

“Our Memory Has No Future”

by Ammiel Alcalay

OF CITIES AND WOMEN (Letters to Fawwaz). By Etel Adnan. Post-Apollo Press. 114pp. \$11.

PARIS WHEN IT’S NAKED. By Etel Adnan. Post-Apollo Press. 115pp. \$13.50

Although she has lived in America for more than thirty years, the pleasure and power of Etel Adnan’s writing remain the privilege of far too few readers in this country. Born in Beirut to a Syrian Muslim father and a Greek Christian mother, Adnan began, even then, to negotiate what she called the two poles, the two cultures that Beirut and Damascus, the landscape of her childhood, represented.

She now writes in English, after having composed in French for many years (she divides her time between California and Paris). At the same time, she is unquestionably an Arab writer. How, then, can one come to an easy definition of Adnan? Is she a Lebanese writer, a French writer, an American writer, a woman writer?

Her example also throws into relief the narrowly defined and often exoticized category of Arab women’s writing, a body of literature that American readers are only beginning to familiarize themselves with through the work of better-known writers like Nawal el-Saadawi, Hanan al-Shaykh and Assia Djebar, as well as lesser-known writers like Fadwa Tuqun, Alifa Rifaat, Salwa Bakr and Sahar Khalifeh, among so many others. As always, part of the problem in seeing the larger picture has been availability. Since most American publishers are loath to take even minimal risks in order to introduce new writers in translation, readers are left with only the most schematic vision of foreign literatures and little or no sense of the dense interconnected texture of relationships out of which particular writers emerge. The remarkably innovative artistic life of Beirut, for example (which forms such a central part of Adnan’s experience), remains a largely closed chapter of intellectual history to those who were not directly involved

As well as being a novelist, essayist and poet, Adnan is also a painter, a fact that constantly informs her work, particularly her two latest’s books, *Paris, When It’s Naked* and *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)* [Post-Apollo Press, 35 Marie Street, Sausalito, CA 94965]. Of the connections between language, image and origins, Adnan has written that she can only express herself in Arabic through painting. Despite the multiplicity of her cultures and endeavors, these books provide an excellent introduction to her unique blend of acute observation, emotional integrity, political clarity and philosophical speculation.

Paris, When It’s Naked is the testimony of a lover whose conscience is stricken, whose awareness has been pierced by the fruit of other knowledge and experience. The lover is Adnan herself, the object of her desire is Paris and the forbidden fruits are her past and present allegiances. Composed of short sections, each titled “Paris, When It’s Naked,” this gem of a book offers an unconventional but crucial narrative. The relentless honesty,

openness and accumulated memory implicitly in Adnan's writing probe the idea of Europe as margin and center in ways that are increasingly important for us to grasp. Describing an encounter with a Parisian friend, Adnan writes:

Paris is beautiful. It aches to say so, one's arms are never big enough to hug such an immensity. Claude can say it innocently. It's harder for me to say so, it's also more poignant. It tears me apart. Paris is the heart of a lingering colonial power, and that knowledge goes to bed with me every night. When I walk in this city I plunge into an abyss, I lose myself in contemplation, I experience ecstasy, an ecstasy which I know to be also a defeat. Look, look how ugly are the Arab Quarter's pimps, how dehumanized the Algerians who squat in it, how destroyed their women, how degrading their prostitution to the very ones who vote for their expulsion. And I consider this monstrous being called Paris to be beautiful....

At the same time, Adnan never assumes the role of victim. Her gaze penetrates the cityscape, the objects and people inhabiting it, but never at the cost of sparing herself, of abdicating responsibility. Having grown up "thinking the world was French" and "that everything that mattered, that was 'in books,' or had authority, did not concern our environment," Adnan returns to Paris, to "French" and everything that implies. She roams the sites that had been projected onto the now distant but ever-present soil of Lebanon, in order to interrogate herself through those very signs, cultural icons and ways of life that once stood for both liberation and defeat. But the relations are never simple, for this amalgam of the "implanted" has formed, as well, the deepest recesses of her being. As she writes toward the end of the book:

Dear Parents, why did you lie to me? You told me the sky was blue while we watched it together, in Beirut, by the sea, and the sunset was a flame. You fooled a whole generation, then you destroyed it, the city is destroyed. The sky is not high either, as you taught me, it is so low, low, below my ceiling. I wonder if the rain will come in and spoil my books as it does my bones. I feel them, tonight, these bones you gave me. Neither one of you ever saw Paris, or intended to. Your trains never ended at Gare de Lyon. You thought France as an intruder into the order of things as you knew them. Paris was a place of perdition, you said. Be reassured: I did not lose my soul in it. I only lost my illusions. And you.

Adnan does not simply refer to aspects of a place, a culture or a people; rather, she partakes in and of them. And her range is exhilarating: From retracing the steps of Djuna Barnes to recording the very same colonized pain, aspirations and defeats of the cogs that make the great machine of Paris operate so smoothly:

A lot of immigrants work in factories and create a major problem: how to make them work without having them breathe our air, live in our cities, or look at our wives and husbands? This equation has not been solved. They go on with their menial jobs, genuinely happy to make a living. They love rain, asphalt, warm bread, goat cheese, industrial oils, long grocery hours. They see work as energy and life. People think it's incongruous that they smile in traffic jams. Paris is the machine that eats them and could reject them. What would you say if you became

spit? You wouldn't know it. Spit doesn't think; it evaporates pretty fast. I'm not going to spit carelessly anymore. Out of respect for the street.

Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz) takes many of the issues aroused by Paris on an extended itinerary, in letters written to Fawwaz Traboulsi, a Lebanese writer living in exile. Traboulsi had asked Adnan to contribute an article on feminism in the Arab world for a special issue of a journal he was editing on Arab women. In lieu of the article, she began a correspondence with him, and the book is made up of her missives over a two-year period, posted from Barcelona, Aix-en-Provence, Skopelos, Murcia, Amsterdam, Berlin, Rome and Beirut. But where *Paris, When It's Naked* delves into the accumulated layers of the self, *Of Cities & Women* is more concerned with the nature of race itself, its definition and redefinition, through philosophical speculation, observations on the relations between artists and their ostensible subjects, between women and cities, between women and men. As Adnan writes: "It's no longer a question of clarifying the distinction between the feminine and the masculine, but of redefining the human species."

Adnan goes about thinking through this redefinition in many guises: through an incident in the red-light district of Barcelona; the tale of a "disturbed" single woman on the Greek island of Skopelos who had been taken to a mental asylum; the death of a close friend in Beirut; her obsession with "what Cezanne and Picasso can reveal about women, about the way women are looked at." The passages on "these two sacred monsters," in addition to representing some most revelatory writing on the two painters, are also among the most striking sections in the book. After traveling to see where Picasso spent the last twenty years of his life, Adnan comments:

Picasso had enclosed himself in 30,000 acres of mountain land, of Cezanne's mountain, but on the side opposite to the one which Cezanne painted; he leaned back against this mountain as against Cezanne himself, as if against a wall, the chateau and the wall reminding one of the taut spiritual shadows of Barcelona's high palaces, inheritors of fanatical battles, the Crusades, and the Inquisition. At the bottom of a superb valley, on his rival's mountain, the old Andalusian master, who came through Catalonia, bought for himself an empty kingdom which he would people with his thoughts, and his canvases. That's where he locks himself up with the mystery of the woman...Picasso becomes a voyeur, therefore a witness, therefore woman. He depicts a primary sexuality, without culture, without decoration, which is neither bestial, nor angelic...In his exile he identifies with women, they who are exiled from Power, the place of origin.

Weaving throughout the letters, as always in Adnan's writing, is the awareness of war as presence, companion, nightmare, yardstick and fulcrum (World War II interrupted her secondary education, as the Lebanese civil war would later dislocate so many like her): "The cool breeze of early September awakes old memories. Of what? Of the sea rocks close to the Café Ajram in Beirut (long since destroyed), of the smell of the orange trees burnt fifty years later, by napalm. Our memory is woven with war." The imminence and eventual outbreak of the Gulf War also haunts these letters, as does Andalusia and the cultural genocide of the Arabs in Spain, followed by the slaughter of Native Americans in

the New World. Andalusia, Adnan laments, “the first loss, the death of the Mother, and of the orchards of which Lorca was the last tree.” An exquisite lyric sensibility (a cross between the mysticism of such great medievals as Rabia and Hildegard of Bingen and the American lucidity of Emily Dickinson or Lorine Niedecker) generously infuses Adnan’s evocative prose. Here also, as in two other key works, *Sitt Marie-Rose* (1982) and *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989) (both Post-Apollo), Adnan embodies the role of both visionary and chronicler, seeing what is to come by unveiling accepted ways of receiving and recording the past.

With what another Spaniard, Juan Goytisolo, has called the “memoricide” of cultural pluralism taking place in the heart of Europe, as fundamentalist warlords obliterate not only the people but the material, spiritual and cultural inheritance of Bosnia, we would do well to take cognizance of Adnan’s insistence on remembering, on her insistence that difference is memory, and this fact sustains the survival of the species:

The Christian militias of East Beirut concentrated their attacks, as if to annihilate the essentially Muslim center of the city which was the beauty—and the memory. They behaved as if they believed that they had to destroy History in order to assert their specificity. But like a man who has murdered the woman he loved, the Lebanese will start and have started to become the mad lovers of old Beirut.

By never losing sight of the primal and contradictory impulses that motivate human behavior, Adnan serves as an essential guide to a world bent on obliterating.