

Homage to Etel Adnan

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The Post-Apollo Press, 2012.

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1st published in *Gently Read Literature*, Winter 2014.

Books of homage often seem unsuitable for review. What is there to critique, amidst all that appreciation? Perhaps the starting point is an event at which fellow writers offer thanks and gratitude, through a mix of portrait, anecdote, and criticism, although the later is always within that frame of appreciation. How should a later, more distanced, less personal reader, gatecrash in?

That was my initial sense here, with a book that began in celebration of Etel Adnan's 2011 receipt of Small Press Traffic's Lifetime Achievement Award, itself an acknowledgement of a career that, since *Moonshots*, Adnan's first book of poetry in 1966, has moved (numerous times) from Beirut to Paris to California, through French, English and Arabic, and a formal diversity of fiction, essay and poetry.

Perhaps because of this I was initially drawn to contributions which explicitly foregrounded utility, such as Thom Donovan's essay on teaching Adnan's book-length poem *The Arab Apocalypse*. Yet, as Adnan - in *The Cost for Love We Are Not Willing to Pay* - has noted of reflecting upon the Venus de Milo: "all it did was deepen its mystery." As Donovan asks:

How in teaching, as well as our work as critics, scholars, and theorists, can we perform a poem's/text/s difficulty? How might going down - evoking the hellish recourses of schizophrenia or automatic processes - be absolutely necessary to translate (which is to say, bear across) a text's meaning? Is to enact a text's meaning to suffer it - to become patient to it - beyond mastery?

Donovan's answer is to "presence this impossibility" and it is various understandings of presence - the *present*, the *gift*, the *personality* - that is the achievement of this book, and which this essay seeks to elucidate.

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Adnan's books of poetry, prose and fiction each foreground an explicit present: be it the Lebanese civil war of her novella *Sitt Marie Rose*, the Californian weather that grounds the meditations of *SEA and FOG*, or an invitation to write on feminism that initiates the correspondence in *Of Cities & Women: Letters to Fawwaz*.

All the contributors here approach that *now* of Adnan's writing. I gather a sample of attempts to show their different vocabularies. David Buuck observes in his essay on Adnan's *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*:

Writing here is the practice of memory - not as the mere recollection or retelling of events, but as the making-present of the past, the scripting of that present-making in writing's work.

whilst Stephen Motika, writing on Adnan's *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, describes it as an example of "daybook, the poetic and philosophical thoughts embedded in the daily practice of living" characterized by "fleeting trajectories of thoughts, questions, intuitions, of inner and outer events." For Brandon Shimoda, Adnan's work demonstrates the "supremely generous relationship Etel upholds with the world and its contingencies" which, as Cole Swensen puts it, means a writing that can:

operate gracefully within the world as given; they [Adnan's texts] are an acceptance of it that yet insists upon contributing to it.

Across these different lexicons and emphasis, "now" emerges as a particular form of relation. Like several contributors, Roger Snell describes a social encounter, a dinner party at Adnan's house. Like Motika, Snell sees as exemplary what Adnan writes at the beginning of *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*:

Contrary to what is usually believed, it is not general ideas and a grandiose unfolding of great events that most impress the mind in times of heightened historical upheavals but, rather, it is the uninterrupted flow of little experiences, observations, disturbances, small ecstasies, or barely perceptible discouragements that make up the trivialized day-to-day-living.

For Snell this connects to a "vast storehouse of correspondences" where - quoting Edgardo Cozarinsky - "residues of reading" are "entrusted [with] the continuity of

[her] own written words, the lighting, brutal or perfidious.” A sample paragraph from Adnan’s *Seasons* offers one example:

Today, it looks as if we’re doomed. The sky is bent on itself. Gaza Street is flooded with blood. Nature is howling. The wind is transgressing the mind’s primary function of securing permanence. Space is the body’s prime desire. Stars ignore what it means to worry. Sheets of grayness dampen the spirit.

Donovan, meanwhile, explores this sense of relation via Jalal Toufic’s notion that we “need collaborators” to be equal to events such as the Lebanese Civil War. For Adnan in *The Arab Apocalypse* this means terrestrial forces, the posing within the poem of sun and earth as *I*. Motika’s essay notes how Mount Tamalpais functions as beast, space-ship, dream, woman, geographical wonder, and site for experiencing the elements.

Robert Grenier’s “For Etel” is dated to the now of its composition - May 19 2011 - looking to capture in the rhythms of its prose how his relationship to Adnan and her writing is composed of a series of impulses, observations, clarifications, emphases - which, in Grenier’s short text - are conveyed in typography (quote marks, upper and lower case, hyphens, slash, italics):

I remember looking at a Cézanne with Etel (at the MOMA in NY) from afar - speaking to & with each other ‘about it’ - then walking/ pushing together closer to it, to look & talk some more (as people do) ‘about it’ - to *See It (& Be In Relation With It)* from that spot...

An utterly-different-from-myself ‘Human Being’, with whom I feel an infinite *Kinship* - a ‘Stranger’ (like myself), and yet a ‘Native’ operative, with whom I wish to communicate, ‘now & forevermore’...

This demonstrates that, however much we talk about Adnan as a poet “In the Time of War” (to quote a title of her own), she is working with the material of language, and her insights stem from that working.

Such insight is developed by Benjamin Hollander, who contrasts Adnan’s comment (also made to him personally, in Adnan’s home) that there is “a global uniform tonality in the world today” with her belief that “languages start at home.” Hollander asks where, for Adnan, is this *home*:

Beruit? Paris? Sausalito? Where is “first home’s” place when other languages take its place, when they can seem like home but be at odds with it, as if “first home” were always accented. Consider how Arabic, French, and English can appear at home and be at odds with it - within Etel’s history, depending on where she is, goes, what she does.

Hollander notes how, during the Algerian War of Independence, when Adnan was teaching in English in the US, she considered herself a French Speaking person, until that conflict produced what she called “a problem of a political nature.”

To resolve this, rather than writing in French, Adnan decided to paint in Arabic, a visual and rhythmic copying of letter forms she did not fully understand, what Hollander (also referencing his own Hebrew) calls “a native accent which has lost the vocabulary to speak” and which for Adnan informs the space she described in an interview for *Poetry Flash* magazine:

What can I say of the fact that I do not use my native tongue and do not have the most important feeling that as a writer I should have, the feeling of direct communication with one’s audience.

How to write in the space of this lack? Stacy Szymaszek ends her contribution with an insight that, she says, “I’ll phrase as a proverb” and which makes of Adnan’s work an injunction to “create new and repeatable experiences with each other.” The proverb is a proposition about common experience and wisdom, which also includes the confounding opacity of riddle and koan.

Szymaszek’s essay begins from Pasolini’s remark “I know very well how contradictory one must be in order to be truly consistent.” Szymaszek finds, too, in Adnan’s work a sense of our “responsibility as individuals to use intelligence to come to terms with our death awareness,”

which acknowledges what follows from Adnan’s declared focus upon the “uninterrupted flow of little experiences”

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In an interview with Adnan (not included here, but available on Adnan’s website) Lynne Tillman says: “I think you’re trying to make a place from language.” In Cole

Swensen's contribution, this is partly understood in relation to Adnan's work as a visual artist, how writing and painting create a whole from "two completely different sorts of imaginative expansion."

Swensen is drawn to where the two practices come closest together, in Adnan's leporellos (accordion books), which include both text and illustration (including those partially understood Arabic letters as examples of both word and image), not through the sequential, single pages of a book, but the accordion's continual scroll. The relation to Adnan's writing, argues Swensen, is a three-dimensionality:

This versatility unleashes a three-dimensionality - she's covering a lot of territory, absolutely, but it's not, as the term suggests, only a great and varied place stretching out in all directions; it's also the huge vault of the sky above it, and it incorporates all the time it takes our imagination to cross it.

Which, for Swensen, connects to writing through the (handwritten) line, how it:

balances the intentionality that allows it to be legible with the accidental that guarantees its uniqueness and allows it to express a single moment in the writer's life, that allows gesture to remain alive on the page as a trace of the irreducible humanity of the author/ artist.

In Adnan's (non-accordion) books - often trade paperbacks from The Post-Apollo Press - this tension often leads to an emphasis on the paragraph as measure, like that from *Seasons* quoted earlier. They offer a moment that is complete, but also partially vanishing into the greater whole of the book itself. As a reader I commit to each paragraph as it forms, but find it immediately, willingly replaced (rather than, for example being a numbered axiom in a logical sequence). This shows in action what Adnan herself observes in that *Poetry Flash* discussion:

I have to be clear in my intentions, not in my words... There is a non-figurative or non-wordly world that is ours. But you have to express it through objective things which are colors or words...

Contributions by Brandon Shimoda and Anne Waldman explore this "non-figurative or non-wordly world that is ours." For Shimoda, landscape is understood as elemental, which gives him a language for his relationship to Adnan's work that accommodates reaches of time and space, the external world and a rich, imaginative consciousness, but resists forming that into too-rigid examples of "deep image." The

hope of such writing is to bring such expanses close to the everyday, conversation, love and other dailynesses.

That is how I read statements by Shimoda that describe Adnan's writing "as elemental, as water," where "every perception is still wet" producing the effect of "synthesizing both center and margins of the matrix of her and others' experience." Shimoda calls his relationship with Adnan "ancient and wholly regenerating, as love must be to create the islands it connects." He asks: "How else to build a life for oneself than to become the impossible element."

Anne Waldman's contribution is a private performance of Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse*, which utilises the full range of expressive capabilities: mouth and face enact the handwritten glyphs punctuating that poem's lines, posing the reader as "echolocation," the imperative to find vocal and gestural equivalents for "this text's magnitude of display and yearning and urgent alarm."

Later in her essay - a part of Waldman's *The Iovis Trilogy* - this voicing leads to personal memories of sleeping in the desert near Abu Simbel; evoke Mao and Rimbaud; discuss (via Adonis) the value accorded to recitation (as distinct from composition) in pre-Islamic Arab poetry. Waldman concludes by describing her use of such a performative reading when teaching the poetry of Berber (Amazigh) schoolchildren in Marrakech, using the poetry of William Blake.

If Shimoda inhabits and extends an encrypted opacity of the glyph, trying on the page to make of it something relational (recall Donovan's "presence this impossibility"), Waldman sees (this) text as something demanding enactment, a mirroring in another that in its inevitable transformations seeks meaning in poetry as an experience of the "non-wordly world" coming to articulacy via ecstasy, terror, prophecy, and penance.

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These, then, are some shifting lexicons of ways and words through which the contributors to this volume articulate the I-Thou space they each form with Adnan's work. Is it possible, in a space so intimate, to make some more general statements about Adnan herself and her example, to form, perhaps, a useful *type* or *figure* of the writer?

Swensen concludes that we should regard Adnan as a philosopher for whom “philosophy [is] made physical, tangible.” Adnan taught philosophy at the Dominican College of San Rafael in California. In *The Cost for Love We Are Not Willing to Pay* she observes of Nietzsche: “there’s no system, no hard center to his work, but a series of fundamental intuitions.” The Nietzsche quote that follows is “I am a rendez-vous of experiences,” whilst his nine summers in Sils Maria get described in Adnan’s essay on Mount Tamalpais as “nine ascensions into the next century.”

But a philosopher of what? Snell suggests Adnan’s work is held together by a “core set of ethics that refute the irrationality of our current time.” For Szymaszek, Adnan is a philosopher of love, whose fundamental insight is “the violence caused by people’s inability to hold space for many points of view” and how this “translates as an inability to love.”

Perhaps, though, such frames and roles are, in Adnan’s words, too much “a hard center.” The contributors here, I think, find a freedom in Adnan’s work which comes from its forms of commitment and engagement but also from a lack of any direct indications of how the writer earns a living. “Writing puts the world on hold” Adnan herself notes in *Seasons*. This means attention and writing themselves appear to offer a life sustaining economy.

Formally, too, “no hard center” means a writing whose component parts and conventions are fluid. This is what Laynie Browne observes of Adnan’s *Paris, When It’s Naked* in a Jacket2 commentary on the Poets’ Novel, writing how “She [Adnan] has chosen place [Paris] for character” with the consequence that:

At the same time the body of the speaker is walking through the streets, taking part in what she observes by embodying many possibilities of experience, she is also composing questions about existence, language, and perception. This novel, located in a city extends outward from that city to exist on many planes, locations, and modes of consciousness.

Such adaptation of devices of character and plot is also applicable to how ideas of *contemporary*, *engaged*, the *political* and *commitment* become revealed in Adnan’s work as a consequence of ever renewing acts of perception, rather than as a pre-defined quality to cite and impose.

This is what emerges from Joanne Kyger’s poem-essay, which entwines Kyger’s and Adnan’s words, as - referring to Adnan’s *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* - Kyger notes

“I view from the west side. Etel lives on the east side/ And sees all sides/ It seems effortless, the kinetics of her writing/ The balance of land, water, and sky.”

The remainder of Kyger’s contribution focusses on the “weather”: literally, the details of climate in their shared California home but also, for both of these attentive poet-minds, source of many sorts of news.

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For all the connections made, *Homage to Etel Adnan* reveals a unique figure. Only Roger Snell compares Adnan to other writers (Luis Cernuda, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Abdelfattah Kilito, Rebecca West and Juan Goytisolo). I thought myself of Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, and Hélène Cixous, with all their differences to Adnan and each other, for their sharing a fierce ambition and commitment to a certain space of written consciousness.

In diverse ways and places these writers also do what Jennifer Scappettone has observed, writing about Adnan when introducing a volume of the Belladonna Elders Series, where she included Adnan and Lyn Hejinian under an editorial frame of “poetry, landscape, apocalypse.” Scappettone offers one formulation of what contributors to *Homage to Etel Adnan* move towards and around:

Here is a task of poetry: to sense the terrain in a city that has done its utmost to balk at the limits and curvatures of landscape, to obscure its own shores and patterns of light; to seek out the margins disregarded by business, a few blocks or thousand miles away... To throw those echoes trammled by our administered time-space continuum of information, virtual plenitude, into more expansive relation, restoring distances, hostilities even. Into riverine lines - of social affects and affections, a neighborliness and a crossing that is not a leveling of identity between these and “the un-visited latitudes,” animal, landscape, other.

Without Adnan as a literal, physical neighbor to visit, it is in/as writing that I have tried to measure my own participation or not in such “social affects and affections.” For all that I admire it, a response like Shimoda’s does not feel available to me. For now, I need more “wordly world” strategies that utilize my distance, to make a figure and a type from the ideas and examples of writing and writer this book propagates.

Thus I have come to share the possibilities and doubts that characterize Thom Donovan's classroom. I also take off from this book and, apart from this essay, look at how these questions are explored poetry to poetry: in Thom Donovan's *The Hole* and Stacy Szymaszek's *Hyperglossia*; through ongoing installments of Jennifer Scappettone's *Exit 43*, its appearance in print alongside Adnan's "Celestial Cities": a sequence of poems (in that Belladonna Elders volume) dedicated to Szymaszek.

For all their continuities, each book of Adnan's I read suggests another way of understanding what *Homage to Etel Adnan* astutely and affectionately explores. In giving examples here, I have not considered at all the short fiction of *Master of the Eclipse*, or the sequences of poems that thread through *The Indian Never Had a Horse* and *The Spring Flowers Own & The Manifestations of the Voyage*. Nor have I made any mention of the fifty years of paintings exhibited at Documenta 13, the collaborations with composer Gavin Bryars...

To think about Adnan's work, then, is to be reminded of something she wrote in *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*: "There is no system to perception. Its randomness is its secret." Instead of a conclusion offering closure, I'm thinking about all that I've said here in relation to one of the gathered notes and observations that follows: "It seems to me that I write what I see, paint what I am."