, each absorbing from and responding to the others, and the movement of ideas, people, and trade-goods in the Mediterranean area prevented any cultural isolationism. This ended before 1492, which, as well as being the date when the New World genocides began, marked the beginning of the Inquisition and the expulsion of the Sephardic Jews and Muslims from Spain.

We want to find a revolution on the scale of this scandal.

Etel Adnan is describing an ideal reading experience. I'd prefer not to read for any other reason.

A very strong reminder that the extremes of political uncertainty are happening at the levels of the body and the spirit. Interrogation may open an aesthetics, but the pain it also opens is not virtual but lived. Arendt's claim for the essential darkness of the

him “find in the most specific mountains and valleys a counterpoint to the divine stations.”

Everything is exalted by the woman; she traverses the signs of the Zodiac at their highest point. She is the morning that rises into the sky, the rose that arises from tears. Her throne is a high mountain, for she transcends the world. And from there, the sky of light is under her feet, her diadem, beyond the spheres. She establishes—on the human, as well as mystic level—harmony and union.

Yes, my dear friend, a XIIIth century Arab *sufi*, in this old city of Murcia, has awoken in me the need to know where I stand with myself, and where we are in the face of things. The formidable questions he raised, his clairvoyantly insane quest of the divine, the disquietude that must have underlined his apparent certainties, seem close to our sensibilities and torments. Are we going to exist? Will our civilization survive? Will the evil of bloody violence ever cease? When we read Ibn ‘Arabi, the questions that his frenzied quest of God arouses give us a kind of vertigo that some people who suffered head injuries have experienced. It’s as if fuses blow out in our brain when traversed by high-tension currents, when the uninterrupted invocation of Being congests the nervous system, and the heart, leading us to the abyss. For over half a century, we who live in the Arab Orient, and its whirlpools, experience interrogations about our destiny as painful as the mystical adventures of the past.

The weather is uncertain tonight, as is my soul. These questions that pursue me, as much as I pursue them, destabilize me emotionally. We have the power to ask them, but do we have the power to find their answers?

Space closes in on me when I attempt to break out of this state of sleepwalking in which I live, when time seems to run like an open faucet.

I wash my hands, I dust off the dresser, I turn off the light, I open my windows to air out the room, and everything is right, is adequate. Then I stop. I try to ask myself who I am, what I am good for, into what kind of an order I fit, for what purpose I act, what road I must take, what this difference is between, say, you and me, and everything flips over, my anguish breaks my heart, and I am thrown again, for my loss, into some inconsequential activity, or, if it comes quickly, into sleep.

And then, there is the whole of Spain outside.

I like what is happening now in Spain. Neither poor, nor rich, it's a "worker's" world such as communism dreamed of, but could not accomplish. The people seem happy on the whole, a little amazed I suppose by their new purchasing power, and the peace the country enjoys. In family discussions there is still talk of the civil war, but as of something exorcized. I like the crowds that smile at will and whose nonchalance subsists in the frantic rhythms of a motorized world.

There, in the conference rooms, Ibn 'Arabi represents a seeking for that which endures. And happiness, in the streets, is perhaps only ephemeral. But the ephemeral has the power to enrapture, like this moment, when I stand before a shop that sells television sets which all show simultaneously the streets of Granada and a Southern singer caught in a passionate frenzy. You could say this country is a very very long afternoon.

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heart—that it must be broken before it can expand—is a statement of the same tenor.

A healing crisis? Will the revolution first show in our bodies as rashes, sallow biles, stiffness, nausea, headache, nightsweat? Is this part of the fluidity of revolution?

In the street this morning there were white pigeons. A little girl aged five or six was feeding seeds to them. A dove had chosen to eat from her hand, perched on her wrist. The child had gone over to the side of the birds and the painful boiling of my heart calmed down while witnessing this scene.

I tell myself that we are terrorists, not terrorists in the political and ordinary sense of the word, but because we carry inside of our bodies—like explosives—all the deep troubles that befall our countries... and traveling doesn't change anything in any way. We are the scribes of a scattered self, living fragments, as if the parts of the self were writing down the bits and ends of a perception never complete.

To live with defeats, to share one's room with them, to chase away gas fumes with one's hands, to eat things that are swimming in oil, to remain standing for hours before news racks, these are the elements with which we counter the things which devour us. How can we attain whomever or whatever with such tools? We need to drink and vomit, to vomit an overused soul to make room for the possibility of a new one, something which we are far from being sure to get.

And here, in this little town of Murcia, a terrible question comes to my mind: do we have a soul, even if it were independent of God's existence? It seems that we aren't going to find answers in our end-of-the-century streets. Nothing can save us from the sadness we feel. But then, what a bliss when we find a restaurant without noise, what a beautiful day when war hasn't yet broken out in the desert, what a relief to have crossed the street without

being run over by a car, what a mystery resolved when we have not been lost! I have nothing more to add...

Spain (or should one say the Inquisition?) has carefully erased the traces of its Arabs. And this cultural genocide was soon followed by the slaughter of the Indians... and Spain will tomorrow celebrate the quincentennial of its conquest!

These last few days we have spoken of Ibn 'Arabi as if we were dealing with a ghost or a shadow. Where is his house? Where are the places he frequented, the libraries of his parents, the gardens in which he played?

Hearing the Arabic words behind the Spanish ones, I tell myself that Andalusia is the first loss, the death of the Mother, and of the orchards of which Lorca was the last tree.

Ibn 'Arabi pursued the Whole when all the details were falling one after the other around him. He had foreseen the fall.

Spain has been a mirror for me. An enormous mirror in which my reflection is but a small fragment. There are a lot of people in this mirror: people of yesterday and people of today, women, men, children, animals, plants. In the memory of a woman there is always the memory of several others, as if to be woman and to be memory were one and the same thing.

We will see, dear Fawwaz, where we're going, and I send you all of my love,

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