

Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 23
Issue 1 *Empire and Occupation in France and
the Francophone Worlds*

Article 12

1-1-1999

Anamnesis in the Language of Writing

Assia Djébar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Djébar, Assia (1999) "Anamnesis in the Language of Writing," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 12. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1461>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Anamnesis in the Language of Writing

Abstract

To write, to return to the body, or, at the very least, to the hand in motion...

Keywords

write, return to the body, anamnesis

Anamnesis in the Language of Writing

Assia Djebar

Translated by Anne Donadey, with Christi Merrill¹
University of Iowa

I

To write, to return to the body, or, at the very least, to the hand in motion. First, a detour via the mother: to turn away from those beauties asleep, from those so melancholy in their silences, from those who watch the threshold in vain. To forget the closed-in gardens, the subdued voices, the courtyards without windows to the outside, opening onto a still and stubborn sky. Once, only once, but for a moment that lasts, to betray the faraway gaze of she who waits: the gaze of another woman, or of the same one; of another who thought she had passed you, and then stopped, still.

Ana-mnesis? No, first of all, a surge forward and, as the hand begins to race across the page, the feet stir, the body takes flight. . . . And the eyes, the eyes especially, the eyes fix themselves on the horizon, a horizon searched for, then found, sliding far away, sinking close at hand. . . . Nothing counts but the first glimmer, nothing but the light, nothing but the sun, persisting deep into the heart of the night.

To write, or to run? To write in order to run; indeed, to remember, in spite of oneself: not the past, but pre-memory, before the rising of the first dawn, before the night of nights, before. . . .

II

This would be writing in flight, let us say, writing as riding (but what mount could carry my tireless fever, and my doubt?): to write to the beat of my breath, exhaling, inhaling, pausing. . . .

To write—why not—eyes closed, fast advancing, with sure step, like a sightless person navigating through the crowd. Eyes closed, to perceive the iridescent movement inside oneself, twirling and gliding. Above all, not to immerse oneself in memory: rather, to touch nothing but its silkiness, or its slow tearing away. Rather, to imagine the air to be released, the space to be freed, navigating neither wildly nor recklessly, but with a steady hand.

Writing in order to flee, not in order to survive. Next fall, when I go to Oklahoma City, I shall begin to write, for myself, what will become a long poem, a poem set to the rhythm of walking, as though I were carried along by some slow caravan from the past; as though I were setting out to join the fenced-in Indian tribes of the last century who, most surely, wait for me; as though I were going to encounter the phantoms of the past—mine, certainly, as well as theirs. . . .²

I shall thus begin, next fall:

To write close to, or rather, alongside the abyss.

“Alongside” is certainly as important as the last word, “abyss,” if not more. “Alongside”: since this will be, as it already is, a motionless race, simply an inner journey, a ceaseless wandering, without delay, with neither pause nor respite, a sometimes slow, sometimes precipitous advance, always forging ahead (if I should wake in the middle of the night, my sleepy voice softly sings, “Faraway friends are falling, oh, my poor heart!”). And then, as soon as I begin to assess the situation by outlining the theme of anamnesis, as soon as this desire surges within me, already a contrary project presents and imposes itself on me.

III

Anamnesis . . .

A year ago, I was just finishing *Vaste est la prison*. . . .³

But have I really left it behind? A prison whose walls keep widening, whose sentence keeps lengthening, like the effects of time on Saharan frescoes as they appear, then disappear, little by little, on prehistoric cave walls—were they dreamed of, or truly encountered? Women hunters on the cave walls, striding somewhere, among ostriches and buffalo, on the lookout for some way out, seen only in a

flash

Vaste est la prison: the novel barely written, gaps begin to appear, widening under the substance of the text, memory gaps.

A wind suddenly sweeps through them now—is it a tornado, or a slight, subtle breeze? Unexpected memory gaps: for example, during the grandmother's early adolescence, what I never knew, what the mother (that is, her daughter) never told me, what the mother most likely never heard put into words, but somehow guessed at, was an occluded transmission. And yet, some seventy-five, no, ninety years later (for if my grandmother were alive today she would be a centenarian), what my grandmother overshadowed and sealed up (she and the women around her and with her at the time) was the tragic death of her own mother—a death from jealousy and powerlessness, a death from the incurable wound of an unthinking husband's blatant cruelty. The very thing that should have been obvious to all the women, enough to keep them from living, from laughing, bearing children, hoping—facing all of them was this savage grief coming from one of them, causing all to slowly begin to putrefy. That is what should have happened and yet never did, not even with the grandmother!

As a fourteen-year-old girl, ready to enter into early matrimony, or perhaps married just recently, she suddenly wanted to obliterate the mother and her defeat, the stricken mother, taken away and so quickly buried. The grandmother, on this occasion, hardened herself, armed herself with virile energy, but also with a voracious silence and with the mud of forgetfulness.

At the price of forgetting, or pretending to forget, the mother's defeat, she, the grandmother, was able to live, with a strength first only glimpsed fleetingly, then recovered gradually, thanks to constant struggle. She turned her back on memory—with its ridges, its rough spots, its desert, and its sterility.

In the end, she presented herself to me as a virile foremother, unwilling to communicate to me the price she had to pay, initially and then again each day, silently. In a way, opening an abyss behind her, inverting her sexual role from that point on, she nevertheless wanted to become for me—me, the little girl of yesteryear sitting at evening gatherings by the glowing embers—the transmitter, the storyteller of heroic ways and deeds.

Deeds of men of old, of their battles, and of their glories, even in defeat.

Thus memory inverts itself. The guardian, my grandmother, masked herself for me; night after night, she would faithfully re-

count the history of the tribe for me—the palms of her hands, reddened by henna, holding mine together in their warmth. At last, she softened into the role of storyteller, taking up the golden thread.

The thread of life, to be sure, the trace of battles. In front of the seated storyteller, the little girl is listening, crouching at her knee. Behind this screen of reconstituted glory, a woman nevertheless keeps on falling, in the mortal faint of a defeated wife, defeated till death.

Fifty years later, it is the daughter of the deceased who recounts memories of . . . her second husband to me, the little girl crouching at her knee. In turn, fifty years later, I seize her voice for my writing in French. I intercept the foremother's Arabic sound. She had extinguished a woman's originary grief (her mother swallowed in forgetfulness) in order to rekindle the fiery fervor of her noble husband: was that a slippage, an inversion, a betrayal of women, or an obscure strategy erected on the summit of her craggy memory that allowed her to continue, to survive, to hope against all odds?

Thus have I reached this strange denial of the mother of yesteryear, of the felled woman, who felled herself. The adolescent daughter, who was probably ready to take her own marital vows, became frightened. And wanted to forget everything at once.

To disavow the mother, the immolated one.
Anamnesis?

IV

Memory gaps, as I said, resurface in my search for *Vaste est la prison*. But there is also the loss of voice: first, my mother's aphasia, as a little girl, a loss that lasted an entire year.

And suddenly I am reminded of the Iranian poet who died a young woman, at age thirty-two, on a street in Teheran in 1967:

The voice, the voice, the voice,
Only the voice remains—
Why should I stop?

This was to be one of her last poems. This poet "of another birth," Forugh Farrokhzad, has been haunting me for so long now.⁴

"Only the voice remains." Now the mother, a six-year-old girl who remained mute for a year, and then tried to forget, the mother—my mother—kept silent for all that time ("a cold season" that stretched into a year), wanting to follow the wake of her disap-

peared sister Cherifa. To leave as if following her; her voice evaporated at the hour of the funeral, as if preceding her, pulling her far away, beyond the Lethe. . . .⁵

For an entire year in this white tunnel of silence, she must have staggered, teetered, on the brink of the abyss. Days of vertigo, all those months without words, prayers, or sighs. . . . Only her eyes faced the others, staring beyond them, searching for a voice that would not return, like the flight of a lark frozen in a steel sky! The city by the sea, with its ancient harbor and its lighthouse, immutable over two millennia, the city waited its turn. . . .

And what if it were always this way, at least in my country today? All violence, turmoil, and stifled rumblings. . . . Yes, what if it were always this way, even today: to know that for each disappeared girl (for Cherifa who died yesterday of typhoid fever, how many young girls and grown women of Algeria have fallen, murdered, today? The count for just one year has reached at least sixty!), for each of these, for each contemporary Algerian Iphigeneia, or for each Antigone with no fiancé to accompany her to the grave, alive, to await her death (yes, thanks to the mother—my own mother—and to this desire for anamnesis that her ancient sorrow imposed upon me), I know now, I am sure that for each woman who must die in the light of day, for each sacrificed woman, for the loss of each immolated woman, a young girl, a single one, in the neighborhood close by, loses her voice, for weeks or for months, or longer still, sometimes forever.

The face of the child-witness is suddenly left with only her gaze, her waiting eyes to face us.

Ordinarily, young girls do not haunt tragedies. They remain in the shadows, standing behind the curtain, or at most, in the wings (it is most likely at the moment in which the blood of their nubile bodies begins to flow that they are supposed to arrive on the dangerous, even fatal, stage!).

But what of my land where nearly all women, young or old, have been fenced in, packed in, confined together in enclosed spaces (gardens, shacks, or patios) in order to prevent their hymns, their cries, their showers of song from ever reaching a potential audience?

There only remain streets, empty, or full of men and young boys, which amounts to the same thing.

No, there is no theater for this world; the people I come from do not have the right to witness the ritual of a tragedy unfolding before

them, because the same tenacious division of the sexes keeps reappearing at the very center of social life, of the city, of its two-pronged history.

What if there were, precisely, a theater for mute women, a theater of the blank stare, unfolding in all its mystery and invisibility? Then, could the voices of the young girls who must have looked death in the face and seen its grimace have fled toward such a ritual, such a liturgy? Such a necessary purification rite?

In the context of such a draining of voice, such an entombment of the past, where can the trajectories of our memories carry us today? Where does the archaeology of our reclaimed female genealogy lead us? As much towards loss and vertigo as towards a possible renewal?

V

Long ago, perhaps close to twenty years ago already, I believed that to navigate the night of women (at least, of Islamic women) would help me to recover the strength, the energy, the faith of the steadfast foremothers. I dreamed that if only I could attempt to swim against the current, to confront the violent ebb and flow of dispersal through orality, they would be able to pass their survival secrets on to me . . . I believed.

I approached this undertaking in a naive way. I was deluding myself, of course: these old women with their weather-beaten, wrinkled skin, their tattooed cheeks, brightly colored headdress, and their ancient talk laced with religious formulas like brasswork glittering on a breastplate, these foremothers had silenced their originary voices, had swallowed the sounds of their youthful hopes from the beginning. And when it was their daughters—such as my mother—who stood up, vulnerable, petrified, then the matrons quickly resorted to magic, poetry, and trances: quick, quick, let the voice return!

Only the voice remains—
Why should I stop?

still sighs the ghost of the 1960s poet in Tehran.

These rural and city women of yesteryear, Berber and pious Arabicized women from my Maghreb, these women so far from Forugh Farrokhzad, could nevertheless have taken up for themselves the refined lament of the mortally wounded poet.

My very mother—to return to the novel *Vaste est la prison*—could not have known that it was, in fact, thanks to this long year of aphasia that she was able, so many years later, to carry out her escapes and her passages. Her crossings.

At the beginning of her womanhood, my mother grafted all her strength onto this initial loss of voice, a loss that one could view as the price paid for sisterhood, briefly glimpsed then erased. She found the strength, as a child, to turn her back on the Berber language, the language of a father who never was to return; as a young woman, to fall in love with the suitor who came to her, French books in hand; to then risk forfeiting some of her status of cherished city-dweller while initiating a dialogue, in French, with European women in her neighborhood.

Then the mother turned into a traveler, for the sake of her son, incarcerated in faraway French prisons. She went there by boat, by train, by plane—awkward and elegant, with her proper spoken French and a secret in Arabic hidden in her poise and stiff pride.

Loss of yesterday's voice: it is in this shattering, in this stretch of time without memory, almost without a trace (except for the echo of my search, brought back by chance), that my mother's victorious mobility—her rebirth—inscribes itself. For she must have ardently desired to continue walking along the edge of the shadows. Innocent shadows dissolving into sunlight.

I have said it before and say it again now: today, in my country, so many other young girls must brave the same vertigo: to let their voices, their hearts, or their memories, accompany their sacrificed female relatives, to shroud themselves in silence at the risk of never returning.

Only time will tell, one day, what unexpected strength these countless mute women will discover in themselves. Armed again, but for what purpose if not to sketch the voice and seal it firm, to fix it indelibly on the page, in stone, or on the wind, in other words, for writing, painting, sculpting, music. Yes, indeed, for all types of writing.

VI

I will conclude with Luce Irigaray's urgings:

we must not once more kill the mother who was sacrificed to the origins of our culture. We must give her new life, new life to that

mother, to our mother within us and between us. . . . We must give her the right to pleasure, to *jouissance*, to passion, restore her right to speech, and sometimes to cries and anger.

She then adds the following, on the same topic of the “bodily encounter with the mother” (and indeed, what signification could any anamnesis have if it did not take that bodily encounter as its starting point?):

We have to discover a language [*langage*] which does not replace the bodily encounter, as paternal language [*langue*] attempts to do, but which can go along with it, words which do not bar the corporeal, but which speak corporeal.⁶

Thus, these quotations allow me to finally return to the “language [*langue*] of writing” announced in my title, this language that I could have called my “paternal language” (as the first volume of my novelistic quartet, *Fantasia*, made quite explicit in 1985).

To return from my crossing into a female memory, a memory that spans nearly a century (my mother, my grandmother, and her own mother, the very first sacrificed woman), and to bring back a new kind of viaticum, strength and nourishment for the road ahead—not goatskins of holy water, but the ebb and flow of biographies that risk being frozen, obscured, suddenly turned into gold or lead, but not, alas, into a mother’s fluid, a father’s seed, or reviving spirits where all that matters is the strength of the alcohol.

In other words, must so many narratives—rearing up like wild mares, rushing forward, or fleeing in retreat—must all this chaotic movement, incessantly searching for a way out, freeze up under my fingers the moment I write them in French? Turn to stone, motionless, petrified, as if striking an aesthetic pose, listening to others who also turned to stone?

Must any paternal language, the moment it is put into use, lead us on, almost in spite of itself, to the ultimate instant, swiftly bringing death, in the hands of a female narrator of the “maternal bodily encounter”?

Because I write and speak in the Others’ language, the language of the mediating father as well, do I not, in turn, compromise myself in some way through an objective alliance with the murderers of the first mother?

Am I not an accomplice to the first blood, to the first sacrificing father, to some obscure Maghrebian Agamemnon who would have departed, like the other, to conquer some illusory Troy?

“Words which speak corporeal,” Irigaray writes. How may I conclude, if not through a last allusion to *Vaste est la prison*, a novel that I henceforth question from the outside and now call into question? It is I think not by chance that my crossing over into my female genealogy (titled “A silent desire” in Part III of that same novel) is next to and confronts the erasure of the Berber alphabet.

The re-reading—the end of the illegibility—of the earliest writing (I would almost call it the mother-writing), only occurs thanks to the intervention of the many foreigners (travelers, former slaves, archaeologists) who came in search of mystery for mystery’s sake, or, on the contrary, for a very concrete gain.

For me, as well, the language of writing that was, throughout my childhood, the language of the father (“a little Arab girl going to school for the first time, walking hand in hand with her father”), that language is, first and foremost, for me, as an Algerian woman, the language of the previous century’s invaders, the language of battle and virile bodily encounters—in other words, the language of blood.⁷ Perhaps, after all, that is why the first sacrifice of my genealogy—the great-grandmother’s sudden death, as if by suffocation, as if her boiling emotions had poisoned her blood—could only resurface in my memory through (or thanks to) that adverse language . . . “Adverse language” used to tell about adversity, including that suffered by women and swallowed for so long.

It is not by chance, either, that in *Vaste est la prison*—which I will call the book not only “of the mother” but “of the mothers”—a throng of dead others rises up (and most certainly not in the mother’s tongue), those who perished by the thousands in the fall of Carthage. . . . The books rescued, the fire consuming the bodies, the disaster and its relentless rhythm, the whole scene is resurrected thanks to the Greek historian Polybius: a third type of writing, then, neither mine (the French) nor the Berber on the Dougga stele, but the Greek, encircles my female genealogy—passing, as it did, from Arabic and Berber to the French inscription—in a ring of fire. This backdrop of disaster glows red in History’s infinite spiral.

VII

What can I say about “my” French language, however, in this game of opposites, in this bodily encounter with so many mothers? It seems to me sometimes that my French is cracking, shattering,

that its marble surface breaks into pieces. The muzzled sounds of oral languages behind my French, muted languages on its margins, placed outside the realm of writing since my early childhood, their music, their movement, the overflow of their hidden life resurface within my French and stir up an effervescence under its very flesh.

I write in a language deemed clear (the language of Descartes), but against a backdrop of fire, surrounded by danger and sometimes, these days, by terror. I attempt to communicate I'm not sure quite what, in a language, at any rate, whose main criterion seems to be clarity.

Yet, in spite of myself, in spite of my respect for this language, whose deep rhythms, whose very breath move me, in spite of being aware of its "dignity" (isn't the "dignity" of a language simply its soul?), in my sentences, or in the structure of my verbal constructions (of which I conceive as an alliance between my need for architecture and my aspiration for musical fervor), in spite, then, of this language that became the father's, the movement animating my characters—the people of my genealogy as well as their shadows who, in a sense, are looking at me, challenging me, expecting me to pull them, to make them enter, in spite of myself, in spite of themselves, into the house of this foreign language—this movement becomes my principal thrust, the central core of my novelistic form.

Thus, I see myself riding with so many shadows, but also with the voices of invisible, illiterate women; indeed, riding a language that must be guided and sometimes coaxed like a wild mare. A language of movement, my movement that invents and recharges itself in the very writing of the novel. . . . Step by step, the slow rhythm gains momentum, and I no longer know if it is the others that I carry (the mothers, sisters, foremothers) who pull the language and I, its rider, along, or if it is the language of writing, neither dominated nor driven wild, simply inhabited and thus transformed, that sweeps us along and carries us away. Us? Myself and the other women, of course, who all populate my crowded memory.

Thus goes the ride, for the length of a novel, a narrative, or a short story.

To write, or to run. To write in order to run. To run, and to remember. Forward, or back, what's the difference?

Notes

1. Thanks go to Michel Laronde for his close reading of and suggestions about this translation. All notes are translator's notes.
2. This essay was written in April 1996. In the fall of 1996, Djebar was awarded the prestigious Neustadt International Prize for Literature in Oklahoma. See the special issue of *World Literature Today* dedicated to her works.
3. The 1995 novel, which is the third volume of a novelistic quartet begun with *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Ombre sultane*, has not yet been translated into English. The other two were translated by Dorothy S. Blair under the titles *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* and *A Sister to Scheherazade*.
4. *Another Birth* is the title of Farrokhzad's most famous collection of poems.
5. In Greek mythology, the Lethe is the Underworld river of forgetfulness. The dead descending to the Underworld drank from its waters and forgot about their lives on earth.
6. Luce Irigaray, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother" 43. This text was first published in French, in 1981, as *Le Corps à corps avec la mère*.
7. The quotation is from the sentence that opens the autobiographical novel *Fantasia*.

Works Cited

- Djebar, Assia. *A Sister to Scheherazade*. Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.
- . *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*. Trans. Dorothy S. Blair. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.
- . *L'Amour, la fantasia*. Paris: J.C. Lattès, 1985.
- . *Ombre sultane*. Paris: J.C. Lattès, 1987.
- . *Vaste est la prison*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1995.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Le Corps à corps avec la mère*. Montreal: Editions de la pleine lune, 1981.
- . "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother." Trans. David Macey. *The Irigaray Reader*. Ed. Margaret Whitford. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1991. 34-46.
- World Literature Today* 70.4 (1996). Special issue on Assia Djebar.