



## Wanderer and Polygraphist

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and faster into the ravine between the two rocks; and we believe we can read the unstoppable course of seasons in the falling of this sun . . .”

(Translated from German by Rosmarie Waldrop)

### **Abdelwahab Meddeb**

#### **Wanderer and Polygraphist**

Perhaps my taste for wandering comes from my early involvement—age ten—with the first desert Arab poets whose poems we had learned in school in Tunis. These poets of the fifth and sixth centuries—Imru’ al-Qays, Labid, Tarafa: just to recall some of their names is a pleasure—had already been presented to a European public by Goethe in his *West-östlicher Diwan*, with acknowledgments to Jones and Sylvestre de Sacy, the English and French Orientalists who had studied and translated them.

These poets are among the dead I find it necessary to dialogue with daily. They are my contemporaries in their very archaisms: from them I have learned the cult of the trace—a trace that stays mute despite the poet’s insistent desire to interpret it, to make it over into a sign that would return him to the path of meaning.

Such a trace signals displacement and witnesses absence. An irrevocable absence, an interrogation without answer opening only upon the memory of those moments when the gift of expenditure occurred along the vector of a pleasure that makes the body quake and brings it to extremes—annihilation, experience of nothingness, death and rebirth—in the interval opened up by the love of women, the praise of wine, the crossing of night and storm, empathy with the mount, horse or camel.

Thus the poem’s engine starts up, following the evocation of the trace, the stridency of the beginning: carried by the breath of the rhapsodic voice, the poem chains its sequences to the fragile pedestal of the desert, perdures despite its fragility, despite the effacement that lies in wait for it from the very moment it is echoed on its ecological site, metaphor of the white page. Faced with this metaphysics of an absence that demands no reparation, I track the idea of the trace through the fate that was its own in the distance covered by the Arab language. I take hold of it again once it has migrated into the Sufi text transcribed in Baghdad in the ninth century; there, through the mouths of Persian turncoats,

the trace assimilates itself to a saying destined to bear witness to the moments of presence that puncture the weave of a world usually inhabited by absence.

But the doubt remains. And the judgment of the spiritual speaker keeps oscillating between the authenticity or the illusion of those moments. Such skepticism doesn't dull affirmation's blade. And the experience is brought back in the savor of the trace. It's the trace the spiritual wanderer enjoys in his halts, tossed between contrary states, through alternating times that rhythm his itinerary, between the excessive gift and the lack of presence.

Such is the double reference that founds the mythic table on which I in turn inscribe my poetic saying. At the end of this century wanes the anthropological reality that engendered the immemorial sayings constituting the palimpsest to which I add my own graph in another alphabet. Assaulted from every side by the universalization of the Technological, nomadism and sufism are truths that keep withdrawing from the world. They are threatened by extinction, surviving at best in the folds of ritual or in the entropy of repetition and veneration, outside any creative impulse.

It is in the passage through, and in the migration, in the in-between they set up, that these energies can be actualized that had granted nomadism and sufism the conjuncture of the Spirit. As in all displacements, it is here too that form and meaning transform, are metamorphosed. The textual memory that registers the concept of the trace unfolds what it carries; subjected to a new lived experience and to a new space-time truth, it consumes itself as trace of the trace.

The poet's stance remains the same; in the face of irrevocable absence, the poet remains the guardian of Being, no matter that such a Being would envelop the world completely differently. The incessant revision of the interpretation of the world acts on the bodies and the imaginations. But the principle of the *mise-en-abîme* of the known by the unknown invests existence the same way. The darkness does not dissipate itself, it remains all around, very close, ready to grab the advancing foot, the proffered hand. Similarly, the cosmic coma remains unbreached, despite our lightning-fast breakthroughs that have only shaken the constructions propped up against the pretensions raised by the worry for totality and systems.

The more the scene of wandering widens to take in the whole planet, the more the poetics which enter in resonance with the locus of the desert are verified, that poetics which does not try to mask the truth of absence as expressed by the montage of the fragment, concomitant to the instant.

In the face of the disaster hitting one or the other of the places that divide the world, in the face of the ordinary contamination gnawing at its places and climates, the poet does not desert but is immersed in the reality of fellow human beings without however renouncing the withdrawal needed to fix his saying, that singular concatenation of words emanating from a minute grain of the infinite that erodes the dead and the quick.

I say that the body registers. It is my way of being present to the world, in what place reveals. Or in what is revealed between the conjunction of a *body* and a *place*. Thus does the wandering take on concrete form through an actualization subject to the norms that disseminate us in order to make us available to the discontinuity of our space-time.

A *body* that in a *place* tests the physiology of sensation and emotion through what the eye, the ear, the mouth, the fingers, the nose register; in the relation to the other body when all the senses are acted on; in the relation to the signs, to the architectonics that organize them and to the crisis which undoes the link.

The dissolute images and figures lead to a pleasure of the traces and vestiges, as if not to forget that the world resembles an abandoned house, approaching which weighs down the shoulders and constricts the chest of a body that remains marked by the abduction and the rapture procured by the intermediary hours when it gives himself to wine, food, flowers, wild animals, birds of prey, each in their particular truths that conjoin and concentrate to throw light on what gathers the poet's body and the woman's body, when both are guests of the dragon, guests of a scene set up in the interval separating the places and the moments.

I write this in Cairo, on the terrace of the sixteenth floor of the Everest, a run-down hotel frequented by the modest young Egyptians and which sits on Ramses Square; the giant pink granite statue of the eponymous pharaoh seems lost in the network of boulevards, viaducts, and highways that straddle and double the urban weft.

It is the dusk of a holiday (the country celebrates the October 1973 war which led to the recovery of the Sinai). A day less busy than usual. Yet the sound mass distorts one's listening capacity; and the mix of dust and fumes emanating from the old cars makes breathing difficult.

To forget that I'm choking I contemplate a sky whose henna tints spread a pink glow over the earthen walls along partitions of planes made up of greys and yellows, whose pastel shadings rhythm the distance. The Moqattam's screen of naked rock reminds me that this time I did not visit

the tomb of Ibn al-Fâridh, the twelfth-century Sufi singer of the bacchic metaphor, buried on the flanks of the steep hill.

After the muezzins' call spat through a thousand loudspeakers that distorted the amplified voice, I stumble upon the line of worshippers lying prone on the tiles of the waiting hall of the railway station.

I jump into a black taxi that takes me to Bab Nasr; I make my way to the fatimid city and the al-Hâkim mosque (10C)—a vesperal penumbra veils the catastrophic effects of a botched restoration; the mass of pillars and the succession of aisles and arcades remain impressive; the vast patio constitutes a filter that removes the chaos of sounds and tempers the disarray created by the overpolluted atmosphere; the patio's emptiness sets up a site of retreat for the poet; the curtain goes up on the spectacle of the first stars inscribing themselves into the blue of the sky slowly turning black.

In me the night person awakes. Instinctive and ferocious, the rush to write is irrepressible. It charges into the abyss between the real and the imaginary. My Cairo day has stored food for novel, poem, or essay. On the roads of my wandering, there is enough to quench the polygraphist's thirsts. At this halt, the privilege is given to the poem. I open the pages of my mental diwan and add to the old notebook containing the Cairo Fragments composed during my last visit to the city, in October 1989; I enrich and correct them, here now, this evening of 6 October 1997.

#### CAIRO FRAGMENTS

(October 1989)

—Like a baby in his mother's lap.

—Like a corpse in the washer's hands.

The weight of the body—nothing. Body of dust.

Bundle of atoms, a star in each pore.

His liver is roasting; it is done to a turn—

the smell pleases the guests' nostrils.

To take it at the right time, extract it from the live

before it contaminates the body's temple,

black smell, walls of coal,

agape for the celebration of the ~~dead~~ departing.

(word changed, Oct. 97)

On the vibrating bridge—the sparks  
in the clang of car horns. He splits the crowd —  
light vertigo above the water.  
His eyes transpierce the body's armor.  
He sees the passion in each heart,  
and every atom has a heart.

(October 1997)

His lungs—extinguished paper lanterns.  
His chest—a wounded cave.  
His throat sips from the yellow evil.  
Thirst covers his face  
at the edge of the river  
the ear no longer hears the scream.

The desert in the city  
the sand under the tooth  
the stones in the mouth  
he chews the wind.

On the banks of silence brother of exile  
very close to the newborn crescent  
in the round of strangers  
as in the expanding orb  
he meets the constellation of the migrants.

(Translated from French by Pierre Joris)