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# TO HOLD THE WORLD VISIBLE

## WRITING AND HISTORY IN THE WORK OF MOHAMMED DIB

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# Abstract

This dissertation proposes a broad reading of the work of the Algerian francophone writer Mohammed Dib, some 30 volumes of novels, poetry, stories, and nonfiction writing published between 1952 and 2003. It reads a tension in Dib's work between the "visible," the immediately given details of life and transmissible structure of meaning, and the "invisible," larger structures or processes that link disparate elements without being themselves describable. Such a tension can be translated into the languages of Islamic mysticism, phenomenology, or a philosophy of history, all discourses that guide the investigation of Dib's work. The dissertation proposes that for Dib an acknowledgement of the invisible – as an underlying unity connecting its various manifestations, a flux of experience not divisible into separate categories of object and subject, or a course of events exceeding the control and grasp of definable actors – does not lead to escapism or rejection of reality, but to a return to the visible, to increased attention to the details of everyday life and the observable world. The act of writing, for Dib, involves holding to the world, even though the words that link writer and reader are only shadows of the events they witness or the processes that produce them. The dissertation's first half focuses on Dib's writing technique and influence, situating him in 20th-century French and francophone literary theory, tracing his adoption of Arab-Islamic, North African, and Sufi literary and aesthetic traditions, and analyzing how conscious experience forms and dissolves in his presentation of landscape and in childhood. The second half turns to his treatment of historical events, mainly those of Algeria through the colonial period, the war of independence, the post-independence period, and the civil war of the 1990s. Dib's commitment to the perspective of the marginalized, search for a way of presenting history that does not condemn the details of everyday life to insignificance, and attention to the role of imagination lead to criticism of colonial, bureaucratic, and apocalyptic attitudes as attempting to escape the given world, and searches for a use of history that undoes, rather than reinforces, physical and symbolic acts of exclusion.

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# Note on Languages in the Text

I have kept all quotations from Dib's work in French. For other sources in French, I have used English translations where published ones were available and kept the original in other cases. For Arabic words, I have used the transliteration guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES)*, except in the cases of names or concepts with frequently used English or French standard transliterations.

# Preface

*Mohammed Dib – brief bio- and bibliography*[1]

Mohammed Dib was born in 1920 in Tlemcen, a city in Western Algeria – closer to Fez in Morocco than to Algiers – long established as a centre of Arab-Andalusian culture. Dib came from a family of "notables ruinée" which included respected musicians. Cultural influences, self-consciously tied to classical Arab culture, would colour Dib's work throughout his life, often providing a different set of reference points than those of Algerian writers coming from other parts of the country. Dib's father died when he was a child, but his childhood was relatively comfortable compared to most Algerians of his generation.[2] He was educated in French-language schools, by both French and Algerian instructors, and after his schooling he took on a string of different jobs – including teaching, journalism, union activism, designing carpets, and a stint as a French-English translator for the Free French forces during the Second World War. He was active in leftist circles, and a member of the Algerian Communist party (PCA). He published journalism in left- and communist-affiliated journals (*Alger républicain, Liberté*) and poetry, prose, and criticism in Algiers-based literary journals (*Simoun, Forge*) – rare spaces where people of Algerian and European origin shared space on a relatively even footing. Although Dib withdrew from direct political activism, his political sympathies – which called for direct engagement between the poor and political decision-makers – would continue to colour his work. He remained based in Tlemcen through the 1950s, and in 1951 married Collette Bellisant, whose father he had met through the PCA, with whom he would have four children. His first novel, *La grande maison*, was published in 1952 by the French press Éditions du Seuil.

When armed revolt against colonial rule began in 1954, Dib was by his account significantly engaged in the struggle. He remained in Algeria until he was forced to leave in 1959. After spending some time in Eastern Europe, the south of France, and the Paris region, Dib

1 Biographical details are drawn from Naget Khadda, *Mohammed Dib: cette intempestive voix recluse* (Aix-en-Provence: Édisud, 2003), and from various published interviews with Dib – see Wadi Bouzar, *Lectures maghrébines: essai* (Paris: Publisud, 1984); Eric Sellin, "Interview accordée par Mohammed Dib", in *Revue CELFAN* 2, no.2 (1983): 20-25; Mohamed Zaoui, *Algérie: des voix dans la tourmente* (Paris: Le Temps des Cerises, 1998).

2 I use "Algerians" to refer to people whose family history traces to populations living in the territory of today's Algeria before colonization; this includes people of Amazigh / Berber (including Touareg and Mozabite), Arab, Jewish, and Turkish heritage, among others. In my usage, this term is opposed to "Europeans", those whose pre-colonization family roots go back to Europe, even though many of these people called themselves "Algériens".

settled in 1967 with his family in La-Celle-Saint-Cloud, a Parisian suburb with a significant North African population, where he would live the rest of his life. Despite relocating to France, he would continue to consistently refer to himself an Algerian. Dib, generally reticent about his personal life, told interviewers that he made several attempts to find a cultural position in independent Algeria, but he claimed that he was blocked by people in power and by a general culture of nepotism; without the means to provide for his family, there was no question of his going back.[3]

Dib continued to write and publish regularly until the end of his life, publishing with a string of small to mid-sized but prestigious publishing houses. He travelled, took a teaching engagement in the U.S. for a semester in 1973-1974, and developed a particular fondness for Finland, visiting repeatedly and translating some poetry into French. The Finnish landscape took on a major importance in his work from the 1980s onwards, as a counterpoint or parallel to the North African. He was awarded a number of literary prizes, including the Académie Française's Grand Prix de la Francophonie in 1994. Although his work never enjoyed huge popular success – with the exception of his first trilogy, which was the basis for a successful TV serial in Algeria – he was a well-known figure within francophone North African writing and French literature in general. He died in 2003, in La-Celle-Saint-Cloud.

Dib is widely considered one of the "fathers" of North African literature in French, and his writing also impacted authors working in Arabic. There is a substantial body of critical literature on his work in French, most of it by specialists in North African literature. Several books provide overall surveys of his work, beginning with Jean Déjeux's *Mohammed Dib: écrivain algérien* in 1977, and including the particularly valuable studies in Charles Bonn's *Lecture présent de Mohammed Dib* (Algiers: ENAL,1988) and Naget Khadda's 2003 *Mohammed Dib: cette intempestive voix recluse*, and most recently Mohammed Saleh-Zéliche's *L'homme épris de lumière* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012). There have been a number of more specific book-length works and several collected volumes or special journal issues on his work, many of them organized by Khadda and/or Bonn, which include critical essays as well as responses, in poetry or prose, by Dib's peers or younger writers influenced by him.

The most significant work from the English-language academy is a Ph.D thesis, *La pierre et*

3 See "Entretien avec Mohammed Dib", in Zaoui, *Algérie: des voix dans la tourmente*, 167-176.

*l'arabesque*, written in French by Josette Bryson, who attended Dib's lectures at UCLA.[4] In English, the most substantial engagement published to date is in Peter Hallward's *Absolutely Postcolonial*, where Dib is one of four fiction writers studied in Hallward's polemic against postcolonialism.[5] Hallward has many good insights, but the inflexible theoretical structure of his polemic and a selective approach to Dib's texts blocks a deeper engagement. There have been scattered articles written over the years, in journals or books, notable ones by Louis Tremaine and Winnifred Woodhull.[6] Although some of Dib's work has been translated to English, these have mostly been marginal works – three collections of short stories, *The Savage Night* and *At the Cafe and the Talisman* in one volume; selections from the poetry collections *Omneros* and *Formulaires* were published in English as *Omneros*; *L.A. Trip* was published in French and English simultaneously, as Dib had planned; and recently a book of non-fiction reflections, *Tlemcen or Places of Writing* was translated.[7] But to date the only major work of Dib's to be translated to English is *Who Remembers the Sea*. Dib's use of language makes translation difficult and good translation harder, although much of his work has been translated to German and Italian. Madeleine Campbell's recently completed dissertation on translating Dib and her plans to publish her own translations should positively affect the field in English.[8]

The website limag.fr, a tremendous resource for the study of North African literature in French, maintains a comprehensive and updated bibliography of French-language work on Dib, which includes the full text of several hard-to-find sources.

*Survey of Dib's work*

Dib's written work makes up 30-plus volumes. Since no reader is likely to be familiar with all these, the next pages give a chronology of Dib's published books with a brief description of each. This can serve as an overview of the work, and also as reference material since the body of

4 Josette Thérèse Saint-Agne Bryson, “La pierre et l'arabesque: rets et réseau thématiques dans l'oeuvre de Mohammed Dib” (PhD diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1979).

5 Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: writing between the singular and the specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

6 Tremaine, “Psychic Deformity in Mohammed Dib's “Qui se souvient de la mer””, *Research in African Literatures* 19, no.3 (1988): 283-300; Woodhull, “Mohammed Dib and the French Question”, *Yale French Studies* 98 (2000):. 66-78.

7 For references, see the overview of Dib's works below.

8 Madeleine Campbell, *Translating Mohammed Dib: Deleuzian rhizome or Sufi errancy?* (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2014). See also her “Geomancing Dib's Transcultural Expression in Translation”, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15, no. 7 (2013): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2384>.

the dissertation moves quite freely between works, decades, and genres. Dib also published poems and short stories in journals, but most of these were later published in books, either in the same form or reworked; this chronology includes only book-length publications, all of which were initially put out by Paris-based publishing houses.[9]

Dib's first three novels, often called the Algeria trilogy, were carved out of a single large manuscript, though each book has a distinct structure.[10] They tell a continuous story, following Omar, a young boy born into a poor family in Tlemcen, from just prior to the outbreak of World War II up to the arrival of American troops in Algeria. The novels are not autobiographical, but draw extensively from Dib's observations while working in teaching, journalism, and the carpet industry.

*La grande maison* (Seuil, 1952) is set in Dar Sbitar, a large building repurposed as a housing complex in which many poor families, mainly headed by women, live. Apart from Omar, the main character is his mother, Aïni, working herself to exhaustion to support her extended family. The book is filled with exhaustion, waiting, and hunger, but also with the resilience and resistance of these poor families.

*L'Incendie* (Seuil, 1954) moves to the countryside near Tlemcen, to two impoverished villages perched on a slope overlooking the fields cultivated by the *colons* and populated by small farmers and agricultural workers. Here Omar discovers poverty even harsher than in the city; but he also discovers the breathtaking beauty of the landscape and the wealth of an oral tradition. The action involves a strike by the agricultural workers, based on a similar strike Dib covered as a reporter,[11] suppressed by burning down the worker's houses. The title also refers, as the book makes explicit, to the rising tide of nationalist sentiment.

*Le métier à tisser* (Seuil, 1957) sees a slightly older Omar, having quit school, taking a job in a small weaving factory, an underground, dark, and cramped space that sets the tone for a novel made

9 Not included are three children's books Dib published: *Baba Fekrane* (Paris: La Farandole, 1959), *Le chat qui boude* (Paris: La Farandole, 1992), and *L'Hippopotame qui se trouvait vilain* (Paris: Albin Michel Jeunesse, 2001).

10 Dib discusses the trilogy's composition in an interview with Wadi Bouzar: Bouzar, *Lectures maghrébines: essai.*: 96ff.

11 For this background, see Jean Déjeux, “A l'origine de *L'Incendie* de Mohammed Dib”, *Présence francophone*. 10 (1975): pp. 3-8.

up mostly of inconclusive conversations. It takes place in dominantly masculine spaces − the workshop, the café, or the streets, which are filling up with crowds of the extremely poor abandoning the countryside. The novel does not resolve its narrative but ends abruptly with the arrival of the Americans.

The short story collection, *Au café* (Gallimard, 1955), includes several stories from the material that made up the trilogy.[12] Most stories are written in a realist style and concern the life of the urban poor, although a couple of stories draw on local oral storytelling ("Le compagnon") or fantastic tales ("L'héritier enchanté").

*Un été africain* (Seuil, 1959) reads like a collection of short stories, switching between sets of characters in and around Tlemcen during the early months of the War of Independence, which mostly hovers in the background as "les événements". The characters are drawn from a broader range of social groups than the trilogy, from poor peasants to bourgeois families or the ruined aristocracy, and the plots emphasize family relations and the uncertainties of life during war.

Dib's first poetry collection was *Ombre gardienne* (Gallimard, 1961). Its first half draws on imagery, structure and forms of address from Algerian popular poetry, while its second is written in metre and rhyme (often sonnets) and describes a foreigner's experience as a stranger in French cities. The cover was blurbed by Dib's friend Louis Aragon along lines often used to introduce "colonial" writers: "Cet homme d'un pays qui n'a rien à voir avec les arbres de ma fenêtre parle avec les mots de Villon et de Péguy."

*Qui se souvient de la mer* (Seuil, 1962) begins from one of the characters in *Un été africain*, but transforms wartime Tlemcen into a fantastic world of monsters, moving walls, and strange metamorphoses in a city located at the edge of the comforting presence of the sea.[13] Behind its fantastic features there is a fairly simple plot: the narrator struggles with finding his place in a city transformed by war, before finally following his wife's lead and joining the "underground city" of the resistance. With this novel Dib broke down the barrier between realistic and poetic writing, setting the path for his subsequent writing.

12 Translated into English in *At the Cafe and the Talisman: Stories by Mohammed Dib*, trans. C. Dickson & M. Mortimer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011).
13 Translated into English as *Who Remembers the Sea*, trans. Louis Tremaine (Pueblo, CO: Passagietta Press, 1985).

*Cours sur le rive sauvage* (Seuil, 1964), takes the surrealism of *Qui se souvient de la mer* further away from recognizable reality. Iven Zohar is violently separated from his bride, Radia, just before their marriage, and his search to find her takes him through a series of locales with echoes of myth, fable, and science fiction. The novel's dreamlike images – labyrinthine cities, empty beaches, star-guided voyages, doubled or multiplied characters – appear across Dib's writing.

Most of the stories in *Le Talisman* (Seuil, 1966) are set during and after the war of independence. Among other things, they discuss torture, war profiteering, and the relation between Algerian and European communities. This slim volume covers a wide stylistic range, and many of its stories can be read as reflections on the act of writing.

*La danse du roi* (Seuil, 1968) begins what Khadda calls a cycle of "neoréalisme de la désillusion."[14] The book, set in Tlemcen a few years after independence, centres on two characters: Rodwan, haunted by his memories and by a voice that tells him a half-coherent story, and Arfia, an ex-*maquisarde*, who wanders the city repeating her war memories, and belongs to a theatre troupe made of beggars and misfits.[15] The novel focuses on the exclusions – poor, war-scarred, or dead – from a post-war society where some are busy enriching themselves.

The poems of *Formulaires* (du Seuil, 1970) vary in style; some are in the short and highly condensed style that would characterize Dib's later poetry, and the final section, "Pouvoirs", is made up of unpunctuated prose poems. Much of the imagery in *Formulaires* recalls *Qui se souvient de lar mer* and especially *Cours sur le rive sauvage*.

The next two novels form a diptych.[16] *Dieu en barbarie* (Seuil, 1970) is written as a "novel of ideas," set after independence and concerned with the direction to be taken by the country and the place of tradition in this. Two young men are central: Kamal Waëd, returned from studies in France to take up a position in the bureaucracy and living with his mother, and Hakim Madjar, who organizes a group to visit the impoverished peasants near Tlemcen.

14 Khadda, *Mohammed Dib:* 65ff.

15 Dib adapted the "Arfia" portions of the novel – her war story and the theatrical performance – into a play for the Avignon festival in 1977, published in 1980 as Dib, *Mille hourras pour une gueuse* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

16 At the time, Dib spoke of writing a trilogy – whether he abandoned a planned third book or fit all his material into two volumes is unclear.

*Le maître de chasse* (Seuil, 1974) follows the same characters, using short first-person sections that alternate between speakers. Against Waëd's warning, Madjar takes his group to the countryside to meet with the Ouled Salem, a group of isolated and miserably poor peasants; Waëd sends the army to stop them and in the process Madjar is killed. The *maître de chasse* of the title is a kind of spirit of destruction that speaks to Labâne, one of Madjar's followers. Questions of authority and religion from *Dieu en Barbarie* continue to be examined in this more formally experimental novel.

*Omneros* (Seuil, 1975) is a carefully constructed collection of poems: sequences of poems each a dozen short lines or less, separated by prose poems that form a fairly continuous whole. The poems are abstract or opaque but also very visual; each sequence revolves around a different landscape or set of images. Their address ranges from detachment to intimacy and praise.

*Habel* (Seuil, 1977) presents a nineteen-year-old Algerian pushed into exile by a domineering and jealous older brother, with allusions to the story of Abel (Habel in the Qur'an) and Cain and other intertextual elements. The novel shifts between modes of writing and moves unexpectedly through time as Habel wanders through a mostly nocturnal Paris. It revolves around three pairs that Habel belongs to; two with young women, one of them fighting mental illness, and one with an older man, a writer and transvestite.

The poems of *Feu beau feu* (Seuil, 1979) are formally similar to those in *Omneros*; the material is more explicitly erotic (although still cryptic) and the imagery owes a debt to the Finnish landscape, as would be true of much of Dib's subsequent work.

*Les terraces d'Orsol* (Sindbad, 1985) begins a cycle sometimes called Dib's "Nordic trilogy," three novels set in Scandinavia with some overlap in thematic or narrative material, although each are quite different books and stories. Here the setting is a northern city called Jarbher, where a man who has come as a diplomat from a southern city, Orsol, and who gradually loses his earlier life, his illusions about his new surroundings, and finally his memory.

*Ô Vive* (Sindbad, 1987) is another collection of poetry in the style of the last two. The "Vive" of the title is at once a love object and a figuration of Life. Dib continues to condense and pare down his language while keeping it sonorous and visual.

*Le Sommeil d'Ève* (Sindbad, 1989) is written in two first-person halves. The first is from the perspective of a woman in Finland, pregnant and living with her husband; she is sliding into a madness, obsessed her Algerian former lover, and begins to think she is turning into a wolf. The second is from this lover's perspective, as he helps her regain control of her life. The novel's premise draws from "The Wolf's Bride", a story by the Finnish-Estonian writer Aïno Kallas.

*Neiges de marbre* (Sindbad, 1990), again involves a nordic-maghrebin couple, here the now separated parents of a young daughter, Lyyl. The novel is a kind of interior journal kept by the father, often identified in the text merely as "celui qui dit je." He reminisces on time spent with his daughter, on his relationship with her mother and its deterioration; the nostalgic and sweet tone of the novel gradually shows an undercurrent of loss.

*Le désert sans détour* (Sindbad, 1992) is a short novel set in an unnamed desert in the aftermath of a war. An unspecified voice trapped behind a wire fence narrates hallucinatory mythical scenes that are interspersed between the main action of the novel: the semi-comic wanderings of two figures, Hagg-Bar and his servant Siklist, in search of traces in the sand.

*L'Infante maure* (Albin Michel, 1994), returns to the scenario of *Neiges de marbre*, but is almost entirely narrated by the little girl, here called Lylli Belle. With her father mostly absent, and her mother struggling with depression, Lyyli spends her time in the trees behind her house. Most of the book is made up of Lyyli's observations and her internal monologue, in a child's perspective where objects, emotions, and fantasy mix together.

*Tlemcen ou les lieux de l'écriture* (Revue Noire, 1994), a collaboration with photographer Philippe Bordas, came out of an exhibition that featured photographs of Tlemcen by Dib in the 1940s with more recent ones by Bordas.[17] The book reproduces these photographs with a long text by Dib, mixing childhood memories with reflections on his writing process, particularly in its relation to place and landscape.

The stories in the collection *La Nuit sauvage* (Albin Michel, 1995)[18] are set across the world, from Paris to Sarajevo to Latin America, with several set in an Algeria now suffering from internal

17 Translated into English as *Tlemcen or places of writing*, trans. Guy Bennet (Los Angeles: Otis / Seismicity Editions, 2012).
18 Translated into English as *The Savage Night*, trans. C. Dickson (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 2001).

violence. Most deal with disastrous themes – war, revenge killing, the organ trade, the legacies of the Shoah and of French colonialism. Some of the stories tie explicitly to novels: "La fille dans les arbres" belongs to the Lyyli cycle, and "Talilo est mort" is a kind of metafictional postscript to *Les Terraces d'Orsol*.

*L'Aube Ismaël* (Tassili, 1995) includes three longish poems that form a suite, followed by a long narrative poem. The first poems translates the biblical pair of Hagar and Ishmael into a Palestinian mother and her son.[19] The long poem, which shares the name of the collection, follows a solitary Ismaël through a desert that is desolate but bristling with signs and allusions, Qur'anic, Biblical, and mythic, until he finally reaches the sea.

In *L'Enfant-jazz* (la Différence, 1998), Dib uses his spare poetic style to build a minimal narrative in three sections. In the first, "Ici," the child discovers the world around him; in "Ailleurs" he wanders into a world crossed by singing and oblivious groups; in "La guerre" he confronts a war, as surrounding environment and as a personified figure.

*L'Arbre à dires* (Albin Michel, 1998) is a collection of prose writings. "Le rétour d'Abraham," is made up of short sections circling around questions of identity, language, immigration and writing; "L'Arbre à dires" continues the Lylli Belle stories as a young girl enlists her father's help to "translate" her description of the four seasons into a written text; "Californian clichés" is a set of "snapshots" from Dib's visit to Los Angeles in the 1970s; and "En marge" discusses Dib's relation to the French language.

*Si diable veut* (Albin Michel, 1998) is set in rural Algeria, where Ymran, a teenager from the Parisian suburbs, has been sent following the death of his mother. The novel is told alternately through Ymran's grandparent's voices, his own, the inner monologue of a girl, Safia, the novel's tragic figure, or a detached point of view. It presents a troubling collision between realism and myth, everyday life and a fate that takes the form of rituals and beliefs turned against themselves, in a never-explicit reference to the horrors of the civil war.

Dib's last collection of poetry, *Le Coeur insulaire* (la Différence, 2000), is his shortest, still spare but

19 The poems were initially published with a CD of a reading with musical accompaniment; Dib was also involved in the publishing of an Arabic edition with illustrations by the Algerian graphic artist Rachid Koraïchi.

more direct than some of his earlier poetry, and includes particularly evocative landscape descriptions. Death and absence run through the volume, dedicated to the poet Guillevic, a friend of Dib's who died in 1997.

*Comme un bruit d'abeilles* (Albin Michel, 2001), the last book Dib published in his lifetime, is a collection of stories concerned in different ways with desolation. One story, "Le sourire de l'icône," set in post-Soviet Moscow, is divided in four sections spaced throughout the book. Other stories involve a desert village destroyed by a sandstorm; a group of teenage vandals in a Parisian suburb; and a strange homage to Kafka and spy novels set in post-communist Prague and involving cloning.

Three books appeared posthumously, from prepared manuscripts: *L.A. Trip* (la Différence / Green Integer, 2003) is a "novel in verse" designed to be published in a bilingual edition with an English translation by Paul Vangelisti, Dib's host on his visit to the U.S. in the 1970s. *Simorgh* (Albin Michel, 2003) and *Laëzza* (Albin Michel, 2006) are varied collections of writings, short pieces of fiction and non-fiction, some previously published or reworked, and collections of aphorisms and scattered observations − in *Laëzza* this section is titled "Auto-portrait." *Simorgh* includes a re-telling of the 12th-century Persian Attar's "Conference of the birds" and commentaries on Sophocles and the 20th-century Greek writer Papadiamantis. *Laëzza* begins with two long stories uncharacteristically set in upper-class society, and ends with a set of autobiographical reminiscences of encounters with Europeans during Dib's youth, originally written for a collection of childhood memories by writers from Algeria, edited by Leïla Sebbar in 1997.[20]

20 Leïla Sebbar, ed., *Un enfance algérienne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

# Introduction: from the Invisible to the Visible

Mohammed Dib prefaced his 1972 poetry collection *Omneros* with a note to the reader, which has served me as an entrance point to approaching his work as a whole. It displays the cohabitation of the abstract and the mundane, the obscure and the obvious, that marks his diverse body of work. He begins with a denigration of perception, only able to access shadows of a more fundamental, invisible whole:

> Le côté le plus clair de la vie, le côté perceptible, est certainement le plus obscur. Il n'est que l'ombre portée d'Eros, il n'est, et nous en lui, que le projet d'Eros même dans les instants où il ne le semble guère. Je pensais cela dans le train qui m'emmenait de Versailles à Paris en ce jour de janvier particulièrement doux, et continuais, me disant encore que tout en nous, tenté, aspire à cette source de lumière. Puis j'ai eu la vision aveuglante de cette source de lumière.[1]

But Dib then takes an unexpected turn. The result of his blinding vision is to bring him back to the visible world, embracing its opacity rather than lamenting it:

> Cela m'a suffi pour comprendre que nous devons en repousser la séduction, et jusqu'à l'idée – car qui se dissout en elle n'en ressent plus les effets, qui en est saisi n'existe plus. Découvrant ainsi que notre chance se trouve peut-être précisément dans notre opacité, j'ai cherché du regard les visages humains présent dans le wagon et leur ai été reconnaissant d'être là.

Rather than turn his eyes to the blinding source, by definition imperceptible and which threatens to destroy the capacity of perception, he turns them to what, in its opacity, allows that source to be seen: the changing, divided world, and the presence, together, of individuals who remain opaque to each other.

In the wake of this experience, Dib says, his "pensées tournaient naturellement autour de ces poèmes," and when he returned to these thoughts months later he found the poems still there and ready to be written. As readers, we encounter the written results of this personal inspiration. But Dib is quick to caution us, in one last comment, not to conclude from this that these traces come from some other space, reflecting a self-contained speech or logic of the invisible:

> Il peut sembler par ailleurs que ces poèmes trahissent la nostalgie d'une autre langue, langue qui n'existe sûrement pas, ou n'existerait qu'à l'état virtuel. Il faut de même refuser cette idée et les lire comme des poèmes d'amour et plus littéralement de l'acte d'amour.

1 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome 1: poésies*, ed. Habib Tengour (Paris:la Différence, 2007): 99.

Rather than giving us a glimpse into an other side of reality, of the figure of Eros standing outside the visible world, the poems give us Eros at work in the world. Dib would insists a decade later, in an interview with Eric Sellin, that the poems in *Omneros* did not include a single abstract or philosophical word.[2] It's easy to see why Dib might warn the reader against a secret or abstract reading of *Omneros*, given its style: highly condensed poems whose short stanzas of short lines catch the eye with their shape on the page but seldom have an immediately clear syntactic sense; poems full of imagery and allusion that are grouped into collections and seem to overlap with each other rather than stand alone. Dib's writing abounds in cryptic images and voices coming from uncertain sources. But Dib suggests here that the inspiration that guides these linguistically, syntactically or narratively confusing writings shouldn't be looked for in some outside or secret transmission. They show the movement of desire working through description, adoration, or the sensory pleasures of language, but working always within the world, through the passion of a writing and reading that never escapes its place. No matter what baffling or dazzling vistas the writing may open up for us, it returns us to the only place where it can have existence: the world as we each live it. Writing is not an escape to somewhere else, but an exploration – however far it may move from the obvious – of the shared world of an embodied and placed living.

It seems to me that this movement away from the world and then back provides a lens through which to view Dib's approach to writing, as a creative practice and as a relation to and transformation of the world. In this dissertation I will trace this movement first through the sources, techniques, and intentions driving his writing, and then in his approach to the historical world out of which he and his writing came. Two distinct gestures are involved in this movement: first an acknowledgment that the world as we live it far exceeds what is visible to each of us, and then a return from this acknowledgment of the invisible to the situated and limited details of the world as it appears. This movement does not leave the world unchanged for those who experience it – in the note to *Omneros*, it puts the unremarkable space of the commuter rail train that passes through the suburb where Dib lived nearly half his life in contact with other spaces, real and imagined, and with the forces and dramas that shape the psychological, social, and physical world. But it does not offer the chance to go beyond the point within a visible world out of which it opens up, or it does so only at the cost of a destruction, a loss of self or a loss of

2 Eric Sellin, "Interview accordée par Mohammed Dib": 21.

connection to the others around. To acknowledge the tempting appeal of this risk without succumbing to it is at the heart of a project that is shared across Dib's varied modes of writing.

The story Dib builds in this note, with the tension of living in the invisible, a world that exceeds what is available to perception and knowledge while being inescapably fixed in the visible, a set point with its limited view, can be put in contact with many other discourses. Three of these are particularly relevant for this study, and a quick survey of them will also provide an introduction to the eclectic method that I've used, which attempts to begin from Dib's writing and move outwards. Rather than building a single unified argument, this dissertation tracks resemblances between what might seem at first to be quite different concerns, using Dib's texts to move between them. I like to think that this is a way of putting Dib's texts into action, observing them as they link or translate between other discourses, and inviting the continuation of this action. Rather than reducing Dib's work to a stable explanation, this will hopefully be a way of keeping it in movement, sparking attention to further resemblances and applications, leading from Dib's work, through the field of relations that it makes possible, to the particularities of each reader's field of visibility.

*1. Divine luminescence*

First, the image that Dib uses in his preface has evident resonances with ideas found in Islamic philosophy and theology, particularly in Sufi thought which, in different forms, bridges across the major variants of Islam. For Dib Sufism, as the third chapter will discuss, was part of his cultural heritage and an influence on his writing. Both the unity of the world in Eros and the Dib's blinding vision can be traced back here. Some Sufi writers, particularly in the school of the prolific 12$^{th}$/6$^{th}$ century Andalusian writer, Ibn al-ʻArabi, combined imagery from the Qur'an, in the thirty-fifth verse of Surah 24, *Al-Nūr* (light), with philosophical ideas that Muslim philosophers had developed in conversation with Greek Neo-Platonism. Qur'an 24:35 describes God in terms of light, radiating from a stunning lamp. This was read, in consonance with neo-Platonic philosophy, to suggest that whatever exists is an emanation of the single divine reality. This is usually called by the name "al-ḥaqq," the real, one of the names of God used in the Qur'an. Commenting on the "light" verse, the Emir ʻAbd al-Qādir, leader of a resistance movement to French colonization in Algeria in the 19$^{th}$ century and a scholar of Ibn al-ʻArabi's work, described this emanative unity in terms of optical visibility:

> The light is the cause of the manifestation of creatures – among whom are the earth and the heavens – just as is the case in the physical world where the darkness of night makes things as if inexistent in relation to the observer until the moment when the appearance of the light brings about the appearance of the things and distinguishes them from each other.[3]

In keeping with the understanding of optics in Medieval Arabic science, where light has no existence apart from what it illuminates, this situation creates a mutual dependence between the Real and the forms of its manifestation. As ‘Abd al-Qādir puts it, “without God [*al-ḥaqq*] the creatures would not be existentiated and without the creature, God [*al-ḥaqq*] would not be manifested (*ḥaqqun bi-lā khalqin lā yaẓhar*).”[4] In a doctrine that some of his followers would refer to a s *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the unity of existence, Ibn al-‘Arabi insisted that the divine unity was simultaneously complete in itself and, from the perspective of its emanation, inseparable from the existing things in which it manifests itself.[5] ‘Abd al-Qādir put this in terms of a gloss on one phrase from the passage being commented, “*Light upon light*”: “the light attributed to the heavens and to the earth is identical to the absolute Light which is not limited by either the heavens or the earth.”[6]

While Sufis generally teach that it is possible to have a momentary experience or “taste” (*dhāwq*) of unity with divine reality, to belong to the undifferentiated whole would mean, as in Dib's note, to lose one's own existence entirely. So to every movement of *fana’* – extinction in unity – corresponds a “remaining” – *baqa’* – a return to one's own particular place while remaining aware of one's inseparability from the divine whole. This dynamic is often described, as with Dib's “Eros,” in terms of love, where the creature's longing for unity with the whole responds to the effusion of divine love.[7]

In ‘Abd al-Qādir's reading, the visible world that confronts us are shadows caused by the light but cast by the *‘ayn thābita*, “fixed forms” associated with the names of God and also

3 Chodkiewicz, ed., *The Spiritual Writings of Amir 'Abd al-Kader*, trans. Chrestensen and Manning (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995): 113-114.

4 ibid., 114

5 For an introduction to Ibn ‘Arabi's theory of unity and some of its sources, see Souad Hakim, “Unity of Being in Ibn ‘Arabî”, *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society* 36 (2004).

6 ibid., 117.

7 For a range of pre-modern Arabic and Persian texts on the divine as love, see Chittick, *Divine Love: Islamic Literature and the Path to God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). Fakhruddin ‘Iraqi's *Divine Flashes*, trans. Peter Wilson & William C. Chittick (New York:Paulist Press, 1982), translated from Persian, is a 13th-century reworking of one of Ibn ‘Arabi's major works in poetry based on love and light imagery.

reminiscent of Platonic ideas:

> The heavens, the earth and the creatures, whose light is the Name *al-nūr*, are the shadows of the Names and the Attributes projected upon the immutable prototypes fixed in the divine Knowledge... It is light which renders the shadow visible, but it is the vertical object which gives it its form.[8]

Dib's warning against looking for a secret language departs from this model. For Ibn al-'Arabi and his school the things that cast the shadows, the divine names or set forms, are at least potentially enumerable, and the outlines of the "complete" or "perfect" human (*insān al-kāmil*) who would embody each, of whom the Prophet Muḥammad is the embodiment, are at least describable. But in Dib the figures that cast the shadows are not so clear. In a fragment published in his last completed book, *Simorgh*, Dib terrestrializes the image when he writes: "Les ombres que les nuages perdent en route ne font qu'errer sur les champs, errer dans une grande confusion. Nous errons aussi, mais ombres de quels nuages? Nous errons."[9] In place of fixed forms we find mutable and unfindable clouds, figures of a perpetual errancy.

*2. The flesh of the world*

In his suspicion towards the idea of a truer reality separable from the world of appearances, Dib comes closer to our second reference point, phenomenological thought, especially as developed through the French reception of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Husserl's phenomenology insists on beginning from the world as it appears to us, with objective knowledge derived through the actions of logic on the contents of experience. The world is experienced, lived, and it is known or described only on the basis of its being lived; contrary to "the completely mistaken opinion [...] that 'sense-data' constitute what is immediately given," experience itself is not quantifiable or able to be cleanly divided.[10] The French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his last, unfinished book *The Visible and the Invisible*, described how, accordingly, ideas, while not belonging to the visible realm, are inseparable from it; they belong to a this-worldly invisibility:

> With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positing of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be

8 Chodkiewicz, *op. cit.*, 115.
9 Dib, *Simorgh*, 76.
10 Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press,1970): 30.

> closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated. The idea is this level, this dimension. It is therefore not a de facto invisible, like an object hidden behind another, and not an absolute invisible, which would have nothing to do with the visible. Rather it is the invisible of this world, that which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible, its own and interior possibility, the Being of this being.[11]

Because experience involves categories that include vision, contact, and pleasure, the space of ideas that it "opens up" will draw on image, touch, sentiment, and so on. Merleau-Ponty's first major book, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, had argued that all consciousness is in relation to embodiment, an inhabiting of the world that is sensory and physiological. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he named where experience is lived, where the visible and the invisible are inextricably twisted together, "the flesh." There is no contradiction, to return to Dib's note, between saying that the world is the action of desire and that it is only this world, here, given; the problem arises only if we insist on a clean division between subject, bearer of experience, and an objective world contained in itself. The flesh is not a gap between our vision and things, but a filled-up, substantial, living space:

> It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible. What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them—but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing "all naked" because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh.[12]

The whole of what is experienced by the ego, which is not a single, unitary or passive thing but, in Husserl's words, "an infinite nexus of synthetically congruous performances,"[13] can be explored and developed in similarly various ways. Literature and the other arts are, "no less than is the science of Lavoisier and Ampère," Merleau-Ponty writes, "the exploration of an invisible and the disclosure of a universe of ideas." Unlike science, though, the arts "cannot be detached from the sensible appearances and be erected into a second positivity"; they exist only in the flesh, as they

11 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968): 151.
12 ibid., p. 130.
13 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nidjhoff, 1973): 81.

are experienced through sensibility and the body.[14] Literary invisibility returns us to our own visible / invisible intertwining. While literature can explore experience through a single, fairly consistently defined model of subjectivity, that model may be drawn differently, and literature can also choose to vary it, follow the simultaneous variety of conscious experience. Dib's writing makes full use of this, moving between narrative, sensation, and fantasy, slipping between descriptive and evocative language, depicting characters whose horizons are set by their immersion in the flesh of life more often than they view clearly from outside. What the text conveys quickly is accompanied by its invisible, those aspects that rely on the reader's involvement to bring them to life, to construct and experience them. While this is surely true of all literature, work like Dib's, invested in the processes of perception, the sonorousness of language, and the paths taken by thought and imagination, draws attention to the work of transfer or translation through which each reader recreates or co-creates the work. The richness of the "fleshly" impact of his literature often accompanies described situations that are mundane or unnoticeable and characters who might seem on first sight unremarkable. As in his story of inspiration in a commuter train car, the stuff of experience goes well beyond what is given in the visible.

*3. Illegible history*

Dib's penchant for characters who are marginalized or removed from where major events are happening leads to the third reference point, a tension in the idea of history and of historical existence. History is what we all live in; the historical condition we are born to define the choices and opportunities that will present themselves to us. But the unfolding of everyday life can seem impossibly distant from history as a description of the significant events that have shaped our lives and that allow for new developments. Adopting Dib's figure of Eros, we could say that each of us are only the appearance of History, which moves invisibly and shapes continents; but at the same time, we live history only from our limited positions. Karl Marx, in the 19th century, had insisted on bringing the invisible of history down to earth: rather than an unfolding image of progress or the development of a human essence, as many European philosophers held at the time, history is nothing but the activities of physical humans organizing themselves and providing for their continued existence. Its invisible dynamics, the ideas, structures, and tendencies that might be studied or predicted, unfold from there, and these abstract ideas can be tested against the means

14 Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, 149-150.

by which all members of society, including the most disadvantaged, survive. But Marx's writings also lent themselves to the construction, by subsequent generations of Marxists, of historical trajectories, sequences of stages of society or programs for political action. These could then be set up as easier to study and more encouraging than the details of productive life; simpler than returning from these models of historical dynamics to the disorganized and unpredictable world of the visible was to set them up as alternate realities, a deciphering of the invisible that was directing history. Merleau-Ponty criticized a "revolutionary" attitude he opposed to Marx's, one driven more by a desire to be right than the applicability of its ideas to the world:

> There is a "revolutionary" spirit that is nothing more than a way of disguising the state of one's soul. One speaks of universal history, of efficacy, and of a movement of the whole. But the real wherein one places oneself has been prepared according to one's own wishes and is nothing more than a landscape against which one develops one's personal dreams. It is nothing more than a masquerade for one's personal inclinations.[15]

The situation in the 1950s, when Dib began publishing, offered many examples of the unwillingness of history to follow political dream-landscapes on the left and the right. For the French left, the limitations of predicting future developments and of hoping that revolt would be able to carve out the conditions for its own success were highlighted, among other things, by the collaboration of the French government with Nazi Germany during the second world war and the revelations of the brutality of the Stalinist USSR. The Algerian War of Independence, fought from 1954-1962, shattered expectations of history: it dashed both the Imperial dream and Communist hopes for an alliance of metropolitan and colonial workers; it was a revolution, but not one that followed the model of a proletarian revolution; and it exposed the brutality of the French state without providing an "other side" that many metropolitans felt comfortable endorsing.

All of these factors, historical and theoretical, figured into a crisis in the understanding of history within the French intellectual scene. In the text produced by a seminar he organized as an attempt to return to and reinterpret Marx, the Marxist French philosopher Louis Althusser began from an acknowledgment that history cannot be presented in an unambiguous project or understood immediately:

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15 Merleau-Ponty, *The Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973): 5.

> History cannot be read in its manifest discourse, because the text of history is not a text in which a voice (the Logos) speaks, but the inaudible and illegible notation of the effects of a structure of structures.[16]

This complex structure, the invisible that supports and makes up the illegible marks of the present, can only be studied by applying concepts to it; although these expand the scope of the visible they also define their own blind spots, an invisible that is located "inside the visible itself because defined by its structure."[17] These concepts provide a way to approach history rather than a full description of it: for example, as Étienne Balibar would develop in his contribution to the seminar, although the concept of "mode of production" is able to show a good deal about a society, any existing society is a combination of various modes, and so will follow a more dynamic trajectory than the single concept could predict. As Merleau-Ponty had proposed, defining specific states and then reducing politics to the choice to move from one to the other – whether in stagist Marxism or in the developmental discourse that rose in power as Marxism fell out of vogue – has more to do with speaker's desire than with the lived substance of historical reality.

Some of these points were already apparent, although without the same detailed development of conceptual armature, from the other side of the colonial divide. The colonial project had denied the complexity of Algerian society, reducing it to a set of social institutions that could be co-opted or mimicked by colonial authorities, and saw it ultimately as replaceable by another society, a view that could also be reproduced by European opponents of colonialism. Disillusionment with the idea that history would lead towards progress went back at least to the French invasion of 1830, and for some represented a cultural malaise, a perpetual backsliding, with roots going back through centuries of foreign rule or cultural stagnation. Although some who participated in the revolt against colonialism acted in the name of utopias, socialist or Islamic, for most it was fought not to reach some predetermined stage in a political trajectory but to remove an obstacle to needed development, whether this was imagined as the reactivation of suppressed potential inherent in pre-colonized Algerian society or as the emergence of the oppressed from a longer history of multiple dominations. But the state and society that emerged from the war would continue to display many of the same factors that had prompted the revolt, perpetuating structures from colonial and precolonial society. Despite the revolution's demonstration that what seemed solid was mutable, carried by an invisible history that sustained it and would leave it

16 Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Verso, 2009):17.
17 ibid., 27.

behind, the force of history as determining and limiting, subjecting the present to the constraints of the past, was equally present. In Dib's writing the invisible weight of history presses down everywhere, in the effects of events determined elsewhere, in the resources of cultural memory, or in the spectral presence of those who died opposing oppression. The challenge he explores is how to live, within the limited parameters of a history that can't be presented as the heroic trajectory of a subject, without fleeing the visible for a dream-landscape or giving up entirely on the idea of history as change.

*Methodological directions*

In putting side-by-side a Sufi language of emanation and self-dissolution, a phenomenological language on the inseparability of sensed or thought objects and the process of sensation or thinking, and political language on history, theoretical and descriptive, as a complex whole that cannot be theorized outside of its lived conditions, I am not suggesting that these three discourses explain Dib's writing. Nor am I suggesting that Dib can explain them, or that his work provides a solution to the problems that they pose. And neither do I want to claim that Dib's image in *Omneros* can be developed to show that the three are equivalent systems or discourses – say, Sufism, phenomenology, and "post-Marxism." Instead, Dib's writing provides a place where these different ways of speaking of the world come into contact, where ideas can be translated, not directly from one to the other, but through a third medium where connections appear between them. This metaphorical sense of "translation" heightens the situation faced by linguistic translation: the process of passing from one language to another changes the text, marks it with new meaning and new blind spots, expands its reach but makes some aspects less accessible. Walter Benjamin spoke of translation as "making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language," which he calls a "pure language," the capacity for meaning rather than meaning itself.[18] Following Dib's note, we can say that whatever capacity for meaning emerges from the movement between fragmentary ways of expressing the world will be found not in a virtual state but in its application or use within lives. The "translations" we will follow here are marked by the specificity of Dib's life, the influences and interests that shaped his thinking, the personal and social experiences that he went through or whose effects he

18 Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", in *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Bellknapp Press, 2004): 260.

experienced. But the writing to be studied here does not give access to this personal specificity; instead it provides the medium for further transpositions. In its capacity to mix or exist between modes of expression, literature is characterized by this process of transmission and relay, translating several sources at once.

In planning this study, I have tried to begin from Dib's writing and work from it to other texts whose ideas seemed to be able to move back and forth from it. I have tried to follow Dib's own suggestions where I could find them, but I have also given myself free reign to run after sources that seemed relevant to me; the range covered follows my own interests and experiences, and it's easy to imagine other routes that might be followed. The whole dissertation does not form a single argument that would claim to uncover a systematic unity in Dib's work or ideas; its parts are held together not mainly by relations between them (although those exist) but by their mutual applicability to Dib's work. This seems, to me, to reflect Dib's own practice and thought. Literary writers are not necessarily – I would guess not often – systematic thinkers, and Dib's thought has an itinerant movement, as many have noticed and as is often made explicit in the imagery and structure that he uses.

Still, a reader might have already noticed in my presentation a similarity in terminology – invisibility, overflow, uncertainty, and so on – to what is still called, in the Anglo-American academy, "post-structuralism." Writing in English on North African francophone literature, and on French-language literature from former French colonies or overseas *départements* in general, very often ends up addressing this term, which lumps together a set of French writers and thinkers who shared, roughly, a generally leftist political standpoint, an interest in how knowledge is produced as well as in its content, and a more or less experimental approach towards writing. Proponents can gesture towards the biographical connections that a large number of the most often-cited names – Cixous, Derrida, Lyotard, Balibar, Althusser, Rancière, Khatibi, Bourdieu, Badiou, and so on – had to North Africa and most often to Algeria, as a birthplace or the site of formative teaching or research experience. Opponents generally claim that post-structural theory leads away from historical or political specificities to general or abstract concerns. In her recent and interesting introduction to *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality*, which focuses on francophone literature and theory, Jane Hiddleston argues that many of the objections reflect an "impatience towards the tendency of the poststructuralist postcolonial thinkers of this period to focus on the problems of representation," but proposes to sidestep this by agreeing to "the necessary

separation of culture and politics", distancing cultural issues from any "claim for practical political efficacy."[19] This division seems to me to be unsatisfactory. First, the gap between representation and politics is not peculiar to any particular kind of writing, but is a general gap between theory and practice. Even the most explicitly political theory is applied to a new situation without attention to the conditions of its translation only at peril. And second, any writing, literary or theoretical, no matter how abstract, can be tested against the realities and demands of social and political life, although this will always need to take place through translation: even if a text, Dib's first novels for example, can be said to have had a political impact (although this is seldom straightforward to demonstrate in detail), as critics we approach it outside of that situation. Literature, in fact, demonstrates that it is not possible to separate a political experience cleanly from an aesthetic, an emotional, or a mental one; although they can be studied separately, in literature as in life they are present together, and the study of literature might as well acknowledge this.

Winnifred Woodhull's approach in her *Transfigurations of the Maghreb* warns against potential pitfalls of a textualist approach, but without opposing it to a simplified or stable politics. Her complaint against "certain poststructuralist thinkers" is that:

> Historically, in France, a subversive poetics has gradually *replaced* work for change in the political field. [...] poetic language has come to be associated with an "other" politics radically divorced from social institutions and from material relations of domination.[20]

Her response is not to dismiss "poststructuralism" or to oppose it with another theoretical school, but to use readings of literary texts, with a special fondness for the French-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar, against theoretical texts (and other literary writings) where she sees an emphasis on sexual difference reifying an image of woman as "other," or constructing "the metropolitan identity that certain poststructuralist theories have paradoxically worked to consolidate" while speaking of migrants.[21] The complexity of the literary text can be used against the simplicity of the theoretical text, as often literary writing involves a closer attention to lived detail. Connections drawn in fictional texts can be brought back to non-fictional texts to challenge their logic or seeming unity.

19 Hiddleston, *Poststructuralism and Postcoloniality: The Anxiety of Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010): 4.

20 Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization, and Literatures* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993): x.

21 ibid., 110.

This back and forth necessarily happens inside of history, the understanding of which it may clarify or complicate. Text and history are inseparable, without one being reducible to the other, which is to say that neither a metaphoric text nor a historical narrative is granted an existence outside of their interaction within situated lives.

I have tried to adopt a similar movement between literary and theoretical texts, rather than using the latter to "read" the former. For the most part I present and explore ideas in and between texts more than I use them to criticize each other. I have ignored the category of poststructuralism altogether. This is mainly because I think it is too broad a category, and too rooted in the history of publishing and feuds for position in the anglophone academy to be of much use here. What links the very diverse field of thinkers labelled poststructuralist is probably most of all a shared set of influences, and an attempt to bring them together or set them against each other; these include, importantly, Marxism, phenomenology, and different strands of monotheistic religious thinking. Most of the main trends on the French intellectual scene before and after World War II were variants or syntheses of communism, phenomenological or existential thinking, and Catholic humanism; often what anglophone commentators single out in thought from the 1960s and onwards is already there in these earlier sources. Dib, who had been a Communist party member, whose writing often tried to capture the flux of sensorial life, and who had a deep interest in Islamic tradition, has at times quite significant similarities to thinkers deemed poststructuralist, but these can be studied in more interesting ways than by assuming shared membership of a school. On the other hand, the often-noted Algerian connections of poststructuralist thinkers seem to offer less than they promise. With important exceptions,[22] Algeria most often appears in biographical writings that, while often wonderful texts, do not

22 The most important is Bourdieu's early works, which are rooted in his sociological fieldwork in Algeria – but Bourdieu fits uncomfortably in the category of poststructuralism: *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; *Algeria 1960*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). Others are Lyotard's writing for *Socialisme ou Barbarie* during the Algerian War, which involve more careful analysis and a more principled break with Marxism than much of his later political writing, and some of Derrida's late works, which use the conditions of the Algerian Civil War in the 1990s or the history of citizenship in French colonialism as starting points for philosophical explorations. Jean-François Lyotard, *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Jacques Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other: The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), and *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2001). Hélène Cixous' work revisits her Algerian childhood and her relation to Algeria in numerous works, including *So Close*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); *Reveries of the Wild Woman: Primal Scenes*, trans. Beverley Bea Brahic (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006); *Philippines*, trans. Laurent Milesi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

amount to significant engagements with Algerian history or society beyond providing one remembered glimpse. This does not argue for or against the applicability of these writers' theoretical works to Algerian history, but it suggests that this can only take place through a careful process of translation between theory formulated in a French context and study of Algerian realities. I have tentatively attempted some of this in the second half of the dissertation.

Finally, this dissertation gives particular weight to Dib's identity as an Algerian. This might be criticized on several counts: first, the tendency to treat writers from the "Global South" as national writers artificially limits the field of their interpretation, reinforcing the divide between a "universal" North and a South denied that privilege; second, emphasizing nationality plays into a postcolonial nation-state system that is responsible for many social ills and that Dib himself treated with skepticism; and third, Dib, who spent most of his writing life in France, whose interests were cosmopolitan, and whose writing is in conversation with French and other literatures, ought to be studied outside of identitarian frames. The main reason for my focus is that I have tried, throughout, to follow Dib's own presentation of himself and his work, and Dib's own description of himself always took his Maghrebi and Algerian identity for granted. "We" in Dib's voice refers most often to Algerians, Algerian writers, North African writers in French, and so on. He described his situation living in France as the exile of "un travailleur émigré": "Après l'indépendance, je n'ai pas trouvé ma place dans mon pays malgré les promesses et les démarches. J'avais une famille à ma charge, il fallait bien qu'elle vive."[23]

This should already suggest that "Algeria" to Dib means something different from the nation-state. Following Dib's understanding of his inheritance as an Algerian – someone born in that territory and someone involved in the struggle to make that name into a political designation – helps deform the name beyond political territory and the identity officially advanced by the state. The nation breaks up into different languages and cultures, different historical influences, different groups with their own antagonisms – including migrant workers, who he felt were poorly treated both by the French government and the one "back home." Dib's *algérianité* is specific to his own life and his own cultural background, and it can be quite different from that of other writers of his own generation who came from other regions and social backgrounds. Emphasizing historical background and inheritance can, rather than reinforcing monolithic categories, help to pick them apart, to show how they belong to a history that predates them and will continue

23 "Entretien avec Mohammed Dib", in Zaoui, *Algérie: des voix dans la tourmente:* 171.

beyond their relevance. Gary Wilder, focusing on France's colonies of administration rather than the settler colony that Algeria was, has recently argued that the French state has never, from its imperial beginnings to its postcolonial present, actually reflected the model of the nation-state it claimed for itself, and that anticolonial projects were framed as much through imperial realities as through the idea of a community of equal nation-states.[24] Tracing Dib's relation to Algeria – as history, cultural inheritance, or challenge, and overlapping at all its edges into broader words – can make its own small contribution to reworking history from an interaction between self-contained political or identitarian units to something that better reflects the movements of people and the developments of their beliefs and aspirations.

This dissertation is divided into two halves, the first of which centres around the problematic of "writing," and the second around "history," although overlap in both directions is inevitable. The first half gives more attention to Dib's poetry, and to its relation to his fiction, while the second generally keeps to the novels and short stories. In both halves, the relation of the visible and the invisible, and the challenge of trying to see the invisible, or its traces, in the visible, provides a loose framework. The two halves, each of which will be more fully introduced in its first chapter, constitute different but complementary approaches to reading. The two frameworks – complexities and sources of writing techniques, and questions of representing history as something lived, not only known – capture together much of the wide range of Dib's work in terms of style and content. Dib established early in his writing career both a strong link to history and a dedication to writing as craft. The generation of French-language Algerian writers that he belonged to, writers who were trained in colonial schools but who became national writers through the movement to independence and their involvement in it, were hugely influenced by these events, personally and in their reception as writers. With Mouloud Feraoun and Mouloud Mammeri, who published their first novels the same year as Dib's *La Grande maison*, Dib is sometimes referred to as part of the "Generation of '52." These writers, along with the next generation (all roughly a decade younger, but publishing in the 50s) Kateb Yacine, Assia Djebar, Malek Haddad, and a few others, wrote novels that presented Algerian life from an Algerian perspective, avoided exoticism, and looked to literary models other than colonial novels. Their

24 Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): 4.

early work was closely connected to the nationalist movement, working to bring the lived reality of the colonized majority to a broader audience.

At the end of the war, Haddad wrote a lament for his peers and himself, "orphelins de lecteurs authentiques." They were separated from the mass of the Algerian population by language and by illiteracy, and the interest and attention they had found in the French public "ne sont pas purs de toute sympathie politique"; they were "les tristes bénéficiaires d'une actualité bouleversée et bouleversante," and their contributions to national independence, while not negligible, were secondary to that of the Islamic reformers.[25] Of these writers, few would continue to dedicate themselves to writing in French: Mouloud Feraoun was killed during the war; Mouloud Mammeri turned mostly to archiving, preserving and translating Kabyle culture; Kateb Yacine spent much of his time involved in producing popular theatre in Algerian dialect or in French; Assia Djebar spent more than a decade training and working as a historian before returning to a remarkable career in fiction. But Dib's response was to reassert his identity as a writer, and to insist on the importance of his pursuing this as fully as possible, taking advantage of the fact that his writing was no longer dictated by a clear political purpose to allow him to explore the craft as fully as he could, a migrant worker but dedicated to his *métier*.

The first half of this dissertation will explore the tools and approaches he used in this work, some inherited but all reworked to his own ends. The second half will then move to see how he used these to address the events and movements of history, opening a vantage point, beginning from the very local, onto the world. Across the whole we will emphasize how his work returns, from the broad vistas it opens up, to the details of the visible, to everyday life and to the activity of writing, aiming to show the dazzling wonders of light, the play of desire, the movement of history at work even where it might be most overlooked or pushed aside.

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25 Haddad, *Les zéros tournent en rond* (Paris: Maspero, 1961). The text of the essay is available at <<http://www.ism-france.org/analyses/-Les-zeros-tournent-en-rond-8207—article-14584>>.

# First Part: Writing (in History)

## 1.1 : Writing as Activity: Intention and Imaginative Space

Trying to think about Mohammed Dib's body of writing as a whole means coming to terms with the sheer variety of the texts that he published. These include novels in realist style, others that are fantastic and dream-like; dense short poems with striking but opaque imagery, prose poems, poetic narrative, short stories in various forms, and works that mix segments or characteristics of each of these. This mix flaunts many of the convenient divisions that get used in talking about 20th century writing: realism vs. abstraction; literature concerned with identity and history vs. literature working on language and form; writing that aims at clarity vs. fragmentary delirium; and so on. At the same time, his body of work is unified in striking ways. In his author's note to the 1995 short story collection *La nuit sauvage*, Dib endorsed the idea that all an author's prose texts form part of a "master novel," a single tree with different branches.[1] In his own work, this applies most clearly to his short stories, many of which are pendants to novelistic projects, but thematic material, characters, and imagery are shared across prose and poetry alike. Dib's writing also shares what might be called a similar "tone," a smoothly musical language usually put down in short sentences and simple grammatical constructions. Even the most fantastic descriptions (or, in the fairly rare places they occur, the most dramatic events) are narrated calmly, smoothly, in the voice of someone who doesn't want to over-complicate or over-explain the world, but to present it in its wonder, misery, and strangeness. This puts Dib in the category of "difficult" writers whose prose style is fairly straightforward, and whose language creates complications through omission and condensation more than through elaborate construction.

The developments in Dib's writing style have often been addressed biographically, by drawing a line at the end of the Algerian War of Independence in 1962 separating Dib's early, realistic and politically engaged writing – the *Algeria* trilogy and *Un été africain*, along with his first collection of poetry, *Ombre gardienne* – from what followed. Dib made this distinction himself, saying that independence had released him from an obligation to write as part of a political project and turned him to more personal concerns of psychology and style. But he tended to present this as a shift in the orientation of his project rather than a change in the project itself. In a 1982 interview, in response to the question of whether his creative process had changed over

1 Dib, *La nuit sauvage*, 245.

the years, he responded:

> C'est le même mouvement sur le plan de la création qui s'est pousuivi, qui a pris des formes différentes, certainement, parce que l'événement une fois produit–c'est-à-dire la guerre d'Algérie, l'indépendance de l'Algérie—une fois ces événements arrivés, il y a eu en quelque sorte une libération de l'auteur qui a pris un engagement. L'engagement s'est trouvé rempli. C'étaient donc d'autres engagements qu'il allait requérir.[2]

In this interview, Dib also acknowledged that his period of writing driven by a political cause had shaped him as a writer in lasting ways, leading someone who always considered himself "essentially a poet" to develop new techniques. In a note published in Simorgh, at the end of Dib's life, he described his lifelong approach to language as a result of the same social situation that gave urgency to his first novels:

> Écrire. Pour moi le problème, au commencement de tout, fut de traduire dans une langue de riches (le français) les réalités d'un pays pauvre (l'Algérie). Ce que je ne pu faire, dans ces débuts, qu'au prix de restrictions lexicales, de réductions syntaxiques, et que sais-je encore, indispensables, mais combien plus éloquentes, du coup. Je suis resté sous cet habit du pauvre.[3]

The shift in Dib's writing marked by 1962's *Qui se souvient de la mer* can maybe be best characterized as the removal of divisions between modes of writing that had already been part of Dib's practice, in particular blurring the line between poetry and prose. Rather than abandoning the realism, social analysis, and political concerns of the early novels altogether, Dib's writing would move at different distances from them, contrasting, mixing, or interrupting them with different modes of writing. Working with and through restrictions would be a catalyst for inventiveness, regardless of the direction in which his writing activity was mobilized. The recognizable cadence of Dib's language, together with a constant reworking of form, accompanies Dib's writing as it runs from social commentary to highly personal and abstract accounts of thinking and sensing. The range of formal styles and their interpenetration mirror the range of everyday personal experience, and the push towards experimentation responds to the lack of an obvious literary form for conveying the simultaneous complexity of experience. Comprehension and incomprehension, conceptual knowledge and sensation, observation and aspiration exist alongside each other, driving forward a writing activity whose entirety, as experience, goes

2 Eric Sellin, "Interview accordée par Mohammed Dib" 21.
3 Dib, *Simorgh*, 66-67.

beyond what can be contained in the written words.

This chapter pursues an approach to writing as activity as a way of setting up the remainder of this half of the dissertation. Viewing writing primarily as an activity rather than as a collection of texts can allow us to see basic commonalities between different styles and approaches. Although the experience of writing is personal and ultimately not fully transmissible, writing is social both in its origin – since the writer is formed by influences, observations, and relationships – and in its reception. In even the most abstract poetry, a social and historicizing link is at work in the effort by writer or reader to convey, capture, or recreate aspects of experience that most resist being put in words. And even the most didactic or descriptive prose writing involves separating out what aspects of experience are to be conveyed as directly as possible, and what aspects are left to the reader's imagination. Taking the visible as the paradigm for knowledge that is sensory and verifiable, potentially recognizable by all, we can say that writing is involved in the relation of visible and invisible in two senses. On the one hand, a writer may be concerned with those aspects of thought and experience that are hardest to express, bringing some version of these invisible processes to visibility so that they can be recreated by the reader. On the other, a writer may attempt to bring what is only locally visible to a broader audience, introducing readers into a larger world and making what might go unnoticed more broadly seen. These two senses, which are easy to apply respectively to a writing concerned mostly with its own form and one dedicated to political tasks, are more intertwined than might immediately be apparent. Both rely on a shared set of language elements, meanings, and images that link writer, reader, and world. These connections mobilize historically formed cultural elements, spanning past and present. But they also open these up to change, as symbolic codes are re-formed through every reading.

Dib described the process of writing, in *Tlemcen ou les lieux de l'écriture*, as a process of capture and of withdrawal:

> L'écriture est une forme de saisie du monde. Mais cette saisie s'effectue dans un mouvement de recul, – recul du scripteur par rapport au monde et recul du même par rapport à l'écriture. L'oeuvre, semble-t-il, se constitue dans ce creux, dans cette distance.[4]

This activity of capturing the world by withdrawing from it, rendering visible to others and to oneself by moving towards the invisible, the personal and inexpressible, becomes a way of moving

4 Dib, *Tlemcen ou les lieux de l'écriture*,53.

between separate lives and desires through the creation of spaces that allow language, culture, and imagination to remake and re-form themselves. The text becomes a means for opening onto this space where desires meet and codes of meaning interact:

> L'écrivain ne serait-il qu'une entité ayant pour fonction de produire du texte? Non, certes.
> On vient à l'écriture avec le désir, inconscient, de créer un *espace de liberté* dans l'espace, imposé à tous, des contraintes.
> On y vient aussi, et toujours, avec ses propres références.
> Le lecteur n'est pas davantage une entité ayant pour simple fonction de lire. Il vient à la lecture, on n'y pense pas assez, pour découvrir un espace de liberté, et se présente aussi avec son fonds de références.
> Tout se passe bien tant que le code de l'un coïncide − plus ou moins − avec celui de l'autre. Mais ce n'est pas forcément chaque fois le cas.
> Il faut alors qu'un effort soit fait par le lecteur, les critiques, ceux qui disposent d'un magistère, pour rouvrir l'espace de liberté, au-delà des codes.[5]

While the freedom in question is certainly on one level the freedom of the imagination, opening life up beyond the imposed limitations of a particular life, the effort that allows re-entry to the space of freedom may also call on the reader to question social and cultural forms taken for granted as forming identity. Early in his career, Dib told the journal *Témoignage chrétien* that he sought to introduce a movement between the particular and the universal in order to let readers see their worlds as linked to ones they might not have identified with. In this case this meant introducing French readers into a space shared with the Algerian poor under the colonial system:

> Nous cherchons à en saisir les structures et les situations particulières. Puis nous nous retournons vers le monde pour témoigner de cette particularité, mais pour marquer aussi bien combien cette particularité s'inscrit dans l'universel. Les hommes sont à la fois semblables et différents : nous les décrivons différents pour qu'en eux vous reconnaissiez vos semblables.[6]

Writing allows a transfer between different sets of references, not by reducing them to the same but by fitting them together into a shared world. The most personal or abstract writings also invite the reader to do the work of transfer or translation that allows writing to pass into a world of meaning, taking on visible form. This may involve stretching the imagination, reworking a sense of self, recognizing new connections; it may affect senses operating outside of linguistic meaning (my personal experience in reading Dib's poetry, for instance, has always involved

5 ibid., 61.
6 *Témoignage Chrétien*, Feb 7, 1958, quoted in Jean Déjeux, *Mohammed Dib: écrivain algérien* (Sherbrooke, PQ: Éditions Naaman): 147.

regulating breath). Without suggesting equivalence or easy transfer between these registers, we can see a continuity between the different modes of Dib's writing, adapting itself each time to different concerns and constraints. Bringing different lives and aspects of the world to readers happens through spaces of freedom where the reader's imagination is called on to recognize previously unseen similarities. And the most obscure of the spaces writing can carve out are realized only by the reader's engaging and interrogating cultural codes and allowing them to change. By opening vistas onto what exceeds the visible world, writing offers the opportunity to expand and intensify the way in which that same world the reader returns to is lived.

*Activity and Engagement*

Before turning more directly to Dib's own writing, it will be useful to situate the idea of writing as activity within the field of some French literary criticism from the period in which Dib began writing. In Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Blanchot, and Édouard Glissant we find approaches that, while sharing an emphasis on the writer's activity as a means of linking the self to a larger and not fully graspable other, come to different and sometimes contrasting conclusions. A survey of these ideas will provide the background to present my own approach to Dib's writing.

Conceiving of writing as an activity linking writer, reader, and world was a current concern in the world of French-language literature that Dib entered in the 1950s with the publication of his first works by the Paris publisher Éditions du Seuil. Several very different factors helped contribute to this. Involvement in the resistance to the collaborationist Vichy regime and the German occupation of France had introduced many writers to a kind of partisan activity more life-encompassing than most of them (even if they had declared political allegiances) had previously known. The stark choice posed between collaboration or resistance raised the question of the writer's active involvement in a cause. In a very different sense, the Surrealist movement had, during the interwar period, emphasized activity through an interest in writing practices that focused not on the content to be expressed but the manner in which it was produced. Automatic writing, collage, and other techniques invited writers to focus on method, making content the product of an imaginative activity rather than its starting point. Surrealist and *engagé* tendencies affected some of the same writers, including Louis Aragon, with whom Dib shared a friendship and a common membership in the Communist Party, and who wrote an introduction to Dib's first collection of poetry. An interest in activity was also encouraged by two of the major

intellectual trends of the era, Marxism and phenomenology. Both begin from existence understood as an active relation with the world, understood in Marx as the activity of producing one's own conditions of life, and phenomenologically as a basic stance inflected in different ways accounting for the range of possibilities for experience. There were efforts to draw on the two at once, the most publicly visible of these likely being Jean-Paul Sartre's. In his 1948 *What is Literature?*, he gave an account of a literary act in which the writer begins from her situation but aims towards something that goes beyond the given, the totality of the social world. Through this action, the writer is able to affect the relation between individual and world, expanding the limits of how this world is seen.

In phenomenological terms, the orientation towards something beyond the immediate given is a question of intentionality. In Husserl's phenomenology, the world is something "horizonal," at the limit of sight: it is not directly experienced, but it is what combines and unites all experience and allows us to push further into experience. A world "*is an infinite idea, related to infinities of harmoniously combinable experience*," whose correlate idea is "a complete synthesis of possible experiences."[7] This world is possible thanks to the "intentionality" of consciousness, which establishes both self and world, co-constituting the two as where experience occurs. It is through intention that something appears to me *as* something, establishing the relation without which no objective knowledge would be possible. The world is the shared space and prerequisite for action; it is the overall system of relations that unites all identifiable processes. Intentionality is what places the immediate data of experience into the home of possible action, regardless of what its horizon contains for any given consciousness.

Sartre saw the particularity of literary action as being able to expand this horizon, making visible some new aspect of this world. By revealing new possibilities, this activity is also changing the world. This makes up a process that he calls "disclosure":

> The prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure. It is therefore permissible to ask him this second question: "What aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?" The engaged writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change.[8]

7 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 62. Husserl's emphasis.
8 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949): 23.

Writing here comes out of a deliberate targeting of one piece of the social totality, which restricts the writer to local and specific action. It also takes place without being sure of its outcome; together these imply that the writer "has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition." This partiality inflects the entirety of the intention, and the self and world it establishes. The writer becomes a partisan, aiming not towards the totality of the world as it could be experienced to today, but a world in its entirety transformed, humanized:

> For this is quite the final goal of art: to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it had its source in human freedom [...] [T]he writer chooses to appeal to the freedom of other men so that, by the reciprocal implications of their demands, they may re-adapt the totality of being to man and may again enclose the universe within man.[9]

The writer's work is redemptive – it re-covers, re-adapts, re-encloses – in so far as it transforms the given by giving it a genetic backstory: by originating in human freedom, it becomes understandable and so controllable by the collective that responds to the writer's appeal. In its most accomplished form, the writer would be creating "the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution," writing for the entirety of a society that was classless and in constant flux; here the writer's work would disappear as activity and would simply be the moment of "reflective consciousness" necessary to the collective's action.[10] Sartre's disclosure is a particularly strong version of what Dib hoped to see from his early work: revealing a shared universality above the particular differences of different people. Sartre aims not just at recognition of a shared condition, but the recognition of a shared power to alter the world fundamentally.

To come to this extreme definition of the writer's activity, Sartre had to make several simplifications in his material. To begin with, Sartre drew a distinction between prose, tied to its situation and "utilitarian," and poetry, which "withdraws from the human condition" and overflows meaning, excluding the latter from his concerns.[11] Beyond this, Sartre had to assume strong positions on the writer's free capacity to determine the writing activity, and the ability of disclosure to alter the world. On all of these positions, Sartre's theory came into conflict with the ideas put forward by Maurice Blanchot, whose articles on literature were highly influential, though not as popularly accessible or available as Sartre's. To begin with, Blanchot's own fiction

9 ibid, 57.
10 ibid, 159.
11 ibid., 18.

writing – both men were creative writers as well as theorists – thoroughly ignores Sartre's distinction between prose and poetry, while also not being assimilable to the "poetic prose" that Sartre found bourgeois and reactionary. His understanding of literature also looked at the writer as directing an activity towards what lies beyond the given, but for Blanchot this beyond was not the social totality but the limits of possible experience, which appears in the form of the writer's own death. For Blanchot, not only is the writer not in full control of the writing activity, the writer as such exists only through that activity. This problematic of "inspiration" means that neither pole of the writer – world relation can be fixed:

> The poet exists only poetically, as the possibility of the poem. [...] Inspiration is not the gift of the poem to someone existing already, but the gift of existence to someone who does not yet exist [...] in the permanent leave of absence granted to the self, to every subjective certainty and to the world's truth.[12]

The relation between writer and world is reduced and abstracted from given details, in a withdrawal that Dib's comments on the writer's taking distance from the world would echo. For Blanchot, who felt that if writers were to be politically useful they could do this better by getting involved directly in political activity than through their creative work, the writer's orientation is not towards a full understanding and control of the world but towards the absence of any image of it. Art can't be divided into what engages the world and what doesn't; *all* art takes part in the world, and even "the artist who thinks he sovereignly opposes all values and protects within himself through his art the source of all-powerful negation submits to the universal destiny no less than the artist who produces "useful" works. Perhaps he submits more."[13] The value of art is rather that at the same time it leads somewhere else, towards a nothingness that it doesn't transform but only marks. Releasing oneself from certitude does not amount to acting on the world; it can only change the point from which we view the world. Rather than giving us the world in the fullness of its meaning, it gives us the world as opaque, resistant to reduction to a given meaning. What is revealed are the limits of revelation:

> Writing begins only when it is the approach to that point where nothing reveals itself, where, at the heart of dissimulation, speaking is still but the shadow of speech, a language which is still only its image, an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary, the one nobody speaks.[14]

12 Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Prace, 1982): 226
13 ibid, 216.
14 ibid, 47.

Language takes on the opacity and irreducibility of things that characterizes abstract sculpture (Blanchot uses the example of Giacometti); as the space it occupies becomes stripped of distinguishing characteristics, the artwork moves the spectator's viewing point to "infinity [...] the point at which here coincides with nowhere."[15] Writing, in Blanchot's sense, is language become image – not because it uses metaphors or paints pictures, but because it becomes a thing, something that subsists on its own and can be viewed from different points, ultimately from any point. Language becomes as solid as we are; it becomes not just something we do but something that happens to us. Writing bears witness to human freedom – but this is not a totalized freedom in the process of realizing itself but one that always asks for more than is possible; it asks for more or other than what it knows. Here writing does take on a political signification. In times of distress, writers cannot directly respond to the distress; but they show that every time is a time of distress, and in times where the world seems to present itself as order and future, art is needed all the more to "maintain the movement" of what escapes all ends and orders.[16]

*Poetic intention*

Édouard Glissant, the Martican poet, novelist, and theorist a few years Dib's junior, developed an understanding of poetics that shares Blanchot's emphasis on writing as an infinite and form-defying task, but extends this towards the point where it comes into contact, again, with the world as lived, physical and social. One of the values of Glissant's theoretical work for studying literary innovation from an international perspective is that he is interested in work that might be lumped on either side of a hastily constructed divide between "Sartrean" and "Blanchotian" camps. This makes him one of the still surprisingly rare theorists trying to take work focussed on linguistic innovation and work involved in debates on identity and history as belonging to the same overall field. Glissant's *L'intention poétique*, first published in 1969, gives a loose history and interpretation of avant-garde poetry in French that, while giving importance to writer's personal and aesthetic orientation, also insists on writing's belonging to the social world, emphasizing the inseparability of world as horizon for literary activity and the world as lived relation. In Glissant's framework, poetic intention makes an infinite approach towards a point

15 ibid. [translation modified]
16 ibid, 328-331 and 332n. Despite the difference in style, we can compare this idea in Blanchot to one of the central insights of Theodor Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1973): that some utopic element in consciousness always stretches beyond the given, but that this element can never be identified; its work is only seen in the negative, where it conflicts with the given.

where the individual would meet up with or merge into something larger or other, but it is also multiplied or stellated into different forms that define a particular author's work. All of these then find their place in the larger trajectory Glissant hopes to describe, from the "world-as-solitude, or -as-identity", to the "world-as-relation."[17] This is not simply a question of moving from isolated perception to full knowledge, or from an enclosed human perspective to "the clear harmony of the world"; instead it would be an overlapping of the material world in its totality and the full range of human histories and aspirations. Writing has the opportunity of bringing something that is missing both from the One, the unified horizon of individual experience, and from "the concrete unity of the earth," which Glissant calls, using the geological images he is fond of, "the wind coming off the shores, where so many of Us churn a little known silt."[18] This image combines the sense of distance, of those places ignored in the dominant or dominating image of the world – "that part of the world which, shivering in its being, is saddled with non-existence" – and the work that produces the dream of unity in all its different forms. To reveal the invisible in the sense of what goes unnoticed is also to reveal that in every place the work of imagination is mining the complexities and mysteries of lived experience.

Like Blanchot, Glissant sees intention rooted in something broader than the individual's conscious intention. Intention is neither self-contained nor easily transmitted: "There is no intention that resists the upsurge from the imagined. But there is no oeuvre that, while developing, doesn't arm itself with a single constant and often incommunicable intention."[19] The surge of imagination "deports" the writer from himself, and the incompleteness of the oeuvre – which always remains "the shadow [...] of what in eternity he would be destined to write" – makes writing an experience of absence. And beyond, or at the heart of, this internal dynamic, the proper name of the author is only a shorthand to refer to a point that is already relational. Underneath the author's I is both a "we" and a "here," regardless of whether the author chooses to emphasize this or even thinks much of it. As Glissant works through brief sketches of late 19th and early 20th century French poets, he places each, differently, in the project of developing a form of knowledge that could go beyond the ones represented by discovery or conquest, enumeration or the consolidation of individual identity. The quest for a language adequate to the

17 Édouard Glissant, *Poetic Intention,* trans. Nathalie Stephens and Anne Malena (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2010): 15.
18 ibid., 9.
19 ibid., 29.

richness of what can be sensed or imagined shows up in very different forms, from Rimbaud's dream of a total poetics adequate to the world in its geographical variety, to Mallarmé's struggle for one that would be grounded in its own complete development, or from the attempt at immersion in the details of a localized landscape in Reverdy or René Char to Ségalen's desire to see his features disappear into those of another. Each points to a place where the world as horizon of meaning and the world as the particulars encountered would come to merge. Glissant sees in all of these writers a thinking that goes beyond the political history of France in its imperial age, an attempt at "listening to the world, fertilized in advance."[20] Because the ultimate endpoint, the world-as-relation or what Glissant would later call the "tout-monde" or "chaos-monde," is not available to a single and unified freedom but is the total space where separate freedoms would move, this "listening" does not constitute disclosure in Sartre's strong sense. But in Glissant's understanding, this experimental work engaged the structures of history by opening paths along which other voices could be heard, showing the inadequacies of forms of thought to the complexity of the world as it was already known.

In this historical sketch, the writers from the colonies would most clearly demonstrate how a personal orientation towards an unreachable world ends up serving to disclose the failings and challenges of the social and the given. This is not because, for Glissant, these writers were motivated by a distinctly political intention. Instead, blocks become apparent in the act through which the intention passes into writing. In the history of *L'Intention poétique*, non-French writers – his central example is Aimé Césaire – came to see the extent to which reaching out to the reconciliation of a livable world and a knowing self, the experiencing self a the self as part of a connected world, runs up against particular social forms. Césaire and his fellow colonial writers were, he says, the "first conscious of that which, between he and this other self, was maintained by the force of barriers."[21] In Glissant's reading of Césaire, the poet's main intention is towards union with the physical environment – to be "free to identify with the earth and the tree" – but attempting to express this led him up against the limits of what was expressible within the racial assumptions and the colonial structures that defined the field where French-language writing circulates. His pursuit of uniting his racialized subject to the land he lives in leads him to call up and revalourize the whole world's history, embracing and transforming a history of subjection

20 ibid., 36.
21 ibid., 130.

into a rootedness. For Glissant, this leads to Césaire's version of *négritude*, where the claim of proximity to nature includes and subverts the deprecation of the black subject in the cultural forms that monopolized literature, showing that all the struggles with meaning, identity, or nothingness that characterize the advanced thought of the metropole are present where the thought of the centre saw “primitive” thought or a subhuman immiseration. What is disclosed is not the solution to the political problem, but the problem's outlines: it shows that the problems of “overseas” can't be reduced to issues of administration, but are lived crises as complex as those of the metropole, and can be addressed only by reversing, reworking, and forging new lines of relation and of listening. Poetry, running ahead of the political situation, announces relation before it is established; but this announcing opens the way for the work that will follow.

The vertiginous experience of writing, different for each, can't be cleanly separated from writing's function in a predetermined political field. To reduce the writer to a political function of disclosure is to ignore the personal intention that drives the writing, which engages the writer on more levels than instrumental reason. But to read a writer's work only as an encounter with the absolute or with nothing would be to miss how writing forms part of an ongoing history of blocked or emerging possibilities. As Glissant describes Césaire's discovery, “to be born to the world, is as much to come to the light of the sun as to that of consciousness - it is to be born to History (not subjected to it).”[22] A writer's pursuit of what comes to light under this double sun means exposure to the invisible within and without, but this exposure leads back inexorably, in the writer's life or in the work's, to the world as it is lived, experienced, and, imperfectly, known.

*Poetic intention in Dib*

I have found Glissant's conception of poetic intention helpful in trying to understand Dib's writing practice. I characterize the poetic intention in Dib's work as moving in two directions, resulting in a tension in his work, although the two also converge in important places. One aims towards identification with the details of everyday life. In the first novels, this takes the form of trying to merge into a collective social voice, but even after the unity of any collective voice is questioned, Dib's writing still dwells on the details of domestic and mundane life. Merging poetic voice and the collective ordinary would strip the voice of its individuality, and would suffuse the everyday with the richness of meaning and interpretability of poetry. This drive moves not only

22 ibid, 134.

towards social everydayness but towards the material world as surrounding landscape. Where the voice tends towards disappearing into its surroundings, it comes closest to the second direction of intention, which moves towards the subject's complete dissolution. It aims to dissolve into air or light, or to trail off into silence. The body fades into the dust or glare of the landscape, dissolves into wind or light, or disappears into the desert or the snow; the poetic voice becomes condensed, enigmatic, or tapers off. The tension between these two directions, figured in Dib's note to *Omneros*, gestures towards an abstract beyond while always returning to the place it rises from.

The two forms of intention can be seen in relation to language, as in Charles Bonn's reading: the capture of a "langue des pauvres," a collective language, at one end, and the approach of an inexpressible silence on the other. Dib also figures these yearnings through reference to other aesthetic forms, image or sound. One of Dib's recurring images is a still and sparse landscape with a star hovering over it. Different versions of this occur from Dib's earliest poems to late works including *L'Aube Ismaël*; it appears most importantly in *Qui se souvient de la mer* and *Cours sur le rive sauvage*, where the star sings and leads the protagonist on as an ambivalent guide. The star may metamorphose into the figure of a beloved woman, in *Cours sur le rive sauvage* or in some of the poetry; the same general form appears in more realist work, as with the dark presence of the mountain, the Pic des Corbeaux, looming over Arfia's guerilla group in *La danse du roi*. Two axes of desire combine in the image: stretching laterally, moving over the landscape, and vertically towards the star, whose radiating offers to eclipse everything else. Dib's use of a similar image, with the suggestion of both limitlessly expandable landscape and the pull towards leaving, to describe his experience listening to singer and ‘oud-player Mohammed Khaznadji, suggests that what we are calling "poetic intention" is at play more broadly than in the printed word:

> On écoute cette voix grave émanant d'une étoile sans nom et on ne sait quoi éprouver, sauf qu'on est traversé par un souffle qui a parcouru des espaces incommensurables pour aller se perdre dans d'autres infinis. Le même sentiment se renouvelle à chaque audition, cela se ressemble et encore une fois ne ressemble à rien. Il faut user d'une longue patience pour l'accompagner à destination et, encore une fois, on n'est pas au terme.[23]

Dib's own aesthetics follow Khaznadji off of solid ground and across the immeasurable spaces of rarefied language, fantastic and emblematic imagery, dazzling light and idealized beauty, and this

23 Dib, *Laëzza*, 159.

is often in connection to the Andalusian and North African aesthetic traditions that fed the music that Khaznadji played. The most literal versions of the search for meaning directly in the lived world, a search for meaning in marks on sand, snow, walls, and so on, also come by way of reference to Arab-Islamic and North African tradition; Dib wrote of a "poésie qui se confondait à son tour avec la recherche du signe, et moins du signe que de la trace du signe,"a thematics found in the study of desert traces in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry or the divinatory practice of geomancy, which he says is "connu de tous les Algériens"[24] – ideas that will be explored in the next two chapters. This range of aesthetics, between the voice that transports you far from yourself and the detailed study of patterns that opens up an endless realm of meaning off of the things of the given world traces an aesthetic field that connects physical contemplation to the purest fantasy. Placing Dib's work within this expanded aesthetics will be one of the concerns of the chapters that follow.

Following Glissant, writing as activity is not reducible to the desire for a specific disclosure, however much that may have been a part of Dib's writing at times (especially at first). But viewing writing, as Blanchot does, as an approach to an impossible or vanishing point does not mean writing has nothing to do with the world as it is lived, in the challenges of historical and political existence. Writing as an intention to merge with the world both as a horizon of meaning and as the totality of life can pull the writer in two directions, not so much contradictory as complementary, and Dib provides a good example of this. The urge to present the details of everyday life in their experiential texture and the desire to lift from the physical plane towards an aesthetic experience that belongs to a broader space than that of situated existence are both aspects of writing as an activity drawing bridges between a situated self and a horizonal whole. This approach suggests that we can, and perhaps should, avoid dividing Dib's work into separate types – seeing works either as attempts to capture reality in prosaic form or to escape into the realm of imagination – but can instead see it as displaying a tension between situated existence and its dissolution, whether into a social or an imaginative whole. Writing opens up an experience that points towards the invisible, towards what conscious experience never grasps but is always coloured by, in two directions: towards the outward horizon of the world, and the inward or upward horizon of a contentless sensibility that conditions all experience.

Modernity, exemplarity

24 Dib, *Tlemcen ou les lieux de l'écriture*, 108.

A writing torn between two points where it would cease to be writing, and instead be the details of life or the uncaptured flow of sensation, is not exclusive to Dib. It looks quite similar, in fact, to the tension Jacques Rancière has suggested characterizes the very concept of literature as it developed in the European 18th and 19th centuries. Novelistic writing, Rancière says, is caught between:

> Two figures of hyper-writing: less-than-written writing, the pure trajectory of breath represented by the Swedenborgian language of the spirit, and more-than-written writing, inscribed in the materiality of things, exemplified by the lines of the canals and railways of Saint-Simonian "new Christianity".[25]

Between writing become the pure breath of life and the writing of irrigational canals and railways, literature stakes out a space for the relation between art and life. The "doubling" of things by their literary or internal realities "can be interpreted in a mystical sense or in a postivist sense";[26] and thanks to the proximity of these two, seemingly antithetical, approaches, Rancière presents the field of literature – from satirical commentary to Romanticism, realism to pure writing – as part of the same field of possibilities. Within this framework, the variety of Dib's work fits within the essentially modern project of literature. But characterizing Dib's field of literature via non-European precedents invites us to think this modern project in terms of different origins and trajectories, and in reference to spirituality beyond the Swedenborgian and development beyond 19th-century industrialization. Along with the doubling of the world, as a net of materiality and as a horizon of meaning, we can think, following Glissant, how "the earth is different to each."[27] Gayatri Spivak has suggested, following Walter Benjamin's effort to understand language – where human language is one translation of "language as such", which covers the "nameless language of things"[28] - that we think of "World as Such and the Worlds of Experiencing Beings."[29] Holding the gap between the world as shared space, assumed by each experiencing being, and the world as it appears to each, helps us "feel we are avoiding assuming a world *and* self as self-evident ground for empirical inquiry." Rather than thinking of the space between – by analogy to Benjamin's essay, the space of translation – as "literature," she proposed

25 Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 143.
26 ibid, 19.
27 Glissant, *Poetic Intention*, 80.
28 Benjamin, "On Language as Such and the Language of Man", in *Selected Writings Vol 1: 1913-1926*, 70.
29 Spivak, "The Stakes of World Literature" in *An Aesthetic Education in the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012): 457.

we think of it more broadly as "a space filled by what is neither reason nor unreason yet seems irreducible," providing a way to "fill up the gaps in presupposing a world." This function is performed by dreams, and is also, Spivak argues, central to a range of what is called culture, whether written or not, recent or not, and including practices often classified as religious or artistic. Responding to the gap between what experiencing beings can feel the need for and what they are capable of providing for themselves, imaginative cultural production comes to allow connection between desired unity and limiting situated existence, without claiming to merge the two. In this framework, the idea of a "poetic intention" becomes stretched beyond definitions of poetry and shows its proximity to other arts and other forms of thought and experience, including the religious.

We can find a precursor for Spivak's idea of "World as Such" in Ibn al-'Arabi's way of conceiving the world, where *al-ḥaqq* – the real, identified with the divine, of which all things are only manifestations – appears to each existent not as the lord of all but in an individuated form. Each existent "has but a specific lord in God, it being impossible for it to have them all"; so every knowledge of the whole, no matter how developed, remains marked by its own starting point.[30] The only place where the real would appear fully is in its own knowledge of itself, a condition that would demonstrate the non-existence of everything else. Dib's poetics in its double direction can be sketched in the space of Ibn 'Arabi's theoretical sufism: on the one hand, the individual seeks self-annihilation (*fana'*) by dissolving self-awareness into the divine; on the other, the "slave" dedicates himself to interpreting all the signs of "his lord" in the world around him. Ibn 'Arabi's writing, and Sufi writing in general, mixed and invented genres, following experience and interpretation into the "space of dreams" where need and making fail to match. This heritage is also part of what Dib translates.

The structure of world borrowed from Spivak and Ibn 'Arabi also suggests a way to consider an author's work according to a structure of exemplarity. Here Dib's status as bi-lingual, post-colonial, or poly-stylistic would be read not as torn between tradition and modernity, or even as the site of an "alternate modernity," where several different zones would have their own experience of the breaks from historical continuity and the dramatic appearance of others and their other knowledges, but as one particular view of a shared condition. Dib's work would be an

30 Ibn al-'Arabi, *The Ringstones of Wisdom (Fusus al-Hikam)*, trans. Caner K. Dagli (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2004): 79.

example, particular in its own forms but theoretically able to translate beyond its origin to any other point in the world. The whole remains invisible, but what becomes visible in the spaces of freedom the work opens allows entry into it as "ours," allowing us to trace back the history of our modernity along particular paths, and to enter into other spaces of possibility.

That the world as a whole is implied as invisible does not mean it is guaranteed as unified, hospitable, or beneficial. It is nothing other than the world in which we live, but not taken exclusively as for us. If the invisible is what allows us to discover, to learn, to expand the limits of our visible, that doesn't mean that this function exhausts or is even important to its existence, as Dib points out in a fragment from *Simorgh*:

> Derrière la réalité se dissimule une surréalité, même et différente, qui ne reste pas toujours cachée. Mais se montre-t-elle et nous découvrons ce qui dans notre paysage physique le transforme en paysage *mental*. Pour nous interroger. Il n'est, semble-t-il, pas interdit de penser que cela se fait dans le but de nous renvoyer à nous-mêmes, de nous engager dans une confrontation de soi à soi. Limiter à cela le champ du questionnement que nous ouvre la surréalité serait néanmoins le restreindre singuilièrement.[31]

The "*mental* landscape" retains the strangeness of the physical; rather than giving the individual a clear place, the encounter with what is behind the visible world continues to interrogate us, and it does this in ways and directions that we may not find comfortable. This may help offset some of Peter Hallward's concerns about Dib's work. Hallward is concerned that an interest in a "singular" point, where self and distinctions dissolve into the whole of the world, eliminates the "specification" that allows for taking a stand, and moves Dib's later works to an "extreme distance from the world" where "there is little left to say."[32] This makes him argue that these works can only be fruitfully studied as revealing the mechanics of representation, not in their connection to social or political concerns.[33] But to stretch towards the point where language dissolves does not mean that point guarantees the end of conflict or a wholeness that is hospitable for us. In fact, it may leave us in an even more heightened awareness of the contradictions, lack, and violence around us. In Dib's writing inspiration and madness, an empowering calmness or a dulling calmness, self-knowledge and hallucination often sit too close to be told apart. Although reading Dib's work may provide moments of escape, the tension between the pull of invisible and the

31 Dib, *Simorgh*, 99.
32 Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, 246.
33 ibid., 333-335. Hallward's distinction between specifying and singularizing literatures bears more than a passing resemblance to Sartre's division of (engaged) prose from poetry.

return to the details of the everyday means that it returns us back to the world, whether this happens through the painful details we are called on to imagine or by summoning our own frames of reference to make sense of the text. If writing gains access to the problem of the world, it has no guarantee of finding solutions. No matter how dense the world of imagination, it can always be wiped away by force and brutality. The goals of writing then become quite modest, scratching out spaces of freedom that give temporary visibility to figures that can let thought make new connections, stretching the edges of our visible world into new relations that outlive the writing's slide back out of experience. Participating in the activity of writing by taking up a text is an invitation to work on the self, but that self is always formed by the particularities of its situation, and its activity can't be separated from this. If writing cannot capture the world and change it, it does return back from its passage through the invisible itself slightly changed. And depending on where and when it touches down, the results are different each time. Here the writer's responsibility is in contact with the unpredictable; hence its risk. In this vertiginous flight and return, the activity of writing can open into a myriad of forms, styles, or genres, each straining to inscribe itself at the point where would touch its limit, the flesh of the world, or both. Following this tension and intention in Dib's work provides a way to approach the specificities of Dib's own writing practice, but also to position it in a field of artistic creation expanded beyond narrow conceptions of literature. This includes not only written work long predating the 18$^{th}$ century but also religious practice, music, and visual art, all places where the effort to connect situated experience with the world as a whole takes shape through activity and leaves its own marks in the physical and social world.

The three chapters that make up the remainder of this first half of the dissertation reflect the breadth of this field. Each follows distinct concerns while referring back to the ideas elaborated here, mostly following the outlines of a kind of phenomenological literary criticism concerned with describing the outlines of "the world of the writer." But they are equally concerned, following Glissant, with showing how this personal world, which we can only partially describe, interacts with other partial views within the horizon of a shared world. This whole world is potentially "visible," able to be known and examined from different perspectives, but its unity is lived via the mediation of the invisible, things that exceed or fall outside of direct perception. Each of the chapters reference this basic framework, but do so from different questions and

starting points.

The chapter that follows is interested in how Dib's work draws on earlier literary traditions, classical Arabic poetry in its earliest forms and as it developed in Islamic Spain, and North African popular oral tradition. A literary tradition projects a world of shared meanings that link different places and times, but the continuity of this world is undermined by the extent to which history involves a constant mixing of traditions. Seeing tradition and modernity as ways of approaching the relation of past and present rather than as historical periods or cultural descriptors, the chapter examines Dib's relation to his cultural heritage as a source for approaches marked not by the assertion of separate "cultures" but by openness and inventiveness. His writing in this way aims to be the continuation of an invisible current of history, one that, in his own description, surfaces in unexpected ways and testifies to a continuous process of cultural change that takes apart claims of separate histories. The chapter provides some historical background on these traditions, and points out techniques and images in Dib's writing that draw on them, as catalysts for Dib's own invention rather than conservative gestures.

The next chapter is interested in the relation of literary form to different forms of human psychology or ways of conceiving subjectivity. The main focus is on the relation of Dib's work to Sufism, or what is often called "Islamic mysticism." Following the observation that many of the formal elements that seem most "modern" in Dib's writings and those of other North Africans of his generation are also found in the very diverse field of Sufi writing, this chapter looks both at Sufi writing practices and at ideas underpinning them that speak to the ways in which experience involves more than what can be communicated of it. The connection made by some writers between Sufism and Surrealism is discussed, and put in the broader frame of the role of sudden contacts between aesthetic traditions in producing the modernisms of the $20^{th}$ century. Dib's attempts at translating the invisible aspects of lived experience into literary form, and the manipulations of this form that result, are tracked through discussion of, among other themes, contemplation, inspiration, dream and madness, and the aesthetics of the sign.

The last chapter of the section is the one most concerned with the visible in its usual sense, with the attempt to capture the experience of the world as landscape or as a field occupied by things. Drawing mostly on 20th-century philosophy and poetry, the chapter begins from the phenomenological notion of the objective world emerging out of an initially undivided realm of sensation. This is a visual trope that Dib uses, but also a starting point to show how the

experience of the visible world refers beyond itself. While this chapter is the most concerned of the three with materiality, the material world in Dib is shot through with intimations of the invisible that accompanies it in thought, imagination, or dazzlement. The chapter looks at the strong interest Dib took in the landscape of Finland as well as that of Algeria, the role of "things" in his writing as well as that of his friend, the French poet Guillevic, and the importance of childhood experience, especially in his late work, as a way of seeing how the visible world emerges for consciousness over time.

Each of these chapters involves separate concerns, but one thing that unites them is showing how the quest to approach a wholeness – the unity of a cultural tradition, the full capture of experience in writing, a merging with the physical world – becomes rerouted and fragmented thanks to the interruptions of life, which is always impacted in different directions at once. The limitations of the visible break up and pull down the approach to the invisible. At the same time, the quest to restrict one's gaze to the given loses itself in a flood of historical inheritances, memories, delusions and desires; whatever we shed light on is bathed in the invisible. Writing instead moves between the two sides, holding to the world while knowing that this grasp is illuminated by everything that exceeds it.

## 1.2 : Reading for Tradition: Nostalgic Modernity

Habib Tengour, himself a poet and novelist who has declared his indebtedness to Dib's work, introduces Dib's collected poetry with assertions that Dib has a “perfect” familiarity with elements of North African literary heritage, including classical Arabic love poetry, the repertoire of popular poetry and song from Tlemcen, and Maghrebi Sufi writers.[1] These are not necessarily the qualities that would first strike a reader, especially one more familiar with French literature than with Arabic. Especially after his first collection, the free verse, compact syntax, and condensed imagery that characterizes Dib's poetry has an open kinship with French symbolist and modernist poetry. Dib is undoubtedly a “modern” writer in many of the ways the term is used: much of his work is experimental, highly concerned with language, interested in fragmentation and in demanding the reader's active involvement in making sense of a text. But he is at the same time, as Tengour asserts, significantly in conversation with older literary traditions, and in particular those from the place where he grew up, whether we understand that as the city of Tlemcen, Algeria as a whole, North Africa, or a broader region defined by the use of Arabic language or script, the predominance of Islam as a religion, or identification with a broader “Arab world.” It is possible, though, not to view his relation to modernity and to tradition as opposed, but as woven together. Rather than referring to distinct periods or styles on a historical continuum, both modernity and tradition can be seen as concerned with how past and present are linked. Culture or tradition would then not be visible categories of identity, but would belong to the invisible, a process of transmission that is only glimpsed where it shapes utterances and forms, but which can't be pinned down into opposed or stable “cultures” or “traditions.” And modernity, rather than the negation of tradition, would be a way of relating to it, acknowledging its invisible presence while holding to a present experience that is never merely a repetition of or continuation of the past.

It is recently and belatedly becoming more common to understand the literary modernism of the 20th century as both having been more in contact and continuity with its precedents than is sometimes assumed and having been from its inception, as Jahan Ramazani has put it, a “transnational poetics.”[2] Loosening the grip of national and linguistic frames of interpretation lets

1 Tengour, “Mohammed Dib, les mémoires du corps,” in Dib, *Oeuvres Complètes I: Poésies*, 7-28.
2 Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

it become clear how much literary history testifies to networks of cultural influence that don't respect national borders or common divisions between cultural zones or regions. The project of tracing influence, particularly for a post-colonial or globally-minded critic, faces a difficult task: the attempt to create a map of influence undoes itself as it progresses, since it undoes methodologically convenient distinctions between cultural unities. But to avoid this effort, either in the name of a globally identical modernism, where the inclusion of local references is simply incidental, or of a postmodernism that allows for indiscriminate jumbling of sources without significance or order, imposes another arbitrary division, this one historical, that ignores the extent to which writers are influenced by the setting in which they are raised and live, and by the social, cultural, and political events that shape those surroundings. In the case of Dib's generation of Algerian writers, elements that seem most modern or new may be the result of the influence of the old as easily as that of the European avant-garde. "Modernist" experimentation involves as much reworking of past inheritance as it does a conscious break with history or the adoption of European forms assumed to be more contemporary than their non-European counterparts.

This relates to a difficulty in the idea of literary modernism itself. The Belgian-American critic Paul de Man suggested in 1970 that the idea of modernity poses a problem for literary history. Pointing out that claims of modernity, and debates between the merits of the moderns or the ancients, go back long before the present era, he proposes thinking of modernity as a stance – in favour of the new, or of fidelity to the present moment, against the continuation of the same – rather than a particular period. But this leads to its paradoxical relation to history: the modern desire to break with the historical is what, in its repetition from era to era, lets there be a history of literature in the first place. De Man writes:

> The continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of literature toward the reality of the moment, prevails and, in its turn, folding back upon itself, engenders the repetition and the continuation of literature. Thus modernity, which is fundamentally a falling away from literature and a rejection of history, also acts as the principle that gives literature duration and historical existence.[3]

In addition, to treat literary history as a series of distinct forms, what de Man calls "positivist literary history," misses what is specific about literature – its immersion in a now that is distinct from any historical moment, since the "time" of a literary work is not the time of its writing or of any one reading. An adequate approach to literary history would need to be able to understand

3 Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity", *Daedalus* 99, no.2 (1970): 401

writing both as an act, one that always involves to some degree the "modern" gesture towards the moment of its composition, and as "an interpretative process that follows after an act,"[4] free-floating in the time after its creation and able to enter into subsequent literary history. The history of literary modernity, de Man finally suggests, needs to be based on a concept of history different from that "of history as a temporal hierarchy that resembles a parental structure."[5]

In a late piece on globalization, included in *Simorgh*, Dib gave a description of modernity that, like de Man's, is repeatable in any era and involves a temporality different from fluid succession:

> L'homme a eu, et il aura, toujours cette étrange nostalgie de ce qui n'a pas encore eu lieu. Et si c'était là l'essence effective de ce qu'on nomme la *modernité*, vocable jamais réellement défini bien que galvaudé? Mais comment pourrait-on jamais préciser l'objet de cette nostalgie: voulant dire, avec quels mots, puisqu'elle ne saurait être que si elle restait sans objet, et sans mots pour l'expliciter, et que c'est cela même qui a fait que toutes les époques ont eu leur *modernité*, cette nostalgie blanche et qui se renouvelle d'âge en âge, se pressent à chaque âge?
>
> La nostalgie sans objet.
> La nostalgie blanche.
> La nostalgie de rien.
> Matrice de tous les rêves.[6]

This "white nostalgia" sets up a historical relay while denying it any set description, since the nostalgia has no referent but its own desire and is betrayed by being pinned down. That Dib gives the concept of modernity a nostalgic or backward-looking character in addition to, or in tension with, its forward-looking one reflects this difference between the situation he is concerned with and the struggle for primacy between the "Ancients" and "Moderns" in 18th and 19th century European letters that de Man draws on. In the colonial situation, or in the globalization that is the main focus of Dib's piece from which the quotation is drawn, the "Ancients" are not the generally accepted founts of taste and manners but are sources and traditions that are being wiped away by a dominant history that appears as a humiliation and a reduction of all things to one, foreign, model. In Dib's damning picture of globalization, its process involves a standardization that wipes out languages and cultures, the division of elites from masses on a global scale, and the proliferation of virtual spaces subject to potentially limitless control. This

4 ibid., 392.
5 ibid., 403.
6 Dib, *Simorgh*, 125.

process inspires a nostalgia for a world full of particulars existing side-by-side without erasing each other, but this is itself a dream of globalization rather than rooted in historical record. In this context, modernity appears paradoxically both in the resurgence of attachments to territory and to a unified and clearly defined social group, a desire to resurrect unities that never were, and in the desire for a technologically enhanced virtuality free of all attachment to place. The defence of the Ancients is itself, as de Man had also noticed, often a modern gesture; and Dib points out that the dreams of the Moderns may resemble the gestures of those who would like to simplify things by resurrecting some lost past. Both gestures break with the lack of object at the heart of the blank nostalgia that is at the root of the drive for newness. The question remains whether it's possible to conceive of historical influence in a way that doesn't fall into the trap of trying to revive what never was.

In a lecture given in 1974 at UCLA, billed as a "Short introduction to Maghrebi literature," Dib addressed the relation of writers to earlier indigenous (pre-colonial) forms of expression, coining a word, *cryptostase*, for this purpose. In his framework, which he first presents in reference to the work of classical historians, a cultural or civilizational element passes, after its apparent defeat or suppression, into "une zone d'ombre où il est entré dans une sorte d'état latent," a cryptostase.[7] In this state of repression, cultural elements continue to develop, Dib says, often becoming clarified and simplified in the process, gaining a "puissance explosive" before suddenly reappearing to shake and disturb the civilizational unity claimed by the culture of the victors.[8] Held in a state of stasis, and so separated from the social conditions where it appeared earlier, when it emerges it is not as a copy of how it appeared previously, but as an element that influences a new gesture in which it appears transformed. What marks the emergence of a repressed element is not its appearing ancient but its striking originality in its new setting:

> On ne doit surtout pas s'attendre à la reviviscence telle quelle, au retour pur et simple des anciennes formes mises entre-temps sous le boisseau de la cryptostase, on doit plutôt s'attendre à voir un avatar de tout cela, dans lequel on reconaîtrait à peine les états cultures, religieux, sociaux, de départ si l'on n'y regardait pas de très près. Un authentique sceau d'originalité, grâce au pouvoir créateur de la cryptostase, marque en effet cette réapparition.[9]

7 This lecture, and two others given around the same time, were transcribed by Josette Bryson and included in her Ph.D thesis on Dib. Bryson, "La pierre et l'arabesque", 249.
8 ibid, 256-257.
9 ibid, 259.

The result of this in literary work is a strange mix of the modern and the ancient, and of images that seem simple but that nonetheless contain layers of historical influence. The author is not necessarily conscious of these influences; the *cryptostase* asserts itself since it is an element of life before it is an element of writing. Dib continues:

> D'où précisément l'extraordinaire mélange d'éléments nouveaux et archaïques qui caractérise les produits affranchis de la cryptostase, mélange au plus haut point détonant, subversif et qui se traduit dans l'oeuvre littéraire par une prédilection pour l'image élémentaire, elle aussi nouvelle et archaïque à la fois, et dont la charge, l'éclat, se trouvent renforcés encore par l'action de cryptostases héritées travaillant au second degré, au troisième degré, et plus. Ainsi le monde nocturne de la cryptostase est vécu, ressenti, et exprimé d'une façon médiumnique sur le mode apocalyptique-magique.[10]

The aesthetic elements Dib describes here seem designed to apply to his own work, which abounds in polyvalent but opaque images. Attempts to tease out sources of symbolism in Dib's work often run into two problems: either an image, phrase, or name can be assigned to different sources equally well, or else the imagery is refined to the point of being generic and its significance can only be read off of lists of pre-established interpretation. Particularly because Dib uses a relatively limited repertoire of images, interpretation that links a symbol to a meaning may ultimately say little about the import or intention of the work as a whole. Figures that reappear throughout Dib's writing – the star, the beast, the ocean with light playing on it, a stretch of desert – are at once packed with allusion and frustratingly generic. Dib's comments here suggest that we might try to interpret these, not in terms of specific individual meanings, but as referring us to the multi-layered movements of history, focusing as much on the way these images relate and are formed and break apart than on their specific content. The links between them will not necessarily be logical, as they bear the marks of conflict, domination, travel, and exchange as well as those of individual thought. The coexistence of different elements, as Dib describes it, resembles the structure of a community, and what they transmit is not only a state of affairs but the desire to go beyond it:

> Entrant en contact, les divers éléments finissent sans doute par former une même communauté, mais c'est pour entretenir la même harmonie et la même cacaphonie de relations que les membres d'une communauté, pour s'influencer réciproquement, s'emprunter des traits de caractère et trahir le même désir d'émancipation.[11]

10 ibid., 259.
11 ibid., 259.

Dib's comments here largely predate the significant visibility of "postmodern" or "globalizing" literary works explicitly using the juxtaposition of different cultural elements and often what could be described as an "apocalyptic-magical" tone. These overt efforts to revive tradition by transforming it or treating it with an exterior or ironic gaze can be read as a counter-strategy to nationalist discourses of identity in postcolonial nation-states and to culturalist discourses in the metropolis or the emerging "global" sphere (something which brings them closer to an earlier wave of anti-traditionalist and declaredly leftist novels than is sometimes acknowledged). Dib's ideas in his UCLA lecture anticipate what would be theorized as "hybridity" in postcolonial theory: forms of identity whose location is ambiguous, whose interpretations lead in multiple directions, and which accordingly undo linear genealogies of modernity as the product of any single narrative.[12] But Dib's account insistently refers the reader back to history. Hybridity defines the ambiguity of the present, and blocks any direct connection between experience and meaning; but in Dib's reading it also needs to be recognized as the imposed result of a previous history. Digging into hybridity ends up being a way of digging into history – not in order to unearth stable categorizations, but to show how the past is insinuated into the present, linking disparate sites more than it separates them. What this leads to is a model of history that, far from following a strict sequence of generation in distinct families, is everywhere present in its entirety, linking all smaller histories together along paths that can and should be endlessly unravelled, a simple point with significant consequences:

> Ce qui est le moins banal du monde... c'est de découvrir à quel point l'Histoire, tout l'Histoire est présente à tout instant, et qu'il n'a jamais existé une histoire particulière, une religion particulière, une civilisation particulière, je veux dire distincte et détachée des autres, sinon comme une vue de l'esprit et une commodité pour l'étude nullement conforme à la réalité, ou comme un préjugé dû à notre ignorance.[13]

Towards the beginning of his lecture, Dib spoke of two categories of literature, which correspond to two different relations to the past, the first one embracing the fictions Dib describes here and the second refusing them. The two are designated by terms adapted from Dib's training in French literature: the first is the "imperial-classical," which aims to create a monolithic and glorious past from which the present could build, while the other, "romantic-anarchic," embraces the chaotic

12 See, for example, Homi Bhabha, "The postcolonial and the postmodern," in *The Location of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991):, 171-197.

13 Bryson, *op. cit.*, 251.

and explosive overlapping of pasts. It is the second form, Dib said, that characterized French-language North African literature.[14] Although this division is undoubtedly an overly blunt tool for analysis, it points to two very different ways of revisiting past tradition in literature. In light of the full lecture, we can say that the "romantic-anarchic" surprisingly proves to keep closer to history. The solidity of the narrative and of the society described by heroic nationalist texts substitutes, in the name of clarity or ease of use, a constructed image in place of the complications of history. In search of a grounding for authority, it reverses the places of the visible and the invisible: the aspirations of an objectless nostalgia, a desire for something different, are transformed into an image, while the details of the present are spirited away. The more experimental texts maintain the two in their places, understanding that writing has to do with repeated actions and not with solid foundations. While not trying to eliminate nostalgia, the desire for something different that makes the historical record into a resource for forward movement, these texts accept its rootlessness, seeking fulfilment in their own motion and not in a promised return to what can only be imagined, not known. This chapter explores three ways in which Dib's writing looks back to a cultural past – to the classical poetics of the Arab Mashreq, the oral heritage of North Africa, and the influence of Arab Andalusian poetry – not in order to claim identity or resurrect a definable past, but in a gesture of modernist nostalgia, one in which the forms of the past erupt in a looking-back at what has never been but can only be dreamt. Tradition becomes then not practice to be copied, but a force that opens new possibilities, pushing invisibly into a world whose contours and images change with the movements of history and geographical movement, through and beyond domination and exile.

*Nostalgia and chains of meaning: Classical background*

The attitude of a nostalgia for what never was, Dib's definition of modernity, is not itself a recent development. The centuries-long process by which Arabic poetry developed from geographically localized beginnings into a literary field spanning continents and empires has had from the beginning a complicated relation to the cultural community standing behind it. Practices of reference, one poet looking back to earlier ones, have played a large role in defining continuity, to the point that this backward-looking or nostalgic attitude came to be as important as any

14 Dib's declaration that Arabic-language literature fell, somewhat surprisingly but almost entirely, into the first category, hardly applies to the development of North African literature in Arabic since then; it is also not entirely to some writers of Dib's generation, such as Abdelhamid Benhedouga.

originary referent at the beginning of the chain. The idea of a chain of reference waving in the winds of history, a poetry of perpetual errancy, would inspire content and form in some of Dib's writing, linking self-consciously "Arab" material to a post-Mallarméan aesthetics of the blank page of malleable poetics form. This section provides a sketch of these millenia-spanning connections.

The idea that poetry emerges from and is deeply rooted in a collective and historical life was an important characteristic of classical Arabic poetics. In classical and still in contemporary overviews of Arabic poetry, poetry is referred to as the *diwān ʻarab*, the register or record of the Arabs, using the word (*diwān*) that is also used to refer to a particular poet's collected works. In Jamaleddine Bencheikh's words, "la poésie arabe s'est toujours voulue le conservatoire d'une culture et d'une histoire, le monument élevé à la gloire d'une communauté, le champ d'exercice d'une conscience collective et non point individuelle."[15] Formal characteristics (metre, rhyme scheme, etc.), thematic material, and imagery maintained remarkable consistency over nearly a millennium and a half - "une stabilité d'un exemple assez rare pour qu'on s'y arrête."[16] Although a poet might address a particular sovereign in a panegyric, revel in a particular landscape, or address his own beloved, poetic convention tends to depersonalize. Each occasion is tied to a world of symbols and examples that establish the continuity of the community. This continuity looks backwards: the splendours of imperial Baghdad, the purity and unity of the Prophetic community, or the archetypal love between Qays (al-Majnūn) and Layla, become the model on which the present can be described. This is not to endorse the orientalist cliché of Arabic culture as timeless and so void of innovation; across the long time-span under question there was plenty of innovation and there were poets and critics who valued novelty over fidelity to tradition and new works over the classics.[17] But it was understood that a good poet would be well-versed in earlier poetry, and that the imitation of classic work in form and imagery was not only acceptable but a good way to proceed, a useful tool especially for poets hired to produce a poem to mark an event, praise a particular person, or satisfy a patron's whim. Skilful reference to earlier poetry was one of the marks of a technically gifted poet, working along a chain that was consistently

15 Bencheikh, *Poétique arabe: essai sur les voies d'un création* (Paris: Anthropos, 1975): 1.
16 ibid.
17 For example, see Kamal Abu Deeb's discussion of the 3rd/9th c. critic Ibn Mu'tazz in his survey of Arabic literary criticism in and around the 10th century, in Abu Deeb, "Literary Criticism," in Ashtiany et al, eds, *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: Abbasid Belles-Lettres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 344ff.

understood to go back to the beginnings of Arabic poetry in the pre-Islamic period.

In these "original" poems of Arabic literature, the pre-Islamic odes or *Mu'allaqāt*, said to have been hung in the Ka'aba before the birth of Islam, indicating their central place in the community, nostalgia and reference are already key features. In these odes, the first movement, where the poet contemplates the remaining traces of a campsite where his beloved stopped, opens onto a series of recollections, following a sequence of particular topics whose character and order was a major topic of analysis in medieval Arab theories of poetry – of times spent with the beloved, of the prowess of the poet and his tribe, of the rains that bring awe and refreshment to the desert and leave their own traces. A past is reconstructed out of traces left in a barren present, and this reconstruction is carried out according to conventions shared between poets. In a beautiful essay on the preeminence of interpersonal form over individual authorship in classical Arabic literature, Abdelfattah Kilito notes, commenting on the *Mu'allaqa* of the poet 'Antara, which begins with an appeal to earlier poets, the relativity of the Mu'allaqāt's position as origin:

> The Arabs at the dawn of their history in the sixth century were already hearkening back to an earlier and original dawn, now lost and effaced (but for its traces), that, for 'Antara, still hovered as a living presence. His own poetry—which we tend to regard today as the first rays of daybreak—already marks the descent into twilight.[18]

This means nostalgia has to be grasped as an attitude more than as a reference to some determinable past. Origin coincides with loss; the poem arises from solitude, evoking fullness by joining the community of absent poets, following the steps of a practice whose origins themselves are obscured, visible only as traces. What defines the poetic form is not the glory of the lost origin, or its personal parallel, the now distant meeting between lovers, but the act of beginning from half-effaced traces. If there is an original model for this poetry, it will be found not in a golden age but an original act of interpretation. Noting that the writers of the *Mu'allaqāt* variously compare the campsite traces to women's tattoos, to channels left in the sand by water, or to marks on parchment, Kilito presents the poet's own inscription of words as a further step in the process of leaving traces:

18 Kilito, *The Author and his Doubles*, trans. Michael Cooperston (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001): 10. The most readable translation of the *Mu'allaqat* in English is Michael Sells, *Desert Tracings* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989). Arberry's translations aim for word for word accuracy and scholarly notation, but in the process become quite unwieldy - see Arberry, *The Seven Odes: The First Chapter in Arabic Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1957).

> The campsite, the tattoo marks, and the inscription have no sharp or clear-cut design. For this reason the poet is above all else a decipherer of effaced and nearly invisible traces […] When remembrance removes the veil that covers the old campsites, it revives a faded tattoo mark or worn inscription. The poet's task is to draw new lines over old and write one text atop another.[19]

The poet's activity is an example and an extension of the process of interpreting patterns in the world. From physical marks to the projected world of the community, by way of the patterns established by previous poets, the work of interpretation proceeds not by assigning fixed meanings but by way of similarity and of recollection. The *qaṣīda*, the long poem in monorhyme which traces its formal origins to the *Muʿallaqāt* and the tradition of oral poetry they belonged to, was composed of long lines, each forming a complete statement; the unity of the *qaṣīda* consisted in holding these together, not only by means of continuous meaning, but through allusions, similar sonorities, and syntactic and auditory balance between lines and the internal halves of each line.[20] Advocating the emulation of past practice turns these practices into rules; the criteria for poetic quality forms a chain of similarities, symbolic, syntactic, and acoustic, whose extent defines the language and the community. The power of the poem is to hold together elements that on their own might seem disparate, working them into the chain. Even if the poet begins midpoint in the chain, following an established poetic pattern, rather than from his own experience, a poem that properly follows the rules fits itself into a line that extends from the patterns of the natural world to the unity of a transhistorical community. It establishes the primacy of a world of meaning, one capable of bridging great gaps in space and time.

There are explicit references to the themes of classical Arabic poetry in Dib: he referred to the *atlāl*, the traces in the desert that open the *Muʿallaqāt*, directly in late work including *Le désert sans détour* and *L'Infante maure*, where the Arabic word is used and the deciphering of marks in sand takes an important place in the novel, or in “L'Aube Ismaël”, where the speaker wonders if the tracks he's found have been left by the desert itself. These tracks – as in the writing practice of the *qaṣīda* if not in the content it conveys – are important for the movement that they initiate more than for what they refer to, which in Dib is unclear or absent. In *L'arbre à dires*, Dib used the image of desert traces as a metaphor for writing and for symbolic communication in general:

19 ibid, p.13-14.
20 See Bencheikh's citations from and discussions of the 9th/3rd century poet and theoretician Ibn Qutayba in Bencheikh, *Poétique arabe*, 116-126.

> Le *désert* s'affiche en page blanche qu'une nostalgie du signe consume, et le *signe* à son tour s'y laisse prendre avec la conscience que, jalouse de sa blancheur, cette page l'aspirera, l'avalera en même temps qu'il s'y inscrira, ou guère longtemps après. Et plus du tout de signes, d'écriture. L'unique, le grand espoir sera que d'improbables trace (*atlal*) en subsistent.[21]

The tension between text and blank space colours Dib's writing, in the poetry where blank space often dominates the page, and in poetry and prose where voices emerge and sink back at unexpected moments. This desert space becomes, like the physical desert, a space where history appears flattened out, a space both of overlapping ruins and the reasserted blankness of undefined beginnings. The prose poems from *Formulaires* and *Omneros* are filled with words and images that look back to the medieval and ancient populations and movements across the Mediterranean (a gesture to the local past but also to the French poet Saint-John Perse's, from whom Dib took the title "Parabase," a reference to ancient Greek poetry, for the prose sections of *Omneros*). One prose poem from *Formulaires* gives the image of a journey in the desert and the collective work of collecting and interpreting traces. This process reunites the separated lovers but still only opens onto more travel, the tracing of further signs that are incorporated into a chain with no end in sight:

> et le chemin qui est une façon de redire la prière et nous repartons encore une fois et pour une fois rien ne nous empêchera de gagner ces dunes sur lesquelles le vent luit et attend notre passage commenter chaque grain de sable commenter l'écriture des étoiles c'est une tâche qui requiert d'abord une bonne vue nous épellerons lettre par lettre le texte déposé nous collationnerons les mots dans chaque mot nous réunirons les amants cette solitude ce sable ce vent ne sont pas faits pour se couvrir de vestiges mais de la fraîcheur de l'oeil si rien n'y invite au repos c'est que la marche y est repos le jour même n'y est que marche continuée vers soi sans rupture et armée de sa seule chance qu'écriture sur le sable et dont le sable reconnaissant s'abreuve et se vivifie et la chaîne des signes se déroulera jusqu'au coeur du vent[22]

Mourad Yelles discusses this poem as a significant departure from the classical tradition, forms he sees as stereotyped, in favour of a pursuit of vacuity:

> Cette gnose ambulatoire n'a plus rien à voir avec l'expérience poétique d'une certaine tradition arabe qui assigne à la rencontre avec les «vestiges» (*atlâl*) une fonction purement lyrique, en tant que symbole de la séparation amoureuse [...] Libérer le signe des réminiscences stéréotypiques, cela équivaut surtout à restituer au «commentateur» dibien une «fraîcheur de l'oeil» dont on peut supposer qu'elle est

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21 Dib, *Tlemcen où les lieux de l'écriture*, 108.
22 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome I: poésies*, 89.

> indispensable pour rendre à la «chaîne des signes» son éminente vacuité et lui permettre de se déployer d'un bout à l'autre du prisme du sens (ou du non-sens).[23]

Yelles characterizes Dib's poetry as "un long apprentissage du vide," something which situates him clearly in a tradition of French modern poetry and philosophy, with overtones of Islamic mysticism. But while Yelles' reading of Dib is compelling, the poem does not necessarily involve such a clean break with the past form; an endless nostalgia that is less about temporality than about a certain kind of orientation to the world is not foreign to the Arabic tradition, and if the lovers are not often reunited this is sometimes because the separation functions itself as the sign of a void that will never be filled, as in the story of Leila and Majnun. While Dib's poetic form here references $20^{th}$-century developments in poetry that emerged in Europe – abandoning grammatical and metrical conventions – his simultaneous glance towards Arab literary tradition lets us equally well read his modernity as a breaking from the past, while repurposing its themes, or instead as maintaining the tradition not as a fixed and distant image but as something reactivated in each new situation, a chain waving into the heart of the wind rather than a solid entity.

*Golden age or eternal adaptation?*

The migration of poetry in Arabic to the Maghreb, North Africa and Muslim-ruled Spain, raised the question of what relation these societies, far from the Arabian deserts, had to the cultural centres of the East and their past. Despite the development of new forms, particularly in vernacular languages, But the classical forms imported from the East were maintained, and debates raged between Mashreq and Maghreb on whether Western poetry was simply a copy of the masters of Eastern cities or was producing something new. Imagery and thematic material continued to insert the poetry into the chain of similarities that stretched back to the desert, sometimes adapted to fit the Iberian landscape and sometimes leaving references to a different climate and geography intact. The same poet might write detailed descriptive poetry dedicated to the flora and fauna of the Iberian peninsula, along with accounts of desert travel, camels, and sand dunes, things beyond the poet's own experience and even considered passé and unacceptably nostalgic by the more modern-oriented Eastern poets of the same period.[24]

23 Yelles, "Mohammed Dib ou l'<<écriture de sable>>," *Expressions maghrébines* 4, no. 2 (2005): 29.

24 See James T. Monroe, "Hispano-Arabic Poetry During the Caliphate of Cordoba," in von Grunebaum, ed., *Arabic Poetry: Theory and Development* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1973): 135.

Al-Andalus, which continues today to be referenced as the image of a lost glory by Jews or Arabs or of an inter-confessional conviviality by nostalgic cosmopolitans, also provides examples of how much a Golden Age is the product of artifice. Maria Rosa Menucal points out that the most visible symbol of Arab Andalusia, the Alhambra palace in Granada, was built in a period of political fragmentation after most of the Muslim power centres in the region had fallen, and captured not long after it was built. Commenting on the choice of building this monument of the glory of cultural and political achievements in the awareness of being after the peak of that glory, and its subsequent survival as intact monument rather than as ruin, Menucal writes:

> So it is that while it is far more commonly ruins that evoke the poignancies of human loss, and stir those who contemplate them to tears or to the writing of the histories of what was lost, or both, the remarkably pristine Alhambra may be one of the only monuments built avant la lettre to monumentalize the inevitability of loss, and thus to nostalgia itself.[25]

This example, together with other buildings built in imitation of other styles or maintained intact after being repurposed by a different religious or ethnically defined community, contributes to the overall point of Menucal's introduction to a collection of essays on literature in Andalusia: reading the history of al-Andalus in terms of the rise and fall of separately defined cultural communities ignores the wide variety of reasons why objects and writings were made, most of which can't be reduced to the expression of a culture by individuals seen as firmly rooted in that one culture; instead cultural production needs to be understood as always involving creativity, adaptation, and synthesis as well as imitation. Dib's understanding of North Africa in light of the "cryptostase" proposes a similar disaggregation of culture, with the influences of Carthage, Rome, Arabia, Istanbul, Paris and others not only imported but challenged, adopted, and altered. It suggests too that we see historical tropes as elements of literary culture, able to be used and repurposed, even in surprising ways, rather than reflections of events or of an unquestioned ethnic or national identity. This distinction would be an important dividing line between approaches to the Arabic literary tradition taken by Algerian writers in the 20th century.

More than four centuries after the final fall of al-Andalus, after the period of Ottoman occupation, and most importantly after colonization by the French – which involved mass dispossession and the disruption of most centres of Arabic learning in Algeria, and institutions of

25 Menucal, "Visions of al-Andalus," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: The Literature of Al-Andalus*, ed. Maria Rosa Menucal, Michael Sells, and Raymond P. Schiendlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 7.

education in general – the relation of a North African or nationalist culture to the Arab past was once again a contentious issue. The setting for this was one of cultural fragmentation, where the integrity of a culturally specific, linguistically mediated world could not be taken for granted. Speaking of the popular (dialectal) arabic poets of the late 19th and early 20th century as having "instauré un univers symbolique d'une rare beauté sur un univers physique d'une rare laideur," the critic Mohammed Souheil Dib describes the profusion of symbols in this poetry as a "représentation en pointillés."[26] M.S. Dib indicates multiple relations between this image in fragments, which mobilizes much of the old tradition, and the historical situation it emerges from: it is a product of historical blockage, a transfiguration of a difficult reality into symbolic richness, at times an allegorical "detour" to present political viewpoints that couldn't be expressed openly. The old poetics of allusion continued, but, in the face of physical and cultural dispersion, the unity of its world of reference was loosened and broken up. The transmission of this popular poetry, written and spread by largely itinerant poets and singers, contributed too to the sense of a culture in fragments. The situation of colonization disrupted the possibility of forming new central or dominant cultural forms, but practices of composition and mutation of earlier forms continued – in the condition Dib would call *cryptostase*.

The rise of nationalism saw varying responses to this state of fragmented culture. Not all nationalists agreed on the causes of fragmentation; some blamed it squarely on the French colonization, but to others it belonged to a longer process of disintegration. The religious philosopher Malek Bennabi, for example, set its roots back almost 800 years earlier, with the fall of the Almohad empire, meaning that by the time France arrived in Algeria it found "une société atomisé, aux activités abolies [...] dans un état social tribal et nomadique."[27] The religious conservatives in general saw the present state of disorder as a social problem, to be remedied by the revival or recreation of a virtuous Islamic society based on an image of the Arab past. In the early 20th century, some Algerian writers linked to Abdelhamid Ben Badis' Association of *'ulama*, the cultural-nationalist movement that saw the triad of Algerian nationality, Arabic language, and Islam as the key to cultural and political reform, tried to revive the classical language and poetic forms. These writers, many of whom had received an Arabic-language and religious education outside of Algeria (primarily at the Zaytouna in Tunis), were inspired by the modernist *Naḥda*

26 Mohammed Souheil Dib, *Le trésor enfoui du mâlhun* (Alger: ANEP, 2009):311, 315. Like Mohammed Dib, this author is from Tlemcen, though I'm not aware of a direct relation.

27 Bennabi, *Vocation de l'Islam* (Beirut: Albouraq, 2006): 80.

movement in the Arab east, which had involved both work to reform the Arabic language and the birth of "reformist" (*islah*) Islam. Their poetry was, in Ahmad Lansari's description, for the most part "conservatrice dans sa forme, didactique dans son expression, austère par son inspiration, revendicative et patriotique par son idéologie."[28] This "poetized prose" holds rigorously to the metre and rhyme of the *qaṣīda* and other forms, and to the grammatical rules of classical Arabic. Its intent is to convey its message clearly and memorably: praise of the *'ulama*, of successful Muslim political and military leaders of past and present, and of an educated and pious population; criticism of popular forms of religious expression – seen as obscurantist and innovative (in the negative sense of adding external material to the pure form of religion) by the reformers – and its corrupt leadership. Like the general view of the reformists, these writings tried to set up a connection between a glorious past – here seen in a "cultured" use of language and form – and an emerging glorious future; this connection would be mediated by language as a medium of clear speech and proper behaviour. Moving between two projected images, one past and one future, this literary strategy attempts to write out or overwrite the fragmentation and confusion of the present, just as a proper education in language and religion would overwrite the ignorance of the colonized mindset. In this way of relating to tradition, the historical trajectory moves from a fixed image of the past and passes over the present to touch down in a projected future whose image is glimpsed in the language of cultural leaders. This is a response to a historical situation where the identity between beautiful language, proper behaviour, and historical community had been broken; but it is one that (in a conservative mode recognizable from many countries and situations) tries to suture the connection back together by reducing the present to an object for condemnation and silencing. The lived world is wiped away in favour of an invisible one; and this invisible one is defined as real, material, and enduring. That this was done in the name of rendering religion more rational and effective is reflected in its attempt to refashion language as an unambiguous tool for political action.[29]

28 Ahmed Lansari, *Anthologie de la poésie algérienne de langue arab* (Paris: Publisud, 1994): 13.

29 James McDougall's *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) discusses the model of history implicit in reformist discourse, and the complications it presented. This historical model is generally common to what are called "fundamentalisms." Souleyman Bachir Diagne distinguishes between progressive and reactive fundamentalisms, the first of which draw inspiration from the past to move into the future, while the second resist time and try to cling to an unchanging origin. This distinction seems useful to me in that it highlights the way that religion, exemplary of tradition in general, witnesses to a persistence of the past and resists collapsing history into the present as real and all else as false or ideological; but work like McDougall's shows how slippery the line between these two forms is. See Diagne, *Comment philosopher en islam?* (Paris: Panama, 2008): 140-141.

In contrast, most of the founding figures of French-language Algerian literature were among the writers who turned instead to oral poetry for inspiration, in the process embracing at least some degree of cultural fragmentation.[30] Several major writers from Kabylia – Jean Amrouche, Mouloud Ferraoun, and later Mouloud Mammeri – published collections of poetry in translation from Tamazight (Berber) to French.[31] This poetry, which shares descriptive and religious material with the Arab and Andalusian heritage, also carries a deep rooting in the local landscape, a sense of pride in person and ancestry, and a recurring theme of the poet's isolation and loneliness, whether personally accepted or socially imposed. The translated anthologies made this poetry accessible, and available as a model, to writers trained, as Dib was, in the French-language schools. The figure of the itinerant poet, familiar from Kabyle and Arabic popular poetry, became an important image for Algerian writers: someone working to convey news and emotion, connecting people across territory whose earlier routes of commerce and communication had been broken. This point-to-point network of communication recalls, and is surely responsible in part, for what M.S. Dib characterized as the "pointillist" character of popular Algerian poetry. The parallel between the itinerant storyteller or poet and the itinerant political activist became part of nationalist mythology.

The idea of an itinerant culture, maintaining its identity not by remaining the same but by adapting to new circumstances and importations, could provide an alternative to a linguistic-cultural nationalism even within a local frame. This could be particularly appealing to writers hailing from communities that did not define themselves primarily as Arab, and to writers working in French rather than Arabic. Sharp distinctions between Arabic- and French-language writers in the late colonial period have often been made hastily, influenced at least as much by post-independence cultural politics as by research, and a comparison of the two (something beyond my capacities here) would likely show more shared concerns – including how to deal with colonial technology and culture, the effects of poverty, and the role of pre-colonial Ottoman domination – than sharp differences. But Dib was one of several Francophone writers for whom

30 I use this term to refer to Algerian-born writers from the majority (indigenous) community, or at least those who saw themselves belonging to an Algeria made up of this majority community. As such it excludes writers who aligned themselves with a colonial, minority, nationalism – the "Algerianist school" for example. For a concise overview of literature by colonial writers, see the first chapter of Ena C. Vulor, *Colonial and Anti-Colonial Discourses: Albert Camus and Algeria* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

31 Amrouche, *Chants berbères de Kabylie* (Tunis: Monomotapa, 1939); Feraoun, *Les poèmes de Si Mohand* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1960); Mammeri, *Les Isefra* (Paris: Maspero, 1969).

orality helped to figure a national or regional character that was by definition flexible, not linked to a particular form. Jean Amrouche, a Kabyle intellectual and cataloguer and translator of folklore, wrote in his 1943 essay “The Eternal Jugurtha”[32] of an “African” character marked by a chameleon ability to embrace imported forms while retaining a distance from them. Named for Jugurtha, the Numidian king who moved in and out of alliance with Rome, this character's association with orality became a strength, letting him avoid being conquered by capturing the conquerer's voice for himself:

> Jugurtha s'adapte à toutes les conditions, ils s'est acoquiné à tous les conquérants ; il a parlé le punique, le latin, le grec, l'arabe, l'espagnol, l'italien, le français, négligeant de fixer par l'écriture sa propre langue; il a adoré, avec la même passion intransigeante, tous les dieux. Il semblerait donc qu'il fût facile de le conquérir tout à fait. Mais à l'instant même où la conquête semblait achevée, Jugurtha, s'éveillant à lui-même, échappe à qui se flattait d'une ferme prise. Vous parlez à sa dépouille, à un simulacre, qui vous répond, acquiesce encore parfois; mais l'esprit et l'âme sont ailleurs, irréductibles et sourds, appelés par une voix profonde, inexorable, et dont Jugurtha lui-même croyait qu'elle était éteinte à jamais.[33]

Jugurtha's voice, rising from the rubble or hovering above a seemingly defeated corpse, figures a popular spirit not subdued and capable of remaking itself in whatever world it finds itself in. The totality of domination is denied by the flexibility of adaptation without giving up specific difference. For Amrouche, who came from a family that had converted to Catholicism and who moved within the high circles of literary culture, Jugurtha's ability to resuscitate himself argued in favour of accepting whatever could be taken from the French; the essay ends with a call to Jugurtha to leave contemplation and take up action, by learning the use of instrumental rationality from the Europeans.

While Dib's account of North African history in his UCLA lecture on “L'Histoire et la littérature de l'Afrique du Nord” also describes a particular “African” character surviving against the backdrop of changing, and often externally-based, sovereigns, his emphasis is somewhat different. Citing the history of schismatic movements in North Africa – the Donatist movement under Roman domination or the rise of Kharajism following the Arab conquest – Dib sees North Africans not as assimilating to an imposed culture but taking and altering it, a people “qui ont su

32 Jean Amrouche, “The Eternal Jugurtha” (1946), text available at <<https://www.scribd.com/doc/8028868/Jean-AMROUCHE-L-Eternel-Jugurtha>>.

33 Amrouche, “Eternal Jugurtha,” 8. Amrouche himself points out that scripts (lybian and tinafigh) had been used for indigenous languages, but treats this as exceptional.

toujours et très rapidement faire *leurs*, des civilisations venues d'ailleurs, non par une adoption passive où ils seraient de simples épigones, mais par une adaption de ces civilizations à leur nature et mesure propres."[34] For Dib, educated in French but in a segregated milieu, the language he used was less the mark of an assimilation than what he called his "adoptive" language, initially learned through its sonorities and resonating, when his writing was at its best, in sympathy with his mother tongue.[35] In this account, the ear guides a process of adapting and remaking culture passed on to him. Dib would use, in several places in his work, the sonorities of oral recitation – a literally invisible embodiment of tradition – to present a sense of community that, while tied both to place and to cultural commonality, is untethered from a set cultural identity and open to reforming itself. Like the voice of Jugurtha summoning his corpse back to life in Amrouche's image, the character of the voice in general, which emerges from the body but can be heard even where the body is not visible, and of the orally transmitted poem, spoken by an individual but referencing an unseen and unknown chain of transmitters, both serve to suggest a collectivity or united will even where one seems to be absent.

*The voice and the people*

In Dib's first trilogy, popular poetry shows an outside to the generally grim realistic and ethnographic material that makes up the bulk of the novels. Poetry lets something appear in the situation that extends beyond the limits of descriptive prose to convey, cutting through the closed world of poverty as something mobile and promising. Certain characters – the communist agitator Hamid Saraj, the politically conscious worker Ocacha, or the ex-soldier Comandar, all of whom have travelled and can speak to a world much broader than colonial Tlemcen – contain echoes of the character of the itinerant poet or storyteller, a figure whose voice has the power to awaken feelings and knowledge otherwise hiddenifrom other characters. But the power of the voice can also arise from seemingly static situations. Dar Sbitar, the titular housing complex of *La grande maison*, is often enveloped in inarticulate noise – voices speaking at once, or the "murmure monotone [qui] semblait ne point devoir finir" that Aïni, the protagonist's mother, mutters as she works late in the night – or in a heavy silence that "tournait, rond comme une meule."[36] In the midst of the downward pull of muttering, argument, and mechanical drudgery that contributes to

34 Bryson, *La pierre et l'arabesque*, 267-28.
35 Dib, *L'Arbre à dires*, 48.
36 Dib, *La grande maison*, 75; 101.

the bleak atmosphere, song is able resist the overwhelming gravity. One of Dib's most explicitly political scenes uses this to strong effect. In an almost cinematic scene, as police officers tear apart the house looking for anything belong to her brother, a nationalist activist, one character begins to sing. Dib cuts between her song and the scene through five pages of the novel. The song emerges from her sobs or cries; intercut into the scene it takes up more space than her quiet voice would seem to allow, becoming a significant presence in the text. This voice moves across landscape, it comes to take up space, to inhabit the processes of nature:

> *Quand la nuit se brise*
> *Je porte ma tiédeur*
> *Sur les monts acérés*
> *Et me dévêts à la vue du matin...*
> *Étrange est mon pays où tant*
> *De souffles se libèrent,*
> *Les oliviers s'agitent*
> *Alentour et moi je chante...*
> *Entends ma voix*
> *Qui file dans les arbres*
> *Et fait mugir les boeufs.*[37]

Against the constricted world of colonial Tlemcen, where physical mobility is limited and the future is precarious, this voice moves across territory and insinuates itself into the cycles that guarantee the continuity of time. The intercutting of the song with the narration of the police action, which appears as if in a long shot, divorces it from the particular character singing; the song imbues the scene with a gravity that goes against the frantic movements of the police and the inhabitants of Dar Sbitar. The ambiguous persona of the voice speaking in the song is linked to the nation as social entity ("mon pays où tant de souffles se libèrent") and as natural terrain ("ma voix qui... fait mugir les boeufs"). Later in the song, when the voice identifies itself, the relation to the nation continues to be ambivalent: does she claim humble membership in the collective called Algeria, or does she identify with the nation itself?

> *Moi qui parle, Algérie,*
> *Peut-être ne suis-je*
> *Que la plus banale de tes femmes*
> *Mais ma voix ne s'arrêtera pas*
> *De héler plaines et montages;*
> *Je descends de l'Aurès,*
> *Ouvrez vos portes*

37 ibid., 47.

*Épouses fraternelles...*

*Je suis venue vous voir,*
*Vous apporter le bonheur,*
*À vous et vos enfants;*
*Que vos petits nouveau-nés*
*Grandissent,*
*Que votre blé pousse,*
*Que votre pain lève aussi* [...][38]

A fragment of this song reappears in *L'Incendie.* This second novel is the most permeated by songs, which at times – like the stories Comandar tells as he sits high up above the village watching the landscape and providing social and historical background to Omar and to the reader – seem to lift off above the texture of the narrative. As Dib narrates it, the voice often appears before the singer, or the text drifts with the voice away from its origin and over the landscape. The character of the singing voice, which separates from the singer to be diffused in the air, lends form to the poetic desire: to move from its particular origins in the poet and dissolve into the substance of what links a people and flows across obstacles like the wind. The first half of *Ombre gardienne*, Dib's first collection of poetry, brings together his most specifically "Algerian" poems, including the one cited above from *La grande maison*, some of which are explicitly concerned with the struggle against colonialism. The union of two strands of poetic desire – the writing plunging into the details of poverty and war, the self dissolving into the immaterial and unascribable – shows clearly in the title poem, which also gives the bittersweet sense of the distance the poem takes from reality, something quite distant from a celebratory nationalism:

Fermez vos portes
Femmes, le sommeil amer
Remplira vos nerfs,
L'eau, le sable ont usé
La trace de vos pas,
Rien ne vous appartient.
[...]
Fermez vos portes,
Je suis la gardienne:
Rien ne vous appartient.

[...]

38 ibid., 50-51

Mais je chanterai à peine
Pour que ne se mêle guère
La peine à votre sommeil;
Paix à vous, mères, épouses,
Le tyran buveur de sang
Dans vos vans sera poussière

Je marche sur la montagne
Où le printempts qui arrive
Met des herbes odorantes;
Vous toutes qui m'écoutez,
Quand l'aube s'attendrira
Je viendrai laver vos seuils
[...]

Je marche, je marche:
Les mots que je porte
Sur la langue sont
Une étrange annonce.[39]

The "rien ne vous appartient" works both as a confirmation of poverty and a lifting of individual responsibility; the voice takes away the ability to act (close your doors, stay inside) but at the same time promises victory. The guardian shadow in her march brings the popular spirit, the implacable flow of history, and the process of nature together with the dew the morning brings. She highlights the women's condition, coming to each house, but makes them the same – women dreaming behind closed doors – just as she tells them to ignore the difference, among the flames the wind picks up in its passing, between "un feu de joie," "un feu des pauvres," and "un signal de guetteur." The unity of the collective, the impersonal, and physical detail in these poems is formed on the basis of a nationalist sentiment, and in other poems the presence of combat, which can be read between the lines of "Ombre gardienne," is explicit. But this sentiment is one that offers no image of the future beyond the everyday movements of nature and of domestic life, the spring returning, the entrance to the home washed clean. It offers all of these performed in an atmosphere transformed by the poem, in a gesture to be found as well in anthologies of Tamazigh and Arabic oral poetry, into one of wonder, repose, and hope.

The unity that is offered in these songs is fragile and minimal; and the promises offered – the removal of oppression from tyrants, pain, or everyday dirt – offer few specifics of what will

39 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes I: Poésies*, 31-32.

follow. Despite the beauty of these poems, Dib was not much inclined to nationalist or political poems, and, as he announced in a much-quoted interview in 1964, after independence, the need to present the voice of the nation was no longer there: "pour plusieurs raisons, en tant qu'écrivain, mon souci, lors de mes premiers romans, était de fondre ma voix dans la voix collective. Cette grande voix aujourd'hui s'est tue."[40] In most of Dib's subsequent poetry and novels, obscured, fragmented and unidentifiable voices appear frequently. But something of the atmosphere the early work remains persists, along with a way of seeing the movement of time: images and desires, drawn from the past or from the cycles of an imagined undisturbed cyclical time of nature or domesticity, reach forward towards a world that is not described but hangs like a spectral presence. The time of the *cryptostase*, with its return of ways of seeing, living, and hoping that have been repressed, undoes claims of final victory, and it encourages looking away from what might seem most important and towards the places where everyday lives continue despite the difficulties they face.

Dib returned to the poetic voice of these poems from the first section of *Ombre gardienne* and the first trilogy in a set of three poems first published in 1994 and then gathered with another, longer poem into the collection *L'Aube Ismaël* in 1996. Written in response to the (first) Palestinian intifada, they centre around the figures of Hagar and Ismaël, the concubine and son of the patriarch Abraham, driven away in favour of Abraham's legitimate son Isaac, a story that appeared first in the Torah and is shared by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The first poem, "Hagar aux cris," shows the pair driven out in to the desert; the second, "Feu sur l'ange de l'Intifada," reimagines Hagar as a Palestinian mother waiting for her son to come home; and in the third, "La danseuse bleu," she becomes "Hagar toujours rebelle," merging with the ocean and becoming a figure of immovable persistence: "Qui l'en délogerait, / Qui l'en chasserait, / Sombre, éblouissante?"[41] Once again, Dib chooses as his emblematic figure a poor woman, and her revolt is figured through lyrical voice and, here, dance. Dib works fragments of children's riddles that also appeared in his first novels into Hagar's monologue in "La danseuse bleu," and the blessing she gives an unnamed place that offers her and her son shelter in "Hagar aux cris" evocatively recalls his earlier poems:

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40 J. Charon, "Pour Mohammed Dib, romancier algérien, le temps de l'engagement est passé. L'heure est à la littérature," *Le Figaro littéraire*, June 1964: 4.

41 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome I: poésies*, 295.

Pour nous,
Un peu de bonheur
Et pour vous beaucoup,
Plein vos demeures.
Que dans vos étables
Moutons, chèvres et autres
En aient leur part.

Sur maints tons
Je reprendrai, redirai:
«Béni soit votre pain
«Et aussi votre eau.
«Nous en avons mangé,
«Nous en avons bu.»
De paroles douces,
Je vous en remercie.

Vert pays
Qui nous as reçus
Et maisons chaudes
La paix sur toi,
La paix sur vous
Et sur la tête
De chaque habitant.[42]

Blessing, the escape from exile and oppression, comes not as a victory or a stunning event but in the peaceful and plentiful continuation of an unremarkable life. The Palestinian mother of "Feu sur l'ange de l'Intifada," waiting to see if her son will come home alive – while many Palestinian children were being killed or abused by Israeli troops – puts her attention on domestic details: the things prepared for his lunch, the water to wash his hands. Although she accepts his possible death, her dream is of seeing him dancing as she claps her hands, and at the end of the poem she advises him to listen to the world around him: "Écoute, fils, / Pour toi chantent les terres rouges, / L'aloès et le figuier. Le vent / Te le dira." In these clearly partisan poems, the dreamed-for future is once again pictured in terms of a fulfilled vision of nature and a life lived in relation to it.

Collecting together the Hagar poems with the long poem, "L'Aube Ismaël" revives a contrast between characters that Dib used in his novel of the War of Independence, *Qui se souvient de la mer*. In contrast to the female character, in both cases a mother, who inhabits the struggle

42 ibid., 286.

with confidence and grace, the male character is caught up in a world of bewilderment. Ismaël's exile moves through a dreamlike desert, where stones listen and winds speak, whose atmosphere of desolation is as much a product of the elliptical and abruptly jumping language as of the details of description. This literary wasteland is dotted with vestiges of different frozen pasts; Ismaël moves past the ruins of armies, an encounter with a sphynx-like creature, and the day of judgment accompanied by a bird said in some Islamic traditions to recount to each person their deeds. But his exile continues through all this, until finally at the end of the poem he suddenly reaches the sea and the dawn. Like "Hagar aux cris," which ends with the mother and son continuing their journey, "L'Aube Ismaël" ends with movement; and Ismaël's triumph is simply moving from the endless desert out into a space of confusion, and joy, not a fixed image but a shifting one:

> Gagne [...]
> Sois dite dès lors oeuvre vive, toi manège d'oeil, mais toujours en proie aux retraites, aux rechutes [...]
> Répit. Incipit. Jointure. Recueil de signes. Parole dormante.
> Dure joie. Et les pétrels de guérir le mal de l'espace.
> Ô mouvmenets. Blancs et noirs enfin pour une sérénité. Mouvements d'ailes, souffle, défection lointaine [...][43]

Although in "Hagar aux cris" an angel repeats the biblical statement, "Je ferais de lui une grande nation," and the voice that speaks to Ismaël in the desert tells him "Tu fonderas ma demeure sur le nom d'Ismaël,"[44] these promises to the figure traditionally thought of as the ancestor of the Arab nation don't seem to lead to the projection of a powerful future political entity but to the discovery of a surrounding and welcoming physical world. The dreams of a suppressed nation move away from the oppressed present, but rather than following the image of a self-contained and ordered national society, they return back to the lives of people in their shifting details. The promise is of shelter, welcome, and acceptance, not of exclusion and power.

*Real and imagined worlds*

From the mid-1970s, Dib's work began to drift away from North African settings, and his poetry and novels began to be marked particularly by the northern landscape he came to know while spending time in Finland. This shift involved an acceptance of exile, and a further embrace

43 ibid., 307.
44 ibid., 285; 300.

of a personal itinerancy, an individual cultural world built up from personal experience as much as from heritage. But even in poetry without explicit thematics or symbolic connections, Dib's writing has stylistic connections to the Arab heritage, and in particular the legacy of Andalusian poetry. One of these has to do with the way that connection is maintained or developed in the poem, in particular how the juxtaposition of separate elements coalesces into a whole. A fragmentary approach to imagery, inviting the reader to stitch together a world out of impressions, sensations, and references, while put in the service of a poetry that embraces the new spaces and life in which Dib found himself, can also be seen as looking back to cultural practices he inherited from his self-consciously "Andalusian" Tlemcen family. Juxtaposition is an important part of classical Arabic poetics; the themes of reminiscence and voyage found in the *Mu'alaqāt* and carried onwards allow scenes and topics seemingly quite different from each other to occupy the same poem (something that prompted early generations of orientalists to see these poems as disjointed and incoherent, "less civilized" stages of poetic development). The distant perspective provided by the journey lets different locales, wilderness and city, solitude and sociality, struggle and repose form part of the same vision of the world. In cases where the poetic persona is not able to travel, he can sometimes turn to a bird to do the travelling for him, a conceit found in both written and oral repertoires. The bird might be asked to visit an estranged lover, distant friends, or even perform the pilgrimage to Mecca for the poet. In speaking to the bird, the poet can express his feelings, explain his situation, and describe the distant locales the bird will fly over for him.[45] Dib closes two collections of poetry, *Feu beau feu* and *Ô Vive*, with poems that use the conceit of a bird's flight to bring together separate images into a whole. The poem in *Ô Vive* is called "Traces", and begins with an Arabic word for a bird, "al-taïr"; the poem from *Feu beau feu*, excerpted here, is titled "Airs à toute fin":

> [...]
> l'épervier
> jette une ombre
> derrière les collines
>
> et l'ombre chasse
> et porte le meurtre

45 Joris and Tengour's North African anthology, *Poems For the Millenium vol 4: The University of California Book of North African Literature* (Berkeley: Univeristy of California Press, 2013), includes two examples of this conceit from Tlemcen, from the 18th and 19th centuries: see Sidi Mohammed Ben Msaieb, "O Pigeon Messenger!", 232-234, and Mohamed Ben Sghir, "Ya'l Warchan," 249-250, both trans. Abdelfetah Chenni.

loin dans cet ocre

*
oiseaux
faites monter l'arbre

au-delà
de cette nuit
au-delà

et fidèles
allez le travailler

*
ton oeil pareil
à la feuille d'eau
apprivoise les ramiers

regarde-t-il au sol
leurs innombrables graffiti
qui ne nomment rien

*
la branche
au bord du chemin

son désir
de tout donner

sa patience
fouaillée par le vent

*
pourquoi ce cri
fait-il halte

qui a ouvert la plaie

toute l'étendue
et peu d'ombre

*
quelle bête
sous la pluie

quelle bête

crie à mourir

on n'entend plus
cette eau qui coule […][46]

This poem is typical of Dib's poetry from the middle part of his career in its condensed language, in cultivating an ambiguity between statements and questions, and in its abrupt movements between descriptive and metaphorical or abstract language. Here the bird's-eye-view technique holds the disparate elements together. This affects the poem both on a descriptive level, as views from different distances hold together into a scene, and on an emotional level, as the bird of prey's eye is by turns distant, curious, or terrifying depending on what falls under it. Apart from the empty meaning of the birds' scribblings in the snow, there is little in this poem with its cold, wet, tree-lined scenery to recall the landscapes and themes of either Arabia or Andalusia, and the prominence of patience and fear and the presence together of dispassionate vision and close animal emotion are distinctly Dibian characteristics. But the community of juxtaposed imagistic and emotional elements, the use of a travelling overview to connect visible and invisible elements into the same scene, suggest subterranean links between Dib's poetry and its predecessors.

The length of "Airs à toute fin," and the clarity of its avian structuring device, make the juxtaposition relatively easy to see. But this kind of layering can also happen in more restricted forms, and within the contours of a single image. Merging detailed description of natural objects with metaphorical themes, or with received poetic topics, was a characteristic of the nature poetry for which Andalusian writing was known. Although moving between observation and commentary or reverie is common in many poetic traditions, what characterizes many short Andalusian nature lyrics is the layering of several meanings within the same text, relying on allusion or metaphor to allow linking the same words in more than one way. Discussing one of the most famous of the Andalusian landscape poets, Ibn Khafājah, Magda Al-Noweihy describes the several and overlapping ways he uses imagery, "ranging from images that explicitly state their imaginary nature, to those which assert the equivalence of subject and analogue, those which create a confusion between the levels of imagination and reality, and those that are only hinted at or implied."[47] This polyvalence of imagery allows for the overlapping not only of the real and the imagined, the details of landscape and the meanings or memories they inspire, but of the personal

46 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome I: poésies*, 221-222.
47 Magda M. Al-Nowaihi, *The Poetry of Ibn Khafājah: A Literary Analysis* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993): 37

and the social, of what belongs to the poet's own experience and what belongs to the tradition and its chains of meaning linking across continents and centuries. There is a political tension in the work of a poet like Ibn Khafãjah: although famed for his description of natural detail, he was very much a poet of the institution, benefitting from his personal wealth, and the scenes he and his fellow nature poets described were those of the *muntazahāt*, rural retreats to which wealthy urban families would go to get away from the business and concerns of life. For all the carefully gardened flowers, their poetry, including Ibn Khafãjah's, shows "aucun jardinier, aucun paysan ne peuple les descriptions, alors qu'il est facile d'imaginer l'énorme main d'oeuvre requise pour l'entretien de ces domaines et de ces espaces cultivés," presenting as spontaneous nature what was the work of human manipulation.[48] But after the fall of Andalusia and its cultural elites, these poetic forms, with their overlapping of the descriptive and the imaginative, the natural and the erotic, would move into exile in North Africa, feeding a range of musical traditions that openly claimed their Andalusian influence, including the school of Tlemcen in which Dib's family was involved.[49]

One of the early Algerian anthologists of the musical repertoire, a certain Qâdi Mohammed, described this influence in terms that echo both the cultural-nationalist preference for classical Arabic and Dib's notion of the hidden, eruptive movement of *cryptostase*:

> A l'origine, la poésie arabe empruntait la langue classique, littéraire et normative avec ses mètres et ses rhythmes. Mais lorsque la maîtrise de cette langue avait grandement diminué dans notre patrie, l'on n'appliqua plus correctement ses règles d'écriture. Mais comme l'art poétique est naturel aux Arabes, mêlé en quelque sorte à leur sang, il lui fallait se manifester d'une manière ou d'une autre. Ce fut le *malhûn* qui se constitua comme voie nouvelle d'expression. Tout comme une source d'eau souterraine qui chercherait par tous les moyens à apparaître à la surface du sol.[50]

In Dib's work, compositional elements of this poetry move farther afield, distancing themselves from their "imperial-classical" roots or from nationalist claims, particularly when, in the 1970s,

48 Brigitte Foulon, *La poésie andalouse du XIe siècle: Voir et décrire le paysage* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003): 54-55.

49 On nature imagery in the North African *andalousi* musical repertoire, and on the relation of these texts to the older tradition, see Beihdja Rahal and Sâadane Benbabâali, *La joie des âmes dans la splendeur des paradis andalous* (Algiers: ANEP, 2010). Andalusian poetry would also have an influence on 20th century Spanish poets, thanks to which, by the time Dib was writing, the poetry was available both in Arabic and in translation to European languages. In addition to "classical" music, much of the Arabic-language popular music of the post-independence period uses these forms, or close variants. Some French-language poets have picked the forms up directly; see for example Bachir Hadj Ali, whose poetry draws heavily on Andalusian forms and their Algerian developments. See Hadj Ali, *Oeuvre poétique*. (Algiers: ANEP, 2005).

50 Quoted in M.S. Dib, *Le trésor enfui du malhûn*, 6.

his poems began to be filled more with the frozen landscapes of Scandinavia than with his African roots. Despite this significant difference in "visible" content, these poems show the subterranean continuation of the older tradition.

Two readings, first of a poem of Ibn Khafādja and then one of Dib's, can help demonstrate these connections. Here is a short pastoral poem of Ibn Khafâdja's, in a recent French translation that tries to approximate the rhythmic and rhyming structures of the Arabic:

> La mimosa, au-dessus de nos têtes
> Avait tendu son dôme de ciel frais,
> Tandis qu'en bas circulaient des comètes
> Emplies de vin. Un cours d'eau entourait
> L'arbre épanoui, comme une Voie lactée;
> Et maintes fleurs y miraient leurs étoiles.
> À voir le fût et l'onde, une beauté
> Naissait, fluette et ceinte d'azur pâle.
> Et les coupes, escortant l'épousée,
> La célébraient par leur ronde nuptiale,
> Tandis que la promise ôtait son voile
> Sous l'arc des fleurs répandues sans compter[51]

Three layers of imagery interact: the direct description of the flowering tree and the drinking party beneath it, the celestial imagery of comets, stars, and milky way, and the figure of the bride appearing and lifting her veil. Their overlap conveys the sense of an experience, and this without directly describing any subjective sentiment. The stellar transfiguration adds a sense of awe, and perhaps of endlessness; the brief season of flowering and the duration of the session mapped onto the permanence of the night sky. The bride gives the meeting a sense of special, even consecrated, importance, and her lifted veil centres the experience of beauty and celebration into one figure. The scene is lifted out of its setting and projected into a realm that is, at least to the world known by 12th-century Andalusia, universal: the routes of the stars and the rituals of marriage. The elements of the poem are common in this poetry, shared with eastern Arabic and Persian poetry, and would be well known: the cups circulating, the starry sky, the beauty showing her face. They stand not only for themselves but for a set of feelings or states − companionship, joy, contemplative rapture, and so on, each of which is likely better communicated by reference to an object that incites them than by their names. This same imagery was taken up in mystical

51 Hoa Hoï Vuong and Patrick Mégarbané, ed., *Le Chant d'al-Andalus: une anthologie de la poésie arabe de l'Espagne* (Arles: Sindbad / Actes Sud, 2011): 183, translation by the editors.

poetry, where the revelry of drinking wine and the displaying of the bride is taken to stand for a purer and more essential sensation: the experience of certainty and union with the divine. But, in keeping with his reputation as the great poet of the Andalusian landscape, Ibn Khafâdja's poem remains a description of a place, a flowering tree by a river. The poem is not unidirectional, moving from an image to its interpretation; rather the layers of imagery coexist, presenting a sensorium by way of a world of images that define a set of recognizable experience. The tree's beauty is established not by detail of description, but by placing it within the poetic world that defines beauty and its associated states. The poem is self-contained but also referential, descriptive but also conventional, realistic and localized but also part of a mobile imaginative tradition.

We can compare the reading of this poem to one from Dib's *Feu beau feu*, "Feu à fruits":

vois comment
procède le feu

planté en terre
il porte le jour

il n'a de soins
que pour la feuille

il sait redescendre
dans ses racines

il te regard
et brûle encore

été déjà en fleur
sur ses branches[52]

This poem is relatively simple and straightforward; and like much of Dib's poetry it may take its place within the collection more comfortably than it stands on its own. The initial image is, as with many of the poems in the collection, a fire. The symbolic structure of the collection employs a distinction between the outside world – a space of cold, dampness, the play of hunter and hunted, and the cries of the nameless beast (all seen in "Airs à tout fin") – and the inside world of fire and erotic intimacy. The second image, a flowering tree, is gradually superimposed onto the fire. The poem captures – and commands – a contemplation of the flames that gives way, through steps of comparison, to another similar image. In the process, the fire takes on new

52 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes: Tome1: Poésies*, 200.

characteristics; it becomes what carries the day and the summer in ahead of themselves – in the winter world of *Feu beau feu* the fire already carries a blooming summer. The transformation of the image becomes a transformation of a whole set of images, linking them beyond themselves to a process of regrowth. The fire that consumes wood turns into what grows it back again, in roots, leaves and branches. At the same time, another layer of meaning enters in the active verbs assigned to the fire: it carries, cares, knows, watches. Flame and tree are also something animate and specifically something nurturing and vigilant. The two main sections of *Feu beau feu*, "Natyk au beau feu" and "Natyk aux emblèmes" take their name from the arabic *naṭiq*, a word which refers to speech or to enunciation, and that serves as a term in classical Arabic philosophy, like the Greek *logos*, to refer to rationality. (*Al-hayawān al-naṭiq* translates the Aristotelian *zoon logon*, the human as "speaking animal"; *al-nafs an-naṭiq* is the rational soul). The interior space where the fire is – one poem names "la maison de Natyk" – is also a space of speech; in a reflexive sense the space of the poem, but also the space in which thought moves. The way the fire proceeds, knowing how to reach down to its roots, dedicating itself to care, watching as it unfolds its fruits, show the movement of a thought that unfolds with the steady timing of staring into a fire but reaches behind and beyond itself. The counterpoint between Natyk and the beast is another structuring opposition in *Feu beau feu*, one of the main threads in the erotics central to the collection. The book is dedicated to "louve" – an animal and the author's own feminine alter ego ("Dib" is homophonous with the Arabic word for wolf – a play Dib engages elsewhere as well). Disembodied reason and the embodied animal meet in the gaze that goes from the viewer to the flame and back from the flame to the viewer.

To read this into "Feu à fruits" requires placing it in the context of the full collection and its main reference points: fire and water, inside and outside, word and corporeality, an even, steady poetics and a mute animality of desire and hurt. These binaries can seem simple on a first glance, but superimposed they create a world of reference that includes landscape, figure, emotion and affect. A poem, resonating in this space, reflects meaning at different levels: so "Feu à fruits," while never ceasing to be an account of staring at a fire, becomes a part of a landscape, a communication, and an image of thought. Dib's poem does refer beyond itself, but not via established codes or generic conventions; instead it gestures cryptically, through names and techniques or through symbols that might be taken in many directions, including simply back to the physical world of Dib's own experience. The unity that holds together the juxtaposed

elements doesn't coalesce into the picture of a fixed society – and in fact Dib's poems are mostly solitary or between two figures – but it performs its connections to other traditions and ways of seeing, and invites the reader to continue this performance.

To say that Dib's poems are influenced by Arabic, Andalusian and North African modes of poetics is not to say that they are continuations of the earlier traditions in any direct sense, as Qâdi Mohammed said of *melhûn*, or in the sense of a "parental structure." Many other North African writers have drawn on local poetic traditions in very different ways, and it would be difficult if not meaningless either to claim that they're all the same or to rank them according to degrees of authenticity. And the same elements examined in this chapter might be approached through different rubrics and seen to be in contact with the history of French poetry, or other ways of defining tradition. Rather than a blend of isolable cultural types of poetry, Dib's poetry – at least after his first collection[53] – is best viewed as a particular formation that can be traced back towards multiple origins but not separated into elements each with their own distinct trajectory. Whether Dib's poetry appears more "French" or "Arab" will depend on what elements are prioritized – language, imagery, form, etc. – and which texts are used as a point of comparison; and, particularly since writing in French and in Arabic share a history that goes back before the 20th century (to the influence of Andalusian poetry on the French troubadours, or the translations and reworkings in French of Arabic poems and tales from the 18th century), trying to sort out the two would lead to revealing hidden connections in history that challenge long-cherished cultural identities. Historical trajectories of culture seen as belonging to the invisible push forward not only writing but reading as well, demanding shifting hermeneutical tools that let writing and history illuminate each other. Seen in this way, every reference to tradition will need to accept that its nostalgia is without object, referring to a future interpretation rather than a set past meaning. Where a work doesn't claim to be the continuation or successor of a tradition or social order whose image it projects, its roots will be unavoidably hidden or hanging free. Such a relationship to the past marks it as modern, something that sets itself apart from any chain of reception that might fully explain it. Roland Barthes, the French critic and writer, addressed this division between kinds of literature by separating a classical poetics, inserted into a chain of meanings, from a modern one, rooted straight in itself and the activities that produce it:

53 *Ombre gardienne*, whose second half is made up of poems that carefully follow classic French metrical and rhyme schemes, clearly invites reading as the encounter of separate styles. This is not to say that careful reading would not discover overlaps and complications, particularly if read in tandem with Dib's later writing.

> In classical speech, connections lead the word on, and at once carry it towards a meaning which is an ever-deferred project; in modern poetry, connections are only an extension of the word, it is the Word which is 'the dwelling place', it is rooted like a *fons et origo* in the prosody of functions, which are perceived but unreal. [...] Fixed connections being abolished, the word is left only with a vertical project, it is like a monolith, or a pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings, reflexes and recollections: it is a sign which stands.[54]

The idea of a speech that is rooted in the Word itself is something that Dib played with at least as early as the prose poems of *Formulaires*. But an understanding of literary history as shaped by cryptic and unexpected resurgences of older practices suggests a revision to Barthes' image. The "totality" into which the sign plunges or from which it rises is itself a tangle of chains in stages of decomposition and recomposition, and its monolithic body is made up of bits of them, determined not, or not only, by the writer's choice as by the way they have been tossed up as historical sediment. The implications of this agree with the Moroccan sociologist and novelist Abdelkebir Khatibi's call, two decades after independence, for a "double critique," insisting that both "Europe" and "Islam" were intimately involved in North African being and that both should be broken with wherever they tend to mystification;[55] the effort to be "modern" may take more than one gesture. But they also suggest that a double (or triple, or multiple) critique will run up against places where no one of the interpretive frames, the lines of critique, that it uses seems exclusively applicable. These, on the one hand, point to a role or responsibility of the individual, an originality that no particular genealogy can replace. But on the other they show how much, as Dib said, every history is caught up with every other, and invite us to trace those histories back so as to rethink the way we defined the streams of influence were following in the first place. These kinds of points of confusion, not only between streams defined as belonging to different cultures but also between different ways of giving meaning to life that may coexist in the same individual, will occupy much of the next chapter. There the focus will be less on tracing historical trajectories than on looking at the ways in which multiple approaches, forms, and experiences coexist in the same text or the same mind. Once again, the present or modern will appear not as contained by its own specific character, but as a space where layers of tradition and understanding interpenetrate, collide, and burst in generative sparks and flowerings.

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54 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967): 53.

55 Abdelkebir Khatibi, "Pensée-autre," in *Maghreb Pluriel* (Paris: DeNoël, 1983): 12.

## 1.3 : Shapes of imagination and writing: form and inspiration

The previous chapter looked at aspects of the Arabic literary tradition concerned with establishing the coherence and continuity of a culture through the adoption and acceptance of literary forms and images, and ways of connecting these. Twentieth-century writers also inherited from this tradition a mode of writing that existed at the edges of these coherent unities, and one that emphasized individual experimentation, although this process was understood quite differently from the volitional activity of an autonomous or self-making individual. The historical corpus of writing by Sufi authors – or at least selected authors from several centuries of literary history – was a reference point for many Arab writers in the 20th century looking to make a shift away from classical or traditional forms and towards the perceived demands of the present. At the same time, the artistic and intellectual field to which these works belonged offered ways of thinking about creativity and form different from those on offer in European modernist forms. These included not just approaches to writing but the relation between different arts, and between creative production and psychology. Beginning from a discussion of Sufism in relation to Dib's work and those of his contemporaries, this chapter looks at the relation of Dib's writing to visual imagination and inspiration, to a psychology modelled after the journey or quest, and to a materiality of language that sees existence as written into the substance of the world. In each case, what is at play in Dib's work is not a faithful transmission of earlier tradition, but a troubling and questioning of a modern condition that does not give itself obviously to a single interpretive lens.

A situation of modernity, which puts earlier ways of doing things into question, draws attention to how non-transparent the relation of self and world is. The encounter or collision of different cultural traditions invites mediation not just between different ways of seeing the world, but between quite different ways of conceiving the place of aesthetic experience within it. Such collisions can be tremendously fruitful aesthetically. Many of the most famous developments of European modernism in the early 20th century were the direct result of exposure to and imitation of artistic forms from elsewhere. This is probably most dramatically visible in painting and sculpture, but it affected fashion, music, and other forms as well.[1] These borrowings were made

1 For a list of European artists directly influenced by North African or Arabic art, see Khatibi, *L'art contemporain arabe: prologomènes* (Paris: Al Manar, 2002): 9. It's worth noting that artists themselves were often much more up-front about non-European influence than critics, for whom the influence of particular artworks often would be blurred into the influence of a place, a vague cultural spirit, or generalizations about the “primitive.”

easier by Europe's conquest and colonization of much of this "elsewhere," as well as the development of transportation technologies, facilitating the transport and display of artworks and *objets d'art*, and access to more places for the casual traveller. These translations between grids of reference, in particular under the uneven power relation of the colonial encounter, were generally "bad" translations, seriously distorting or destroying what meaning the art would have had in its original context in order to turn it into an object readable to a European spectatorship. But such "bad" translations may well be the rule rather than the exception in the formation of culture. What is transferred from one place to another is less likely to be the art form itself than a set of formal possibilities opened up, in the "language" of the artist's own formation, by the awareness of previously unknown approaches.

The literary arts provide the metaphor for this translation, and are particularly reliant on it – while a Picasso could have an actual face-to-face encounter with West African statuary, the significant influence of Arabic and Persian poetry are stories on German, French and English literature from the 17th century happened almost entirely by means of translations that seriously altered the poetics, form, and vocabulary of the originals. The European novel, as Srinivas Aravamudan has recently recounted, became established through the eclipsing of other narrative forms, as the novel "usurped the mantle of fictionality as everything else was declared insufficiently or faultily fictional."[2] Some of these forms, what Aravamudan calls "fantastic" or "Oriental tales," were openly in conversation with Arabic and Persian sources, although this conversation involved pastiche more than imitation, filtered through several layers of translation and enthusiastically building an image of the other designed to address local concerns. Not unmoored fantasizing, these were works written to address their own world, Aravamudan explains, but their authors drew from the wide range of formal possibilities rather than situating themselves inside form defined as that of a nation or civilization.

The twentieth century saw the novel re-open into a field that acknowledges interpenetration of forms. The realistic novel had brought with it ways of modelling history, psychology, and experience, models that early novel-writers were often playfully aware of, but that came to be accepted as normative by what Aravamudan calls "the partisans of the novel" within a nationalist frame of literary criticism. While borrowing from other cultural traditions had been continuous in

2 Aravamudan, *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012): 25.

European literary art, from Romanticism to Surrealism, in a climate of literary internationalism and with the decline of colonialism it accelerated. The significant mutations in literary form can be seen not a reversion to something "before" the nationalist novel or as a break with it or rejection of it, but rather as the continuation of a process of developing forms frozen by a critical lens that imposes a national or culturalist teleology on it. And the emergence of writers, and other artists, from European colonies and former colonies, writing in the colonial language, drew attention to the fact that this movement was not only a question of other forms being absorbed by European cultural forms, but a movement, of forms and of individuals, in both directions.

The colonial situation, and European global domination more broadly, meant that movements into Europe and out of Europe were not identical or equal. In the case of literature, colonial education into the French language was also an education into French literary forms; this was particularly influential in a region like Algeria, where colonial rule had crippled local modes of education. In Egypt, by contrast, where literary production in Arabic thrived, a distinct field of novels and short stories in Arabic developed beginning in the 19th century, effectively naturalizing these forms.[3] But Algerians writing in French were more likely to feel caught in between different forms. In Dib's account, the difficulty his generation of writers faced went beyond mastery of language. Despite the interest of the significant body of writing on bilingualism in postcolonial Maghrebin literature,[4] it is worth remembering that for centuries a literary multilingualism had been established in Muslim-ruled lands (as also occurred in much of medieval Europe), where it was not at all uncommon for a writer to write in a language other than her mother tongue. The difficulty North African novelists experienced, according to Dib, was not just or primarily a question of linguistic ability, but had to do directly with a conflict between ways of experiencing the world, the ones embedded in the European novel and the ones familiar to these writers:

> [C]es Algériens qui avaient donc appris le français, qui l'avaient assimilé, n'avaient derrière eux qu'un passé culturel, disons un passé culturel extrêmement différent, qui entre autres choses, sans entrer dans les détails, ne connaissait pas cette forme littéraire qu'on appelle le roman. [...] Il fallait [...] qu'ils assimilent ailleurs ces formes et qu'ils les restituent, non pas sous formes de pâles imitations, mais d'oeuvre originale. Et c'est là que se trouvait la difficulté. Une des difficultés par

3 On this see Sabry Hafez, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse: a Study in the Sociology of Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Saqi, 1992).

4 For Algerian examples, see Malek Haddad, *Les Zéros tourne en rond*; Kateb Yacine, *Le poète comme un boxeur: entretiens 1958-1989*, ed. Gilles Carpentier (Paris: Seuil, 1994); Assia Djebar, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent: en marge de ma francophonie* (Montréal: PUM, 1999); Leïla Sebbar, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (Paris: Julliard, 2003).

> exemple, pour l'écrivain de ces pays-là, c'est d'obtenir l'unité, la cohésion dans un récit. L'autre difficulté, c'est de donner le sentiment de l'écoulement du temps. Toutes choses qui sont, lorsqu'on étudie de près la littérature, qui sont presque, je dirais, uniquement la, les caractéristiques de la littérature occidentale.[5]

According to Dib, then, two major characteristics of the realist novel fall outside the Algerian writer's familiarity: the unity of the narrative, and a sense of chronological unfolding. Shortly after, he identifies a third; that of a psychology based on self-reflexive introspection and the narrative construction of an identity:

> […] ces Algériens qui se mettaient à écrire des romans se trouvaient du même coup confrontés avec eux-mêmes. Chose dont on n'a pas beaucoup l'habitude. Les gens vivent; ils ont une façon de concevoir la vie qui, en quelque sorte ne tient pas beaucoup compte de l'introspection. C'est une attitude mentale, morale, je dirais même, religieuse. [...] Et à partir du moment où on est confronté avec eux-mêmes, se pose le problème de l'identité, et pas seulement de l'identité personnelle, mais de l'identité de la communauté.[6]

The three characteristics fit together into a model of subjective psychology: the self as a unified development growing steadily through time, creating itself by internally recounting its own story. Dib's comments have an autobiographic resonance; these are areas where Dib's writing, while still remaining recognizably within field of the novel, diverges from and experiments with the norm. Loosened and alternate structurings of time, psychology, and narrative became significant sites for Dib's experimentation. Narrative structure is disjointed, or else multiple narratives, often with very different structures, are set side by side or superimposed. Time flows in strange ways, through flashback, memory, dream, or through sudden jumps in the text, or is accelerated at times and drawn out at others. Dib's characters are usually contemplative, more interested in watching external detail or reliving memories than in internal dialogue, and Dib's own narrative voice often resembles them, immersing itself in the sensuous details of its environment and looking for the forms of hidden presences behind.

Disjointed narrative and character structure can be seen as reflecting certain historical subjectivities whose path to a novelistic subjectivity is blocked by social conditions or by internalized or repressed experiences. But the formal experimentation in Dib's writing also points to another framework for thinking of time, narrative, and psychology, with its own reasons and

5 Dib, "La littérature algérienne contemporaine," in Bryson, *La pierre et l'arabesque*, 291-292.
6 ibid., 293

structures. Here, personal development isn't a progressively advancing line but a series of disjointed stages, each replacing the last without being logically derived from it. Experience is unified by the self as an observing point more than as a substantial entity, and the pursuit of meaning runs through the study and interpretation of outward signs more than inward analysis and synthesis. Experimentation with literary form, an obsession for Dib, not only proposes frameworks for interpretation but draws attention to this activity. As the American poet Charles Bernstein has argued, literary form that displays its own artificiality involves a desire "to make language opaque so that writing becomes more and more conscious of itself as world generating, object generating," something that both makes palpable "the processes of the mind and heart" and highlights "'our' participation in the constitution of nature and meaning."[7] While Dib's experimentation gives body to mental and emotional processes that invisibly surround artistic production, it also shows how that process of making visible needs to be endlessly performed, linking each life to the world in which it lives, and in whose generation it is inescapably involved.

*Spontaneity or structure?*

The Syrian poet Adonis ('Ali Ahmed Said), one of the major figures in the development of a poetry in Arabic that adopted free verse, irregular line length, and other modernist conventions, saw in Sufi poetry a precedent for a writing that maintains a shifting and open relationship with form; mystical writing to him is "a perpetual act of discovery of the infinite, involving a constant destruction of forms," in which "each poem has its own particular form."[8] Adonis presents writing as flux, perpetually creative and embodied, becoming part of the organism's own vibration. Adonis claims that metaphor functions peculiarly in mystical poetry: since it aims not at establishing an analogy between two givens, but at relating a given object to the unknown, it insists on being forged fresh each time. Since Arabic mystical poetry has tended to recycle many of the same images, oftentimes the same ones used by court or popular poetry, what Adonis refers to is not continuous creation of metaphors but something about the way in which the poem is composed: "not merely a rhetorical or descriptive technique, but an original impulse, bursting into life in the same movement as poetic intuition."[9] This notion of poetry as impulsive, coexistent

7 Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Evanston: University of Illinois Press, 1986): 71.
8 Adonis, *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, trans. Catherine Cobham (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990): 73.
9 ibid.

with embodiment and intuition, and occurring outside of or before the work of forming and dividing structures and meanings, is best exemplified in Sufi literature by *shaṭaḥāt*, short verses pronounced in a state of trance and recorded by listeners. These impersonal utterances trouble the idea of authorship, since a text pronounced in a state of selflessness cannot, the argument goes, be attributed to its speaker. The most famous of these are by the 8th/3rd century Persian Sufis Bistāmī and al-Ḥallāj, the latter of whom was sentenced to execution for blasphemy by judges whose sense of authorial assignation was less nuanced.[10] Long read and transmitted by Sufis, they have been seen in the last century, by Adonis and other writers, as figures of artistic experimentation, individual voice, and freedom of expression.

But Adonis' emphasis, here and in his *Sufism and Surrealism*, on a form-breaking and spontaneous linguistic creation, gives only a partial picture of what Sufi literature has been. The focus on mystical poetry leaves out a large corpus of prose work, treatises, letters, or manuals that are much more caught up in the details of everyday religious practice. Even within poetry, the Sufi classics include many works that adopted dominant forms, including long imagistic or narrative forms like the *qaṣīda* or the Andalusian *muwashshahāt*, along with uncategorizable works like the *mawāqif* ("halts") of Niffarī, whose complicated plays on pronounal ambiguity and disorienting abstraction were also an inspiration to Adonis and to other poets working in Arabic.[11] In all of these literary forms, the claim of inspiration or unconscious composition is tempered or replaced by structuring forces. Nor is the divide between a Sufi poetics based on spontaneous composition and a non-Sufi poetics based on imitation necessarily clear; Bencheikh, for instance, discusses the importance of improvisation (and its interplay with construction) in the classical poetry of Abbasid Baghdad – although here improvisation was praised for being able to fit within the established conventions, bravado and originality being an extra bonus.[12] While Sufi writing could involve elements compatible with a model of individual creativity and formal transgression, as a field it remained in close relation to the surrounding literary cultures. In general, the

10 See Bistāmī, *Shatihât: les dits de Bistami*, trans. Abdelwahhab Meddeb (Paris: Fayard, 1989); al-Ḥallāj, *Poèmes mystiques*, trans. Sami-Ali (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000); on Hallaj's life there is Massignon's multivolume *Le passion de Mansour al-Hallaj* (Paris: Guethner, 1922), and many shorter introductions.

11 For examples of long poems, see *Umar Ibn Al-Farid: Sufi Verse, Saintly Life*, trans. Th. Emil Homerin (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001); *Abu Al-hasan Al-shushtari: Songs of Love and Devotion*, trans. Lourdes Mari Alvarez (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009). For Niffarī, see A.J. Arberry, trans., *The Mawaqif and Mukhatabat of Muhammad Ibn 'Abdi al-Jabbar al-Niffari* (London: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1935). Arberry's translation is unwieldy and imposes religious terminology where the original is much terser and ambiguous; for a translation that pays more attention to Niffarī's writing style, see *Les Haltes*, trans. Sami-Ali (Paris: Sindbad, 2007).

12 Bencheikh, *Poétique arabe: essai sur les voies d'une création* 77ff.

approach to Sufi writing as avant-gardist obscures the extent to which these writings existed within social relations and institutions. Although some Sufi figures were recluses, outcasts, and aesthetic or political revolutionaries, Sufism was also deeply tied up with the structure of society across all regions of Muslim culture.[13] The diversity of Sufi practices and institutions make Sufism involved in charitable and communal functions in Islamic societies, and closely linked to fields that modern terminology might classify as aesthetics or psychology. A distinction between Sufism and Islam in general, or the idea of a theoretical mysticism separated from cultural practices, are ideas that have been of some cultural importance during the last century, but they belong to this period and to its projects of adequation between different thought systems, not to earlier periods.

In North Africa, Sufism was, and is still, centrally tied to the institutions of the *ṭariqāt*, usually translated to English or French as "brotherhoods" (*confréries*), although the literal meaning is "ways" or "paths." Based in rural compounds (*ribāṭ*) and in the cities, the *tariqāt* were central players in social order. These institutions, which the French referred to by the term *maraboutisme*, from the term referring to the inhabitant of a *ribāṭ*, were, in Malek Chebel's words, like Sufi institutions elsewhere, the adaptation of Islamic practice to local conditions, "le revêtement imaginaire concret, le compromis entre les anciennes pratiques du terroir et l'Islam dont l'abstraction est parfois inassimilable par les individus."[14] The tombs of *awlīyah*, "friends" of God, but often translated as "saints," were central social sites; exorcisms, trance rituals, and talismanic writing formed an important part of the system of treating psychological and physical maladies; and the musical rituals of different *ṭariqāt* formed an important part of musical and cultural life. After the start of the French occupation, certain *ṭariqāt* were at the forefront of resistance, while others made alliances with the French.[15]

One thing that unites the classic writings of Sufism, from manuals to poetry to polystylistic texts, is that they are in an important sense performative texts. They are designed to guide, or to jolt, a reader through a process of self-questioning or acceptance that will lead to an insight or

13 Nile Green's recent introduction to Sufism argues for displacing "mysticism" as the main framework for understanding Sufism, in favour of "tradition", which better accounts for the social character of spiritual practice, and the variety of roles played by Sufi institutions, conservative and authoritarian as well as radical. See Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): 3.

14 Chebel, *L'imaginaire arabo-musulman* (Paris: PUF, 1993): 170.

15 On the responses of various *ṭariqāt* to the French presence see Julia Clancy-Smith, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800-1904)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Martine Le Coz's *La couronne de vent* (Paris: Al Manar, 2009) is an interesting novelistic attempt at describing the conflict between the Emir 'Abd al-Qādir's group and other *ṭariqāt* over response to the French, using the terms and concepts of 'Abd al-Qādir's Sufi writings.

experience that is by definition not capable of expression in words; or, in the case of ecstatic poetry, they are the traces of such an experience that can guide, or derail, the reader's thoughts in a similar direction. This experience, although linked to practices and beliefs, is something that exceeds either of these. A frequently used explanation in Sufi literature, drawn from a *ḥadith* (a saying of the Prophet initially transmitted orally), describes Islam as involving three aspects, *islām*, *imān* and *iḥsān*, a phrase Dib inserts in the text of *Le désert sans détour*. *Islām*, or submission, refers to following the details of the law as pertains to behaviour; *imān*, or faith, to an inward trusting or giving assent; and *iḥsān*, which literally means "excellence" or "improvement," refers, in the words of the *ḥadith*, to "[serving] God as though you could see him." Thought and practice identified with Sufism concerns itself with *iḥsān*, taking the *ḥadith* literally to mean that believers can come to be aware of divine presence via interior and exterior sensation. This involves, in a dynamic whose trace we've already identified in Dib's work, a movement beyond or away from self-awareness, a dissolution of the self referred to as *fanā'*. The attainment of these states and the cultivation of a personality conducive to rendering itself transparent is one of the central functions of what we could call Sufi aesthetics, the principle behind literature but also other artistic activity, particularly music, which forms an important part of popular religious practice in North Africa and marked Dib's early formation. This transparency undermines the visible world in favour of a truer, unseen life behind it; but since this invisible truth cannot support conscious experience – it rather annihilates it – it unfolds in aesthetic forms, which are more markers of the active processes of dissolution and reconstitution than representations of a putatively describable invisible world.

In the context of decolonization and the consolidations of new nationalist and religious identities, a writer's claim of interest in or influence by Sufism often has a political dimension, dissociating the writer's interest in Islamic references from other appropriations of Islam in public discourse or politics, particularly with the rise of "Islamist" trends, conservative and radical/fundamentalist. With the growth of "political Islam" in North Africa, an overt alliance with Sufi heritage, for writers including Abdelwahhab Meddeb, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Tahar Ben Jelloun, could go along with a commitment to secularism or even atheism. While they can be argued to be theoretically compatible with Sufism, these positions belong to a field of discourse marked by the interaction of a European enlightenment framework with Arab-Islamic (or Persian-Islamic) frameworks of knowledge, a field quite different from the one that produced the Sufi classics.

Where Dib considers Islam he is almost always referring to popular, Sufi, and locally-inflected religion. And although Dib rejected being called a religious writer,[16] and expressed agnostic views, his work takes interest in not only the fantastic and philosophical aspects of Sufism but the ways in which popular religion and piety inhabit lives and minds. Reference to Sufism lets Dib ground his work both in the rarefied concerns of literary avant-gardism and in a day-to-day and popular world. In *Tlemcen ou les lieux de l'écriture*, Dib recalls stumbling as a ten-year old into a *dhikr* session held by a local Darqāwi order. *Dhikr*, literally "remembrance," refers in Sufi practice to the repetition of phrases or divine names in order to reach a state of *fanā'*. In North Africa, group *dhikr* sessions, often very prolonged and sometimes musically accompanied, are a common practice. Dib's description gives an otherworldly picture of the absorption of embodiment and concentration involved:

> J'entrai mais j'eus du coup la sensation de tomber de l'autre côté du monde. Peut-être frôlons-nous ainsi constamment des univers étrangers sans que nous nous en doutions. Je fis ce que vous auriez fait. En rangs serrés, s'accompagnant d'une psalmodie sourde, d'un *dhikr*, des hommes se balançaient sur place. Je ne comptais pas jusqu'à trois et me glissais entre eux, qui ne relevèrent pas la chose, ne s'interrompirent pas, ne semblèrent point surpris, ne se posèrent ni ne me posèrent le quart d'une question – se rendirent-ils même compte de la présence de ce moucheron? – ne se souciant que de répéter à l'infini, en cadence, avec de profonds halètements de gorge: *alla-hou, alla-hou, alla-hou*… Inchangée, une invocation que je n'hésitai pas non plus à reprendre tandis que, les imitant, je me mettais aussi en mouvement d'avant en arrière et récitais moins avec ma voix qu'avec mon haleine: *alla-hou, alla-hou*.
> Cela dura, combien de temps: l'éternité? Un bon moment, et le *dhikr* s'acheva sur une unanime et libératrice expiration.[17]

The young Dib continued to go back, maybe more for the sweets that were served afterwards than for the ritual, though he asks, "manger n'est-ce pas une autre forme de prière?" But the sense of an other world around the corner, to be visited at will, seems to have stuck with him. In Dib's adult work, the otherworldly means both the fantastic and unexpected, and whatever is going on close by unseen; the invisible and sought-after rise up from the mundane world of small gestures, and even the steady measurement of breath that turns a length of time into an unspecified or static eternity seems to surface in his language. An otherworldly aesthetic experience links the visible realm of life to the invisible, permeating everyday life and connecting

16 See the interview quoted in Déjeux, *Le sentiment religieux dans la littérature maghrébin de langue française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986): 140.

17 Dib, *Tlemcen ou les lieux de l'écriture*, 91.

poetic imagination to breath, gesture, and contemplation. Rather than interior sense being solipsistic and exterior sense social, the two are intertwined and both are fields where the self is in relation to what lies beyond it. In Dib's writing, Sufism contributes descriptive content and source or intertexts, and also points of reference for an aesthetic where words come close to the body, to sound and rhythm, and to a silence that is at once beyond their reach and found all around.

Dib's writing in places references explicitly Sufi texts. In *Dieu en barbarie* a shoemaker sings verses of Abu Madyan, the Sufi "patron saint" of Tlemcen; this novel and its sequel revolve significantly around interpretations of popular religion. In the title story in *Simorgh* he retells the basic outline of Farīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār's *Manāṭiq al-Ṭayyār* (known in English as the "conference of the birds"), where the survivors of a grand voyage of birds to find the Simorgh, their supposed king, are, upon reaching his palace and being granted an audience, presented with a mirror where they see themselves. In Dib's recounting, each bird, looking in the mirror, sees the group minus their own image; only after recognizing this does the self-image fade into the grouping. *Habel* and *Le sommeil d'Ève* draw on the story of Qays (al-Majnūn, literally the crazy or possessed one) and Layla, although in Dib's version it is a woman who is driven mad by love, and the status of this madness – pathological or visionary, truthful or delusional – is, as with Dib's treatment of insanity or visionary experience in general, ambiguous. Although not of Sufi origin, the story of Majnūn and Layla has a long tradition of use by Sufis to figure the loss of self in pursuit of the divine, and Dib adopts this in reflection on the quest for a self adequate to the demands of a life where exile is not only physical and social but cultural and psychological. In these examples and others, self-attainment depends on self-loss, and both self-assurance and the dissolution into the other are graspable only in relation. There is no static identity, but only identity in movement, and the presence of an invisible that confronts all experience with its own lack of solidity is central to the process of defining self or other. Here the questions brought up by Dib's sources become challenges for writing practice. Sufi practice and poetry give precedent for a way of writing that abstracts the audience, a mode of address that undermines the specificity of both the speaker and the receiver, something that marks Dib's orientation towards silence, dissolution, the blinding sun of meaning or the supporting warmth of an existence untroubled because separated from content. Dib's writing works in the space between self-loss and popular life, and his narrative texts from 1962 on can often be read both as descriptions of individuals' struggles to reconcile themselves with the world around them and performances of how that reconciliation might be thought. The

influence of mystical literature is not only a question of authorizing formal experimentation, but comes to address particular issues of experience, mental life, or social cohesion.

*Surreal inheritance*

The emphasis in Sufi aesthetics on spontaneity has led several writers concerned with Arab or North African literatures to compare it to the surrealist movement of the 20th century. For Adonis, in his writings on Sufism and literary aesthetics, the most important heritage of Sufism was its impact on literary composition; it introduced a different hermeneutics, one based on loose connections, where imagination is not only embraced but is seen as an important part of transforming tradition into new texts. This then reflects back on the role of language as something more than a medium for reproducing the same meaning:

> [T]he significance of Sufism today does not lie in its written dogma (philosophical literature), so much as the path it follows to attain this writing. [...] The importance of the Sufi contribution lies in its re-reading of the religious texts and the attribution to them of other meanings and dimensions; this in turn permits a new reading of the literary, philosophical and political legacy, which has led to a fresh look at language, not only in the religious context but also as a tool of revelation and expression.[18]

In the project of reinventing tradition and the emphasis on an opacity of language as a means of expression, along with an interest in unconscious or stream-of-consciousness techniques of composition, Adonis saw a deep resonance between his reading of Sufism and the early twentieth-century Surrealist movement. André Breton's *First Manifesto of Surrealism* defined Surrealism as based on "the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought."[19] These aspects of meaning, involving looser connections between ideas than the ones suggested by conceptual reasoning, narrative structuring, or standardized grammar, give access, Breton hoped, to the "sur-real," aspects of reality not disclosed in normal conscious life. Further proximity, for Adonis, comes from the way that the relation to the surreal was understood as being essentially about desire, with the proper way to approach this relation being to perform it. What had been thought in Sufism in terms of relation to the divine could be re-thought in terms of a relation to the writing process.

18 Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, trans. Judith Cumberbatch (London: Saqi, 2005):20.
19 Breton, "First Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)", trans. A.S. Kline. Text available at <<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/French/Manifesto.htm>>.

Adonis, resolutely secularist, could reinterpret *fanā'* in terms of a modernist poetics:

> [E]very true poet is Sufi or Surrealist: he longs for something beyond the familiar world, and is conscious that he will not be able to achieve it unless he fulfils two conditions: first, to rid himself completely of any traces of the established poetical climate, in order to purify himself and his language; second, to allow himself to be carried away with this new-found purity, to a language and world that are unfamiliar to him. Only in such a way will the poem reveal something that we have not seen before. It does not mean that it will be unreal – rather, it means that it will present reality from a different angle: not linked to visible reality, but in conjunction with it in some other form.[20]

Reference to Sufi writing suggested paths for writers working in Arabic to access or create new poetic forms in consonance with European and American modernism without merely importing forms from elsewhere. For writers schooled in French colonial schools, the situation was somewhat different, in that the literary influence of surrealism would be likely to have come first. French surrealism already bore traces of Sufism, or at least shared influences; Adonis dedicates a chapter to the influence of Arabic poetry on Rimbaud, whose father was an Arabic-speaking colonial officer, and whose interest in a "dérèglement de tous les sens" was a major inspiration to the surrealists. But for writers educated in French poetry, surrealism was not only a method of writing, it was also a particular school or period in French writing, one with particular historical, political and social resonances.[21] The influence of surrealist and symbolist French poetics on writing by Dib and other second-language French writers also questions somewhat how pure the "purification" Adonis refers to really is: a vertiginous dive into imagination surfaces via a learned store of linguistic tools, and is likely to bring out not only the new but also the familiar. Adonis' driving hope, in much of his writing, is for a clean break with Arab-Islamic ways of thinking and their reinvention in tandem with a European modernism, here through the extraction of a literary Sufism out of the complex field of Sufi practice; but this is in its own way a particularly utopian way of thinking of the development of ideas, and is not the only way of imagining an expanded modernity. The harshness with which Adonis, as he ages, has come to berate his fellow Arabs for not simply making a clean break with the past seems to betray the frustration of someone whose vision of the future turned out to be rather different from what has transpired.

An association with Sufism in writing is not necessarily a guarantee of innovation and

20 Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism*, 147-148.

21 The case of Louis Aragon, with whom Dib had a friendship and who prefaced his first book of poetry, is an instructive example in his abrupt shifts from surrealism to social realism to a poetic lyricism.

creativity. The Algerian writer Habib Tengour's 1981 "Maghrebin Surrealism" takes on the easy overuse of mysticism in literature. Like Breton's surrealist "Manifesto," of which it is a loose pastiche, Tengour's text is both a critique of contemporary literary trends and a suggestion as to what is of value in them. Tengour's target in (mostly francophone) North African literature involves much of what can be associated with "mysticism" in this writing: "an excessive taste for history and controversy" that leads the writer to a "hastily exploited hagiography" that recycles the same great figures; an interest in madmen who seldom amount to more than "postcard" figures, rather than the expression of "the unbearable limits of a dailyness so difficult to bear"; an obsession with demonstrating remarkable individual talent that remains caught in self-consciousness.[22] These tendencies, "surrealist" in their interest in the unfamiliar, the extreme, and the evocative, end up, rather than diving into the flux of life, increasing the distance between the writer and the lived experience of a social life that is more genuinely surrealist in the navigation of the everyday in North Africa than in the works of these writers. The thrill of the unfamiliar or the pursuit of intense emotions can easily be nothing but a fantasy, substituting short-lived enchantment for the difficult and bewildering contradictions of life. One of Dib's last short stories, "Laëzza" from the collection with the same name, is in part a gentle critique of a 1990s culture of consumption and mysticism, set in a strangely-imagined world of fashion and nightclubs, where wild love is mediated by expensive objects, and where buying fancy pens substitutes for writing calligraphy.

Still, Tengour finds a surrealism in the writers he admires, and sees in particular that "it is into Maghrebin Sufism that surrealist subversion asserts itself"; "there always exists a non (?)-conscious smidgen of Sufism in the Maghrebian writer who is not a clever faker." The key element is the ability to point beyond the immediate, first impressions: "there where the exterior observer sees only heresy, sexual dissoluteness, coarse language, incoherent acts, etcetera," such a writer sees, citing the end of Breton's manifesto, that "it's obvious: *existence is elsewhere*." To plunge into appearances is to point away from them, to indicate the presence in them of what escapes appearances. Tengour's final comment, "that despite my perverse attachment to art, it is '*elsewhere*' that I hope to sojourn," can be read either as attempting a plunge into the unknown or into the world outside of art. There does not need to be a choice between the worldly and the

22 Tengour, "Maghrebin Surrealism (Essay and Manifesto)", trans. Pierre Joris. Available at http://poemsandpoetics.blogspot.ca/2010/09/habib-tengour-maghrebian-surrealism.html; published in Joris, ed. *Exile is my Trade: a Habib Tengour reader* (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2012).

unworldly, or the mystical and the political, since both find their footing in the surreality and irrationality found in everyday life.

Hédi Abdel Jaouad, following Tengour's lead, coined the word "soufialisme" to describe the intertwined influenced of Surrealism and Sufism on North African writers. To Abdel Jaouad, the importance of Surrealism for Maghrebin writers was that it provided a model but also encouraged variation on that model, opening the door to loose and changing modes of writing, what he punningly calls "fugues de Barbarie." The point for him is less an identity between surrealism and Sufi modes of writing than a loose correspondence, which encouraged experimentation in highly personal modes. This allowed, for francophone North African writers, moving between Arabic and French literary heritages, and also gave, from both directions, a kind of revolutionary legitimization, an anti-authoritarian and even confrontational stance that appealed to the position in which these writers found themselves. In its very diversity, francophone Maghrebin literature provides a "bridge" across epochs, though not a link of identity:

> Le texte maghrébin est, aujoud'hui, lieu de synthèse et de convergence de l'avant-garde dans «sa partie la plus exposée au soleil comme au danger,» le surréalisme, et de l'archaïque arabo-musulman dans sa trace la plus hétérogène et la plus radicalement hérétique, le soufisme. […] C'est ce même syncrétisme ou mudéjarisme (dans le sens qui lui donne Goytisolo), entre soufisme et surréalisme, que tentent plusieurs écrivains maghrébins, et que nous osons appeller ici *soufialisme*.[23]

Abdel Jaouad sees Dib's "soufialist" particularity through a proximity of Dib's term *cryptostase* and Breton's use of *cryptésthesie,* a kind of "sixth sense" or ability to see hidden things. As with the surrealists' interest in symbolism and myth, Abdel-Jaouad says that Dib aims to

> [R]etrouver, précisément, les grand symboles archétypes (Jung), la «racine profonde,» (Bachelard) pour constituer, au niveau de l'humanité, un mythe collectif qui engloberait tous nos désirs et toutes nos pulsions individuelle.[24]

Although a desire to capture the whole of sensation, desire and drive and to reduce it down to condensed form is certainly at work in Dib's writing, I think that, notwithstanding the work of several critics to show Jungian resonances in Dib's work, it's more useful to look at "archetypal"

23 Jaouad, *Fugues de Barbarie* (New York: Les mains secrètes, 1998): 223.
24 ibid, 44.

symbolism in Dib as intensely personal rather than universal. As I read it, *cryptostase* does not only substitute for *cryptésthesie*, it significantly revises it: the "secrets" glimpsed through literature are not a universally shared substratum but the sedimentation of particular cultural histories, and even if they could be fully dissolved this would open onto a history, one that interconnected all its individual stories, rather than a universal nature. Myth for Dib would be a passage back to a shared world rather than a shared resource in itself; this is why the passages his characters take into dream or imagistic worlds are unstable, flirting with madness, self-delusion or ideological mystification at the same time that they offer a chance for a remaking of the self or a glimpse at the world as a field that dwarfs, dissolves or absorbs the self. Abdel Jaouad's own readings of Dib's texts involve a historicization. He explains some of the tensions in Dib's work by making a distinction between the "merveilleux" and the "fantastique." The "merveilleux," province of local custom and storytelling, offers a comforting "nostalgie d'un monde traditionnel," while the "fantastique," "genre essentiellement occidental," appears in the guise of technology and science fiction. In their collision is found both the struggle of the colonized against the colonizer and the process of inventing a future beyond the situations of the present. This mix in Dib brings together his use of imagery and his use of language, as the situation presents itself as paradoxical:

> Valeur-refuge, surtout pour le colonisé et le laissé-pour-compte, ce merveilleux monde étrange aux signes opaques et indéchiffrables auquel l'Autre, le colon, le Blanc, n'avait pas accès, se dressait comme un dernier rempart et un défi (ô combien dérisoires!) face à une réalité coloniale tout aussi oppressante que dévalorisante. […]
> Dans ce contexte, il n'est peut-être pas abusif d'avancer que le merveileux est devenu, de nos jours, la part du pauvre, la «réserve d'humanité,» dont peut se targuer encore le Tiers-Monde «où l'humanité, selon Dib, reste encore fraîche». Ce merveilleux rétrécit, hélas, de jour en jour face à un fantastique [...] de plus en plus envahissant et accablant.
> On peut figurer le fantastique dibien comme une mémoire future, une projection futuriste du passé, l'irruption du moderne dans l'archaïque, un espace de paradoxe et d'équivoque (d'où l'engouement de Dib pour les oxymorons et les catachrèses) qui fait de toute tentative de distinction entre le surnaturel (l'ombre) et le rationnel («la clairière diurne») un exercice à la fois ardu et futile.[25]

The intertwining of supernatural and rational, modern and archaic, constructive imagination and deconstructive language testify, like "soufialisme" in general, to a productive contradiction, an intertwined modernity formed by shuttling back and forth between languages and traditions. A

25 ibid, 133-134.

future that is not projected from the present but from a past, or a reestablishment of the modern within the field of the archaic, suggests not the exhuming of buried roots but a continuous growing off of them. Moving between nostalgia and speculation without settling on either point, this imagination calls for a rebuilding of modernity on the grounds of those excluded from it, a creativity coming not only from a formal self-dissolution but a dissolution into a field of language and images that emerge in new forms.

This process might still be noisy and bombastic; we could think of the Moroccan Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine, whose work, some of which has structural kinship to Dib's, has a "soufialisme" steeped in blood and sex and principled refusal.[26] It might also be a quiet process. The version of soufialisme in Dib, who Tengour called "surréaliste dans la dérive," might be a tendency to "zoom out," to expand perspective by increasing distance from the upsetting plane of events. If the writing is the *dérive* of some voice, it is one that has lifted itself somewhat above the plane of action, but without becoming a fully detached narrator. This doesn't provide an omniscient viewpoint, but it does let the writing shift quickly, letting the characters' emotional states slide off, giving a sense of context even though this context is seldom filled in. Interruptions into the text break the sense of a contained world. The loosened relation between the writer and what he writes opens up passageways between different segments and forms of writing, as well as between prose and poetry and between narration and commentary, but the "elsewhere" this gestures to is always ambiguously near or far: at the furthest reach of imagination, and also just around the corner, right at the edge of the visible.

*Imagination, feeling, and madness*

This "looseness," between authorial voice and fictional content, between poetic language and established language, or between tradition and its reactivation, can be thought of as a state of mind, creative or imaginative in surrealist style. It can also be thought of as the opening to another space, an in-between world or what would be called in Arabic a *barzākh*, an isthmus between two bodies of water, but also used to describe, for example, what lies between sleeping and waking, between life and death, between this world and the next. Within Sufism, and especially that of Ibn al-'Arabī, the *barzākh* of the imagination is described as the *'alam al-mithāl*,

26 See, for instance, the poetry in *Soleil arachnide* (Paris: du Seuil, 1969), or the novel *Une odeur de mantèque* (Paris: du Seuil, 1976).

the world of images or representations that falls between the world as it is visible to all and the unseen realities. While an emphasis on in-betweenness as creative process reveals ruptures and sudden newness, a focus on imagination as *'alam al-mithāl* emphasizes continuity between modes of experience and naming, stretching from pure concepts to the material world, or from ineffable experience to mundane life. Anthropologist Stefania Pandolfo has investigated the idea of imagination as *barzākh*, drawing together ideas from Ibn al-'Arabī, psychoanalysis, and her contemporary Moroccan interlocutors. What Freud calls the "Other Scene," the reverse of conscious life where drives repressed in favour of sociality play out, and which surfaces in dreams, Pandolfo also reads as Ibn al-'Arabi's *barzākh*, "an intermediate imaginal realm, an *entre-deux* between absence and presence, spiritual and bodily existence, between self and other, the living and the dead."[27] This imaginal realm mediates the relation to absence, and comes into play in dreams and also in the process of retelling or accounting for the past; everything that happens calls up an elsewhere, "inhabited by the visible yet unreadable ruins of an inaccessible past that implicate the future like the legacy of a forgotten loss."[28] The dialogue between a psychoanalytic dramaturgy of drives and desires and an imaginal realm where the absent becomes present is itself a *barzākh*, Pandolfo suggests, a space of life experience that sits between conceptualizations. The imagination can be productively approached from any of these directions, without any one necessarily explaining it, or reducing it to unproblematic status.

Dib's depiction of his thoughts "turning around" the poems of *Omneros* that presented themselves to him suggests impersonal inspiration, and Jean Pélégri, a pied-noir Algerian writer with whom Dib had a relation of friendship and mutual respect, said that Dib told him the poems of *Omneros* "lui étaient en quelque sorte dictés" from some "source" that "s'arrêtait tout aussi brusquement qu'elle était venue."[29] But in general Dib's poems read more as excursions into the imaginal than as spontaneous or cryptic utterances. The poem "Contre-jour," from his first collection, *Ombre gardienne*, describes a process of transformation through reverie, as the movement of a flock of birds makes his vision switch between the image of ocean in front of him and the image of a woman, the two coming to overlap through a play on words ("sans voile", either "unveiled" or "without a sail") and the increasing speed of the alternation, as in the last lines:

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27 Pandolfo, *Impasse of the Angels: Scenes from a Moroccan Space of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 9. This is developed in Part 3 of the book, "Loss: the Sphere of the Moon."

28 ibid, 10.

29 Pélégri, "Le messager et l'intercesseur," *Revue Celfan* 2, no. 2 (1983): 14.

Rien que la mer
Les yeux éteints,
Sans vague ni vent ni voile.

Brusquement les oiseaux réapparaissent;
Et c'est la femme,
Ni étoile ni rêve, ni geyser ni roue, la femme.

Les oiseaux reviennent;
Et rien que la mer.[30]

The movements of imagination are not so clearly marked in later poems, but the sense of switching through visions or modes of visions remains. Dib's poems move through their landscapes, constructing portraits of figures of desire, thought, and wonder – the Eros of *Omneros*, Natyk in *Feu beau feu*, the Vive of *Ô Vive* – and at the same time creating a world that they inhabit and suffuse. Take, for instance, “l'âme de l'eau,” from *Ô Vive*, whose title combines sonic effect, immediately accessible imagery, and a link between the abstract or invisible and the tangibly present, and which establishes the presence of “*Vive*” by flickering through images of the sea, of a human form, and of a bird, while keeping a forward, almost narrative, motion:

*Vive*
qui

te prosternes
et redeviens
le clair blason

voile augurant
la propension

l'oiseau bleu
quand tout se fait
mouvement

rives à l'abandon
offertes rives

et toute alors
s'accomplit bordante
la fiévreuse route[31]

30 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome I: Poésies*, 42
31 ibid, 228.

Sensation and sentiment, the embodied and the abstract, overlap in the importance of warmth and liquidity, the optics of sea and sky, or, elsewhere, the textures of moss or fur or the wet coldness and flat surface of snow. As condensed as the language may become, its actualization passes almost always through the sensory. The loosening of the link between language and representation transforms not only language but the field of representation as well. As soon as art separates itself from copying (or before it comes to copying) – and for written art, given the irreducibility of metaphor in language, maybe even in copying – the need for a part given to the undecidable, the unpredictable, and the sudden appearance of imagination presents itself. The result in Dib's writing is a poetry that is at once imagistic and interested in linguistic ambiguity, one that, by highlighting how partial the translation between sensation and word is, calls on the reader to contribute in reconstructing both, contributing a sensory completeness via imagination, rhythm, or sonority. The style that results, where image and word, contemplation of nature and of abstractions, external story or picture and internal sensation are mixed, flirting with an aesthetic sweetness without abandoning being troubling, has become a model North African writers of the next generation including Tengour, Amina Saïd, and Tahar Bekri, drew on. Unlike the substantial body of contemporary "Sufi poetry" that repeats classic images or attempts to describe blissful states, this model adopts or translates the Sufi correspondence of sensation, impulse, imagination and idea more than it sticks to mystical doctrine.

In fact, to look in texts for insights or images that are specifically mystical is a particular way of thinking about how Sufism and writing relate. The term "mystical" belongs to a European vocabulary, as does the tendency to speak of "mystic experience" or "mystical knowledge"; translations of Sufi texts into European languages until recently have tended to add specifically religious adjectives not present in the original texts, following the Orientalist prejudice that Arabic or Farsi require multiple words to be used in the target language for each word in the source language. The terms used in Arabic to describe the content of Sufi experience are generally ones that could be used in other contexts without a specifically religious or spiritual overtone. So *ma'rifa*, sought by Sufis, translated as "gnosis," "theosophical knowledge," and the like, simply means "knowledge," although in Sufi discourse it refers to a knowledge that is "tasted" (*dhawq*) rather than grasped. This kind of knowledge is in relation to sensation as well as to religious doctrine. Correspondingly, the poetic imagery that expresses this knowledge is not only the result

of some other, unseen meaning; it is the trace of the passage of the inexpressible through the poet's bodily and situated existence. Experience that finds clear expression in language exists in contact with that which does not, and the creations of the imagination bridge between the two, creating a space of experience that shades between the seen and the unseen, the physical, mental, and psychical. Following several 20th-century writers who have drawn on earlier Sufi writers, it is possible to develop a rough theory of imaginary production, seeing it as connected to sensory experience, cognitive matter, and culturally inherited material, each of which leaves traces in language while remaining ungraspable, inviting each reader to step into a world that emerges each time out of the fragments on the page.

Mehdi Ha'iri Yazdi, writing from a tradition of philosophy in Iran that drew on Arab Aristotelian, Sufi (especially Ibn 'Arabi's school), and local pre-Islamic traditions, draws a distinction between "knowledge by correspondence," which concerns verifiable propositions about external objects, and "knowledge by presence." The latter, at stake in mystical experience, is also generally at play in self-consciousness. This draws on a distinction between faculties of external perception and the internal perception of the body that is present in al-Farābī, in the earliest stages of philosophy as a particular branch of Arabic learning and writing. Internal bodily knowledge by presence is not subject to the kind of tests that knowledge by correspondence is: so, for example, when we feel pain, we don't question our perception as true or false. Initially, whatever its source, pain is known by its presence or absence. "In the acquaintance with sensations and feelings such as pain or pleasure," Yazdi writes, "there is no absent-external object, and thus, at the time of experience, there is no need for a representation of that object."[32] It is only if we try to recount the experience that the need for representation arises. Later, Yazdi cites Ibn al-'Arabi discussing knowledge by taste, as distinguished from intellectual knowledge (*'ilm al-'aql*). He gives examples of sensory experiential knowledge, which is not only uncommunicable but depends on the condition of the one experiencing:

> the sweet taste of honey, the bitter taste of extract of aloes, the enjoyment of intercourse and love, a feeling of happiness and joy, and the like, are states such as are impossible for anyone to be acquainted with except by being subject to their act of qualification and by tasting them [...] questions about this kind of knowledge are

32 Yazdi, *The Principles of Epistemology in Islamic Philosophy: Knowledge by Presence* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992): 59.

> of the same nature as the knowledge itself in being associated with the nature of taste. For example, those who suffer from the bitterness of bile taste honey as bitter, while in fact it is not so.[33]

Ibn al-ʻArabi goes on to discuss a third type of knowledge, *ʻilm al-asrār*, knowledge of the secret or unseen. For Ibn al-ʻArabi, this belongs to prophets and *ʻawlīya*, and carries with it a certainty as sure as the others. But what matters for the imagination is that this knowledge takes the form, for the one receiving it, of either intellectual or of experiential knowledge. Sensory experiential knowledge without an external object belongs to *khayāl*, the faculty of producing images or imagination. William Chittick, the most prolific scholar of Ibn al-ʻArabi in English, argues that the key distinction in Ibn al-ʻArabi's ideas on rational thought and its others is not the distinction between "ideas" and "Divine Ideas," as earlier translators suggested, but rather between objects of thought or objects of sense. Proposing "loci of vision" to translate *manāẓir al-ʻulā*, literally "higher visions," rather than "divine ideas," Chittick speaks of an inner experience that, like dream experience, is sensory but not based on external sensation:

> The imaginal realm is a sensory realm, while the rational realm is disengaged (*mujarrad*) from sensory attributes. [...] the imaginal faculty (*khayāl*) works by an inner perception that perceives ideas in sensory form. Hence imaginal perception may be visual, but this vision does not take place with the physical eyes; it may be auditory, but things are not heard with the physical ears. Again, dreams prove that everyone has nonphysical sense experience.
>
> For the Shaykh, the subject matter of poetry is not something that one thinks about as one might think about a problem in dogmatic theology. Rather it is something that is seen with the inner eye and heard with the inner ear. Only then is it described.[34]

The process of description is not a straightforward question, however, even assuming a sensory imagination so vivid as to be indistinguishable in its form from external perception. The inwardness of these "sensory ideas" makes them less amenable to expression, often making poetic or enigmatic language more useful than conceptual language. An understanding of poetic expression, then, needs to take seriously not only that what is being expressed is not identical with the form of the expression, but that the expression and form emerge simultaneously, that neither stands for the other.

33 ibid., 172-173. The citation is Yazdi's translation from O. Yahya's edition of the *Fūtūḥat al-Makkīya*, vol I. pt. 3. (Cairo, 1972), 67-68.

34 William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʻArabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992): 69-70.

The Pakistani poet and thinker Muhammad Iqbal, writing in the 1920s, described mystical experience as involving a properly inexpressible experience but also a drive towards expression. For him, idea, expressive form, and feeling all become intertwined, but with the inexpressible feeling at the root:

> Since the quality of mystic experience is to be directly experienced, it is obvious that it cannot be communicated. Mystic states are more like feeling than thought [...] The incommunicability of mystic experience is due to the fact that it is essentially a matter of inarticulate feeling, untouched by discursive intellect. It must, however, be noted that mystic feeling, like all feeling, has a cognitive element also; and it is, I believe, because of this cognitive element that it lends itself to the form of idea. In fact, it is the nature of feeling to seek expression in thought. […] Inarticulate feeling seeks to fulfil its destiny in idea which, in its turn, tends to develop out of itself its own visible garment. It is no mere metaphor to say that idea and word both simultaneously emerge out of the womb of feeling, though logical understanding cannot but take them in a temporal order and thus create its own difficulty by regarding them as mutually isolated.[35]

This is as strong a depiction as we could want of the situation of writing as the visible and inadequate traces of an untransmittable invisible. But nonetheless, despite the individuality of the feeling that drives creativity here, the results of this process, in a single artist or across a broad cultural field, end up showing similarity. The notion of a "world" of images, the ʻ*alam al-mithāl*, into which the imaginal faculty enters, suggests the extent to which inexpressible individual experiences come to take on shared garb. This "world" is by definition shared, built out of inherited images, connections, and ontological distinctions. Writing on Ibn al-ʻArabi, Henri Corbin insists that imagination is to be understood not as "an exercise of thought without foundation in nature," which he calls "fantasy" but as "the creation of an inner world," a creation that, like the outer world, comes to the viewer from the outside as the fulfillment an innate creative need rather than proceeding from volitional acts or conceptual derivation.[36] The valourization of imagination encourages giving attention to its manifestations, developing the imaginative faculty and increasing familiarity with the realms of the ʻ*alam al-mithāl*. The realm of imagination is for Ibn al-ʻArabi a realm of existence with its own validity and substance, allowing him to work his own visionary experiences not only into poetry but also into the same texts that contain conceptual or theoretical analysis.

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35 Muhammad Iqbal, *The Religious Thought in Islam* (Delhi: Shubhi Publications, 2000): 26-29.

36 Henry Corbin, *Alone With the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn al-ʻArabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998): 179-180.

The "surreal" *dérive* of Sufi writing, then, whatever its sense of newness, is shaped by a store of language and practices that precedes it. Where Sufi writing came to find standard images and terms to express this experience and its different forms, this was often rooted in Qu'ranic language which, as a shared reference point, could lend its language to give form to the formless and allow it be transmitted. As something that Sufi adepts would typically have put to memory at a young age, and understood by Sufis to have multiple or inexhaustible layers of meaning, it provided sets of generative matrices. These are flexible enough to include very different ideas, and to bridge, for instance, between popular conceptions of *djinns* and angels as human-like creatures and the philosophical conception of angels as the abstract forces of motion that drive the cosmos and thought. From this perspective, the two are not mutually exclusive, but concern different realms of existence within a whole that stretches from the invisible world of pure forces to the visible world of sensory experience, by way of *barzākh* or isthmus formed by the world of images. A very personal mode of creation comes to take on social resonance; the private imagination has, like language, a public dimension. Here the "grid of meaning" shapes vision as much as concepts, and again the situation becomes interesting when more than one grid is involved. Even without thinking of different cultural codes, the concern, which Pandolfo discusses with her interlocutors, of distinguishing between vision and madness, divine inspiration or the whispers of *djinns*, points to these problems. The realm of images gives a form to experience that may seem inexpressible, but it also can show that problems posed simply in language may in fact have unseen depths that prevent easy solutions. Rather than solving issues, the imaginal realm creates a space where different issues interact. It does not offer an interpretation of "real" problems behind it but a space where properly ungraspable issues can show themselves in images, despite or because of those images' ambivalence.

The double weight of the imagination figures into Dib's writing. Without speculating on the process of composition for all Dib's work, his central collections of poetry seem to set up an imaginal world as a space of synthesizing, a calm and integrative space for the playing out of sometimes violent emotions, even though Dib's imaginative worlds may draw on multiple cultural sources. At times his writing seems to narrate a passage into the '*alam al-mithāl* in a way that deliberately echoes pre-modern writing, for example in *L'Aube Ismaël*, which is a pilgrimage through the imaginative detritus of several civilizations in a desert that is "le lieu où le temps

s'éteint,"[37] or the central section of *L'enfant-jazz*, whose central figure moves through a childlike sketch of a world filled with strange symbols and groups of chanting wanderers. But his novels are where the instability of the imaginal is most explored. Labâne, in *Dieu en barbarie* and *Le maître de chasse*, is the most evident example, his visions poised between a source of admirable conviction and the maddening aftereffects of the war he's lived through. This edge between help and harm can be accentuated at the edges between reference grids. Pandolfo describes a psychiatric patient whose disconnection involves a retreat into what he calls "le Stade Cervantes," a space of self-identification with the worldview of Don Quixote, at once a sign of his educational difference from the family around him and a cynical acceptance of the blocked opportunities in his life in terms of employment, romance, as so on. Drawing comparisons to Lacan's thoughts on the space between consciousness and expression, Pandolfo describes this as a *barzākh*, between cure and madness, word and vision, and different codes for describing the precarious position of consciousness:

> At once a space of language, where words materialize as images, and a mystical space, populated with jinns, le Stade Cervantes is an intermediate world, realm of the creative imagination: in Ibn al-'Arabi's Islamic metaphysics, *al-'Alam al-Mithal*. It becomes then the site of a possible mediation, a passageway between delusion and creation, where the rejected terms of cultural identification, the remains of an inaccessible tradition, are reencountered and can be symbolically transformed in that "foreign"' space.[38]

The '*alam al-mithāl* is read as an ambiguous space, offering both liberatory and self-destructive possibilities, an untethering from the conditions of life both promising and threatening. In the places in Dib where these realms of images open up, he shows a similar ambiguity. Where the narrator of *Qui se souvient de la mer* sees the wartime world around him giving way into disorienting fantasy but also being structured by the appearance of the star or the spectral image of his wife, Nafissa, this double valence is clear. The distance taken from the external world sits between a flight into hallucination and a productive distance that allows that world to be inhabited meaningfully.

Dib's most explicit exploration of the idea of the imaginal world and its dangers is in *Le sommeil d'Ève*. Although the novel references Ibn al-'Arabi, the subject of visions is a Finnish

37 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome I: Poésies*, 297.

38 Pandolfo, "The Knot of the Soul: Postcolonial Conundrums, Madness, and the Imagination," in Good et. al., eds., *Postcolonial Disorders: Reflections On Subjectivity In The Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008): 354.

woman, and her story is told in reference to a Finnish legend, retold in the early 20th century by Aïno Kallas, of a woman who falls madly in love with a wolf and leaves her life and family to follow him into the forest. Faïna's, whose name may reference *fana'* but also echoes "faynek," "where are you" in North African spoken Arabic, suffers a madness that takes the form of a retreat into a world of dreams, a parallel world where desires that can have no place in her everyday life take on form. Dib first introduces this as a particularly vivid imagination or almost lucid dreaming, as she lies in bed thinking of Solh, her former lover:

> Je suis entrée dans cet état que je connais bien, où je me sens capable de dessiner en l'air et de tirer du noir les images les plus excentriques.
> Je vois de même les mains et les bras de Solh folâtrer devant mes yeux. (Lui, reste dans l'ombre.) Ils sont réels, très réels. Je pourrais les toucher et décrire la conformation de chaque ongle et où poussent les poils, où il y a un sillon.
> Nous nous trouvons ensemble, mais où? - nulle part. Dans un lieu négatif. Nous avons causé et brusquement, d'êtres humains que nous étions, nous nous sommes convertis en ces filets dans lesquels on transporte les provisions. Filets qui se sont ensuite ouverts d'eux-mêmes et changés en un pays vallonné semblable à celui qu'on traverse pour se rendre à Montfort-l'Amaury. Puis les champs n'ont plus été qu'une table d'échecs."[39]

Over the first half of the novel, narrated in Faïna's voice, she retreats further and further into this world, becoming less and less present in the world outside. Over the second half, in Solh's voice, she is gradually brought back; the project, in Beïda Chikhi's words, is "de lui restituer son activité symbolique et de l'aider à circonscrire en soi de nouveau cette zone proprement symbolique et que tout revienne à sa place."[40] The novel hints at psychoanalytical sources for Faïna's disassociation: an early sexually-tinged encounter with an abusive employer, the inability to express her love of a North African to her racist family, a lack of emotional support during her pregnancy. But mostly, the novel moves between the world of images and the world outside, drawing parallels in the smallest details of aesthetic appearance. In this section second, Solh has his own *dérive* into a childhood memory, which is ambiguously his own or someone else's, of brutal violence and reprisal during the Algerian War of Independence, a bloodthirsty madness brought on by seeing his relatives and neighbours slaughtered by French troops. The message is clear, as Chikhi notes: the imagination has the power to destroy if its symbolization is not somehow brought into life. The '*alam al-mithāl*, in Dib's world, is both a potent source of meaning and the

39 Dib, *Le sommeil d'Ève*, 13.
40 Chikhi, *Littérature algérienne: Désir d'histoire et esthétique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997): 124.

space where meaning is lost if no return to the outside world is possible.

*Initiation and Search*

A quick glance at a poem of Dib's can help bring together our themes so far. This is "passage d'être", from Dib's 1975 collection *Omneros*:

> qui oeil en attente ombre le temps
> couvre le temps de cigales d'huile
> désempare une soif de trompettes
>
> puis recel flambe un foin sur un ventre
> l'ouvre à l'émeute à la brièveté
> et rend à son immortelle chance
>
> puis arche ou jambes perd un été
> à l'endroit où désir et quiétude
> sont soie levée contre un voeu d'absence
>
> puis houiller et sans résignation
> recherche l'espace tolérable
> d'une mort légère et sans défaut[41]

Much could be said about this poem, but we'll restrict ourselves to a few comments. First, although this poem reads grammatically (minus a lack of punctuation), it shows characteristic ways that Dib loosens language: the subject is never specified, and the use of the indefinite article (*un* foin, *un* été, etc.) makes the scene impersonal. Rather than someone doing something to something, subject, object and setting are blurred. Over the span of Dib's collections, this builds up an implied subject behind the collection as a whole, which sometimes appears in the image of a woman or an animal, but mostly works unseen. The subject of Dib's poetry seems to be interpretable as a bundle of drives – life forces, animal desire, or the "Vive" that by passing through makes material objects or words suddenly illuminated – whether the "Eros" of the title is interpreted as Freudian libido or Sufi '*ishq*, passionate love or longing. Second, the movement of this impersonal subject solidifies into images, but images that reach back towards feeling either by incongruity ("une soif de trompettes") or by abstractness (what does it mean to open a chest to "l'émeute [et] la brièveté"?). This practice can be linked to surrealism or symbolism; it also seems to combine in some of Dib's late poetry with an interest in Eastern Orthodox iconography,

41 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes: Tome 1: Poésies*, 119.

images where symbolism condenses into blocks of colour. But the idea of fire, quick-burning or slow burning, and of desire and quietude as veils, have Sufi roots, echoing the soul's movement towards love as towards a flame, passing through veils of delimitation or characteristics. Finally, the poem narrates a passage, in four separate steps; this passage might be that of a human life, from emergence to passionate engagement, then through disengagement from passion to a settling into death, or the passage of an individual desire. But the structure of a passage is frequent in Dib's poetry, hinted at often in short poems and almost always structuring his longer poems. This form of a quest, broken into disjointed segments, also appears often in his novels.

Ambiguity, instability of images, and a disjunctive temporal flow are all commonly discussed features of modernist poetic writing, but they also characterize earlier forms. For North African writers, local precedent, whether in oral storytelling or in devotional literature, was closer to the fantastic and disjointed than to a constructed and continuous realism. Abdallah Memmes lists major characteristics of a body of North African experimental autobiographical writing that mark them as modernist, before noting that these same characteristics are also ones that derive from local precedent:

> [...] la pratique de déréalisation, l'éclatement des contenus thématiques, le mélange entre les événements vécus, la fiction et le discours théorique etc., dont le fonctionnement aboutit à un processus de rupture et de décentrement de la matière autobiographique.
> Ces procédés viennent s'articuler à des formes spécifiques, inhérentes à l'autobiographie maghrébine […]:
> - L'importance décisive accordée au déplacement et à la migration (en tant que métaphore de l'écriture) dans la relation autobiographique.
> - Le caractère fragmentaire et discohérent de cette relation.
> - L'effacement de l'égotisme et du souci de la véracité.
> - La déportation, enfin, de l'autobiographie vers la fiction.
>
> Or ce sont là, précisément, les traits fondamentaux qui ont, traditionnellement, caractérisé le genre dans la culture arabe, et plus particulièrement dans la tradition mystique, s'agissant de ce qu'on appelle le récit initiatique.[42]

The practice in Sufi autobiography of narrating the process of spiritual initiation, recounting the various psychological states and challenges passed through and the figures, encountered or dreamed, who played a role in this process, demands a different form than the recounting of a string of external events. The autobiography, or *fiḥrāsa*, of the 18th/12th century Moroccan Ahmed

42 Memmes, "Les soubassement culturels de l'autobiographie maghrébine", in Bendaoud et. al., eds. *Identité culturelle au maghreb* (Rabat: Université Mohammad V, 1991), p. 175.

Ibn ‘Ajiba gives an example.[43] A reader of this, or, as another example, al-Ghazālī's *Deliverance from Error*, accustomed to European autobiography may find that they veer rapidly away from a recognizable life narrative into what seems more like a treatise or a work on psychology. Ibn al-‘Arabi's *Fuṭuhāt*, shifting unexpectedly between autobiography, philosophical musing, textual exegesis, and poetry, is a more extreme version of this acceptance of different modes of address in one work. The “initiatory recital” also refers to a particular genre, widespread in Arabic letters, engaged in by poets, philosophers, and Sufis, which takes the form of an extended allegory, a travel or exile narrative that depicts the movement of the soul through progressive states. Such allegories, written by many of the major intellectual figures in Arabic and Persian letters, could also take inspiration from the tradition of *Mi‘rāj* narratives, accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's ascension into heaven, which follow a similar pattern of travel in stages, where each level of heaven involves its own characters, settings, and increasingly fantastic heavenly phenomena.[44]

In the *récit initiatoire*, the end-point of this process, whether attained or anticipated is, like the end of the *Manṭiq al-Ṭayar*, simultaneously self-realization and self-dissolution into the presence of the divine other. The movement through stages corresponds to a model of psychology developed in Sufism based on stages or stations (*maqāmāt*), configurations of the relation to the divine characterized by particular sets of emotions and attachments which need to be managed and overcome. Although at every stage Sufi practice aims at attaining “states” (*aḥwāl*) of self-dissolution, these states are momentary, while the station is a more durable psychological configuration that continues until it is replaced by another. Because each station is defined in terms of the relation of the self to God, the language used often translates to or overlaps with the erotic. The birds in ‘Aṭṭar's poem go through valleys of “longing,” “love,” and “bewilderment” among others. Sufi manuals list stations, but the number and names given vary, and even where certain orders or writers give a set order other writers will give others. Movement between stations is not controlled by the individual but is commanded from outside; the individual is called upon to orient themselves within the station where they find themselves.

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43 *The Autobiography (Fahrasa) of a Moroccan Soufi: Ahmad ibn ‘Ajiba*, trans. Louis Michon & David Straight (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999).

44 For examples in translation see Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. Afkham Darbandi and Dick Davis (London: Penguin Classics, 1984); Henry Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960); Jamal Eddine Bencheikh, *Le voyage nocturne de Muhammed* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 2002); Meddeb, *L'exil occidental* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005) (which includes his translation of Sūḥrawārdī's text of the same name). Meddeb's *Le tombeau d'Ibn 'Arabi* (St. Clément de Rivière: Fata Morgana, 1995) meditates on the connection between this Islamic genre and Dante's *Comedia*.

The characteristics Memmes identifies might follow from this: the self is described in terms of a series of displacements or journeys, which follow each other abruptly and disjointedly, and this movement erodes any sense of self beyond the form in which it finds itself in its current stage, or the realized form in which it would be fused with its other and cease to be an autonomous self. Autobiography or personal narrative under this model needs to function quite differently than under a model that sees the self as continuous development or essentially unchanging. Self-knowledge is a question of knowing the self in its particular form, while also knowing its contingency; time is not structured continuously but divides into indefinite periods of waiting divided by breaks. And the narrative of events functions mainly as a framework to allow the discussion of internal states or visions.

As adopted by North African francophone writers, this unpredictable journey often becomes an allegory of the writing process, coming into relation with a typically French interest, along the lines of Blanchot or of Bataille, in writing as an approach towards the absolute and an undermining of autonomy. A writing that moves between stories, memories, phenomenological observation, paradoxes, and so on, across ages and geographical or cultural spheres in turn reflects an identity that is held together less by internal unity than by the continuity of the writing voice. Khatibi and Meddeb, who Memmes refers to, both provide ornate and spectacular examples, blending personal biography and mythology into delirious intertextuality in an "exile" that is both a moving between locales and cultures and between internal frames of reference.[45] But it may also be used in more contained ways, the exile being less spectacular but still as fully encompassing. In Rachida Madani's *L'histoire peut attendre*, for example, the interplay between identity and imagination plays out during a train ride leaving Tangiers, as the narrator sketches drawings on a pad of paper that open, with explicit Sufi overtones, into a series of re-narrations involving imagination and memory.[46]

Beginning with *Qui se souvient de la mer*, where the narrator's quest for internal security is superimposed on and mixed with the narrative of wartime life, Dib made use of this model. Dib's next novel, *Cours sur la rive sauvage*, was his most explicit version of a *récit initiatoire*. The narrator, Iven Zohar, after being separated from his beloved, Radia, just before their wedding, moves through a series of surreal landscapes, cities, and interiors looking for her. Movement from one to

45 See Meddeb, *Phantasia* (Paris: Sindbad, 1986) and *Talismano* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1979); Khabiti, *Le livre de sang* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979).

46 Madani, *L'histoire peut attendre* (Paris: la Différence, 2006).

the next happens abruptly, often through dreamlike or science-fiction style changes involving endless falling, sudden dematerialization, or miraculously contracting distances. At times, the reader can glimpse hazily behind these scenes some elements of a real-world exile, a movement into a metropolis run by money and lit with neon, as in the sudden transformation of a supermarket sign into the source of a coded message:

> Le Monoprix resurgit promptement du fond de cette nuit, incandescent. Des messages ou des appels en code en jaillissaient. On ne pouvait savoir si cette voix réclamait une réponse, qui ne venait pas, ou si elle était en train de communiquer avec d'autres voix. C'était au-dessus de ma compréhension. Ces signaux eux-mêmes se tournent. Le brasier se mit progressivement à s'élargir.[47]

The narrator's voyage into the territory where the occupying "takas" from *Qui se souvient de la mer* come from, encountering hostility or navigating the institutions that provide charity, may suggest traces of Dib's own journeys after being forced to leave Algeria. The narrator's movement from city to unreal city in search of the "ville-nova" or "ville-Radia" echoes in particular Sōḥrawārdī's "Occidental exile," which Meddeb reads both in terms of spiritual development and the political situation of Sōḥrawārdi's time.[48] These references aside, the direct content of the novel is at once an experiment into the possibilities of writing and an exploration of Iven Zohar's psychology and relation to Radia. She appears to him in different scenes in different forms; sometimes it is only her voice, sometimes her body, spectrally or multiply present, sometimes incarnated in a statue or a city. The beloved's form is everywhere, while at the same time impossibly distant, pulling him onwards through the narrative. As he moves from scene to scene, his own form changes as well. Towards the end he finds himself transformed into three selves, one made of stone, one of water, and one of wind. The logic of the narrative is such that in the next scene he is present again in bodily form, but traces and forms of the self are left behind as he moves forward in an exile that can never completely settle down without reaching its final goal:

> Le bruit de la source reprit et s'entendit plus loin. Un ruissellement transparent couvrait à nouveau les dalles! Il venait lécher les pieds de moi de pierre; et moi d'eau partit avec l'eau.
> Je ne quittai pourtant pas cet espace habité. Moi de vent volait au-dessus de la cité endormie. Il dessinait des cercles de plus en plus étendus sur son sommeil dérouté par le soleil déclinant autour de la colonne chanteuse […]
> Et moi de vent gagna les profondeurs vives du ciel.[49]

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47 Dib, *Cours sur la rive sauvage*, 31.
48 See Meddeb, *L'exil occidental*, 57-85.
49 Dib, *Cours sur la rive sauvage*, 133.

Abdel Jaouad reads the novel with the intertext of Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélie*, a classic of French romanticism and an influence, in its emphasis on dream, to the Surrealists, rather than Arabic precedents. Others have read it in connection to Jewish mysticism, taking the narrator's name as a reference to the Zohar (it is also possible to read Iven Zohar as Ibn Zuhr, the 12th/6th century Andalusian physician and rationalist, or literally as "the son of the light"). The multiple possible intertexts can be attributed to Dib's syncretism, but also have to do with historical intertwinings: the mutual influence of Jewish and Islamic mysticism, and the influence discussed by Aravamudan of the "oriental tale" on European literature well before the Romantic era, combined with the influence of Goethe and many (often very loose) translations from Arabic and Persian on Nerval and his contemporaries. If Dib's novel continues to be bewildering, it is not due to its novelty, but to the value given to bewilderment in writing, a valourization with deep roots.

There is also a particular twist to the form in *Cours sur la rive sauvage*. Early on, Radia becomes doubled by a second woman, Hellé, who appears initially as a sinister double, a rival for Iven Zohar's attention and an opponent to his eventual reconciliation with Radia. But by the end of the novel, he comes to see that she has been involved in the story from the beginning, and that even distinguishing in his story what role Radia played and what was Hellé becomes difficult. At the novel's end, Hellé is physically present with Iven Zohar while Radia is only spectral. In keeping with the bewildering nature of the novel, reading this pair has prompted many readings, many beginning from the two names. Dib often chooses, here and elsewhere, names with multiple possible resonances, sometimes modifying orthography to encourage this. Radia can be read, for instance, via Arabic as "garden," and so paradise, while Hellé is read, via English, as hell; this would correspond to how they first appear to the reader.[50] But it is maybe more helpful to read Radia, in Latinate terms, as radiance or light, while Hellé is the Greek *hylé*, taken into Arabic via translations of Greek philosophy. So while Radia is otherworldly and immaterial, the object of the Sufi's aspiration, Hellé is this-worldly and material; Iven Zohar's journey involves realizing that chasing the other-worldly necessarily involves coming to terms with the this-worldly. If we let ourselves read the novel as having autobiographical resonance, and as leading off from the wartime allegory of *Qui se souvient de la mer*, this has to do also with coming to accept events. One

50 Abdel Jaouad makes this suggestion, along with a few other possibilities. An opposite reading of Hellé is possible as an anagram of Elleh, God.

critic has pointed out political resonances in details of the first scenes of *Cours sur la rive sauvage*, seeing Radia as a symbol of the nation being abducted away from Iven Zohar by men in uniforms.[51] Although a less direct connection, the very first scene, as the two ride a trolley towards their marriage, strongly resembles the scene that opens the short story "La nuit sauvage," where the couple are Algerian militants on their way to deposit a bomb.[52] This invites us, I think, to read the novel along multiple lines simultaneously. This is not to say that the novel is a political allegory, but it begins from the same point where *Qui se souvient de la mer* ends, and its spiritual quest is on one level a response to the challenges of uprooting, exile, and disappointment. Along these lines, the trajectory of *Cours sur la rive sauvage* involves moving from the pure hopes of political struggle, through their disappointment, to a reconciliation with the world of exile that still maintains a connection to radiant hopes. Dib follows the Sufi trajectory towards self and world dissolution, but insists on a return back to the world of things. This figures a psychological challenge that Dib cycles around again and again: how to find a way of existing that can see and oppose the suffering of the world without turning away from it, learning to live in the present, whether or not that particular stage was the one desired, without needing to move away into fictions.

Dib uses the model of the *récit initiatoire* several other times, though never as explicitly. *Les terraces d'Orsol* uses a quest narrative and is centrally concerned with the quest for, and loss of, self. This narrative form also structures scenes or sub-stories, sometimes in unexpected ways: for example, the nighttime attempt by Arfia's guerrilla patrol to reach a safe post by dawn in *La danse du roi* takes on resonances of a quest narrative as they move through the night, guided by the shadow of a mountain peak that seems to remain distant despite their advances. In *Habel*, it provides one of several sub-texts, along with the story of Abel and Cain and the Majnūn-Leila cycle. The novel's complicated time-code revolves around a series of nights where the young immigrant Habel returns to the Parisian square where he had narrowly avoided being struck and killed by a car. Each night, Habel sits and waits, waiting for an exit from the "station" where he finds himself, the impasse of his life. His exit from this comes through his relation to Éric Mérrain,

51 Unfortunately, I haven't been able to re-locate this article.

52 "La nuit sauvage," although anthologized in the 1995 collection of the same name, was originally published in 1963. The first and second version have significant differences; on these, see Stafford and Kessous, "Littérature postcoloniale et corrosion politique: La troisième voix dans deux versions d'une nouvelle de Mohammed Dib," in *Littératures francophones et politiques* (Paris: Karthala, 2009): 163-178.

alias La Dame de la Merci, a writer, drag queen, and figure in an elite Parisian art scene, through a friendship and seduction that is given explicit Sufi resonances. But if Mérrain serves as Habel's *shaykh*, and as a model of masculinity more honest than the domineering one Habel receives from his brother, he is also a figure of despair, and of a life so caught up in words that it can't survive without them. In the novel's complicated play between high and popular culture, Maghrebin and French, and psychoanalytic and mystical images of thought, it is Habel's passivity, which makes him "like a corpse in the hands of its washer" before his *shaykh*, to cite familiar Sufi advice, that carries him through. Morally ambiguous, the narrative of *Habel* is a fragmented biography, a study of how a life whose mute exterior contains a flood of disparate text can come to relate to the world outside it. Bonn writes that Habel "est une voix silencieuse et pourtant proliférante, protéiforme. Sujet quasi silencieux de tout le roman, Habel n'en est pas moins tout entier parole, voix multiples dont il emplit ce roman."[53] These voices pour out not in action but in contemplation, as words, images and concepts blur together. The most striking example is when, while sitting in a café speaking with his friend and lover Sabine, Habel's mind wanders to the water of the Seine outside the window:

> Tout est descendu dans le même courant, un courant qui ne peut venir que de loin lui aussi, qui avance depuis longtemps, comme cette eau, et arrive peut-être de plus loin encore pour traverser sa vie. Un courant, une eau qui n'arrive, ne traverse sa vie que pour reculer et revenir, arrivant sans arriver, traversant sans traverser, et recommençant.
> C'est bien ça. Une eau qui coule sans en avoir l'air, sans bouger, en dessous, eau gardant toute sa tranquillité. Mais pour vous changer une vie, il s'en faut d'un remous, d'un retour sur elle-même, de cette liquidité, aussi anodine, innocente qu'elle se montre, demeure et continue à passer.[54]

This moment is a psychological defense, the effect of a repression, a way of avoiding issues he'd rather not discuss; but his passivity and disengagement are also assets, opening him to the possibility of a change. His contemplative detachment has the value of the imaginary world of Pandolfo's patient, both an asset and a danger. The narrator of *Qui se souvient de la mer* shows a similar tension: his surreal and fantastic world can be read, as Louis Tremaine does, as a kind of psychic deformity resulting from an inability to process his surroundings mentally, a sign to Tremaine of his immaturity, especially in relation to his wife who is actively engaged in resistance

53 Bonn, *Lecture présent de Mohammed Dib*.
54 Dib, *Habel*, 78.

and clearer-minded.[55] But this detachment is also what allows him to live through the war without giving up or despairing, to continue searching for meaning and involvement. Rather than either laudable or pathological, the contemplative stance is a way of relating self and world, one as open to moral ambiguity as any other.

The contemplative stance is an aesthetic attitude as much as a psychological one, and aesthetic that Dib often links to the patterns and rhythms of North African decorative art, and particularly to the Turkish-Andalusian cultural background of a Tlemcen high society displaced and ruined by French colonization and displacement. In the short story “Tandis que les oiseaux,” a weaver meets with his boss in the courtyard of the boss' traditional upper-class house. The blue-and-white painted tiles and the gleams of water off the central fountain, mentioned repeatedly in a story only a few pages long, summon up a feeling not far from the one Dib's questing characters run after:

> Le bruit de l'eau tombant du bassin se remet à couler entre eux. La même sensation de paix s'empare de Ghosli, chaque instant se confond avec tous les autres, acquiert un poids d'éternité tel que le temps, comme résorbé à la fin, se retire du monde. Ne flotte plus que la présence muette de ce matin d'été entre les choses.[56]

These sensations, beyond time and concerns of temporal flow, point to an aesthetic more concerned with “knowledge by presence” than conceptual representations, an aesthetic that in other places is exemplified the latticework and geometrical decorations favoured in architecture and decorative art. Many of Dib's contemplative or questing narrators, including the narrator of one of Dib's first short stories, “Le héritier enchanté,” Djamal Terraz from *Un été africain*, who becomes the narrator of *Qui se souvient de la mer*, Rodwan in *La danse du roi*, and Kamel Waëd in *Dieu en barbarie* are all products of the remains of a Tlemcen aristocracy. Naget Khadda writes of Djamal Terraz:

> Héritier désargenté et désenchanté, Djamal Terraz, jeune chômeur intelligent et sensible de l'aristocratie ruinée, cultive, avec nonchalance, inconstance et une certaine culpabilité une mystérieuse interrogation sur le monde, instaurant une indéfinissable quête du salut. [...] Son rêve d'une humanité réconciliée le sauve de la médiocrité et de la négativité qui dominent son caractère. S'il s'abandonne à l'échec, à une aboulie qui l'enferme dans un individualisme morbide, il n'en est pas moins traversé de fulgurants désirs de pureté et de rédemption.[57]

55 See Tremaine, “Psychic Deformity in Mohammed Dib's *Qui se souvient de la mer.*”
56 Dib, *Le talisman*, 13.
57 Khadda, *Mohammed Dib: cette intempestive voix récluse*, 46-47.

The quest for reconciliation resonates with a contemplative aesthetics, where the body and self seek an attunement, an adjustment to external order, more than knowledge of an object. That this aesthetics is not necessarily a liberatory or moral force is most obvious in “Tandis que les oiseaux,” where the boss, fearing post-independence changes, drags himself away from his peaceful courtyard to burn down the weaving studio. But a contemplative sense, where fixation on a form or pattern opens into an endless stream of sensation or thought, is both the starting point for many of Dib's characters' journeys and a reference point for Dib's own poetics.

*Signs and visible writing*

A aesthetics of contemplation ends up more concerned with the way that thought or consciousness moves than with the objects that they fix onto, which arise from each particular contemplation rather than from the aesthetic object. In a set of comments on Moroccan carpets, Abdelkebir Khatibi sketches out an aesthetic based not in providing signs with clear referents but in provoking a movement from sign to sign, involving both a searching for resemblance and a free association divorced from its initial referent:

> Au spectateur, au regardant, le tapis offre un moment d'identité a-temporelle.
> Peu à peu l'espace s'anime dans la ressemblance: mosaïque ou broderie.
> Qu'importe ce que le tapis rappelle à la mémoire!
> C'est ce déplacement de signe en signe, c'est ce mouvement, ce rythme qui
> provoque notre enchantement.
> Ainsi vibre la troisième dimension.
> Bel équilibre et gaieté de coloris qui nous forcent à rêver,
> et peut-être à mieux penser.[58]

Valérie Gonzalez has attempted a more general version of this aesthetic that prioritizes motion over figuration in her reading of one of the classic exemplars of Andalusian art, the Comares dome of the Alhambra in Granada. She quotes Ibn Rushd (Averroes) on a connection between the cogitative and imaginative faculties, and suggests that the geometric designs of the dome, and, for her, Islamic geometric art in general, function to trigger cogitative activity rather than to convey a representation of existence or the cosmos:

> While contemplating (or using) the architectural configuration, the viewer's sight perceives nothing defined *a priori*, but in return receives multiple visual suggestive signs. These signs are, unlike those forming a direct representation, a nondirective appeal or, rather, a pluri-directional appeal, so that instead of following determined

58 Khatibi, “Variations sur le tapis”, in *Oeuvres Complètes, Tome 3: Essais* (Paris: la Différence, ,2008): 246.

> and univocal rules of understanding the building, one interprets it *a fortiori*, i.e. one interprets the interplay of the formal and textual cognitions received from it, in accordance with one's own imaginative and cognitive disposition.[59]

In contemplating the stunning geometry of the dome, no particular meanings are transmitted, but the conditions for meaning to arise are established. In this way, a contemplative passivity becomes productive; the object initiates the search for signs without providing them itself. While Gonzalez' interpretation is speculative and certainly not authoritative, like Khatibi's remarks it has the merit of proposing an aesthetics that is applicable to contemporary as well as historical experience. As a mechanism for producing signs and movement between them, rather than a representation (as in the reading of the Alhambra dome as a model of a medieval cosmology), the artwork is operative whatever store of signs its viewers may bring to it.

Khatibi's aesthetic of signs is in conversation with the French semioticians of his generation (Barthes wrote, "nous nous intéressons aux mêmes choses: aux images, aux signes, aux traces, aux lettres, aux marques").[60] But it also gestures towards a grounding in Islamic thought. A Qur'anic verse that Dib quotes at the beginning of "Karma," a short story from his last collection, reads "*je ferais lever mes signes à l'horizon.*"[61] The remainder of the verse, which Dib does not cite, reads "and in their souls" (or "in themselves"). Signs, *ayāt*, is also the word used for the smaller sections into which each s*uraḥ* is divided; Qur'an 3:7 states that some of these have clear meaning and others are ambiguous. The natural world, too, is repeatedly designated as a source of signs; some examples include:

> Among His wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your languages and colours. In these are signs for mankind. (30:22)
>
> Among His wonders is that He displays the lightning to you, causing both fear and hope, and sends down from the heavens water wherewith He revives the earth after its death. In these are signs for a people who understand. (30:24)
>
> Have they not observed the birds, made subservient in the sphere of the sky, whom only God can control? In this are signs for a people of faith. (16:79)[62]

Such signs, in nature, within humans, and in the book, call for study and interpretation, interpolating a people for this task. The omnipresence of signs suggests a continuity between the

59 Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2001): 63-64.
60 Barthes, "Exergue" to Khatibi, *op. cit.*, 7.
61 See "Karma," in *Comme une bruit d'abeilles*, 227. The Qur'anic passage is 41:53.
62 Translations are from *The Qur'an*, translated by Tarif Khalidi (New York: Penguin, 2008).

different registers, textual, psychological, and natural, one that, in the account of the 9th/3rd century polymath al-Ṭabarī, was ultimately rooted in text:

> Or la première chose que Dieu créa fut le roseau (*qalâm*), et tout ce qu'il voulut créer, il dit au roseau de l'écrire. Ensuite, lorsque le roseau se fut mis à écrire, Dieu créa les cieux, les terres, le soleil, la lune et les astres, et alors la sphère céleste commença à tourner.[63]

The sense of a writing that goes out and actualizes itself in the world finds an echo in the omnipresence of script in Islamic decorative arts; text, in a wild variety of scripts and twisted into various shapes, becomes decoration or architecture, or gives structure to figurative painting.[64] Whether grounded in the story of divine writing or the intertwining of sensory and intellectual faculties, writing as visual or sensory structuring and writing as the source of names and meanings run back to the same source. We've noted Dib's interest in physical traces as marks of writing. The idea of reading a physical place becomes, in the section "Les Pouvoirs" from Dib's poetry collection *Formulaires*, a delirious chain of meanings, carried by messengers, ants, stars, or here by mutating and acting words:

> le mot des mots dont chacun se change en son voisin monte sur les épaules de son frère et vous construit des villes vous compose des vies vous offre à lire des livres qui commencent par la fin que vous reprendrez mélangerez jetterez au sol pour qu'il vous parle par des oracles[65]

Far from the tranquil and faithful understanding the Qur'an might seem to suggest to those who follow the marks left for them, chasing after these shifting signs can be maddening. The short story "La dalle écrite" from *Le talisman*, a story that Jean Pélégri said "me semble exprimer, sous forme codée, tout l'Art poétique de Dib," presents a narrator who obsesses over a fragment of a funerary stele embedded in a wall built out of bits of stone and debris.[66] The inscription on it is fragmentary, eroded, and mixed in with traces of dampness. When he sets himself to interpret it, the marks move around much like the chains of words in "les pouvoirs":

> Je remonte alors jusqu'à la première lettre et la soumets à l'épreuve d'une étude sévère. Du coup, ses voisines se parent d'une graphie incertaine, fantaisiste, qui se prête à plusieurs interprétations, différentes à en avoir l'air contradictoires! Sous

63 Ṭabarī, *Ṭarīkh* I.1.3, cited in Ayada, *L'islam des théophanies* (Paris: Éditions CNRS, 2001): 240.

64 Khatibi and Sijilmasi, *L'art calligraphique de l'Islam* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), provides an impressive range of transformations of script on paper; for the use of script in architecture and everyday objects. Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) also offers many examples.

65 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes Vol I: Poésie*, 89.

66 Pélégri, "Le messager et l'intercesseur," 13.

> mes yeux, de faux vocables se forment et prolifèrent dans ce conglomérat de lettres et de signes que l'érosion a découpés et isolés arbitrairement à l'intérieur de mots authentiques, eux, mais estompés, troublés.[67]

At one point he thinks that he can make out the beginnings of a Qur'anic passage, "*Nous avons proposé le dépôt de nos secrets aux cieux, à la terre et aux montagnes. Tous ont refusé de l'assumer, tous ont tremblé de le recevoir. Mais l'homme accepta de s'en charger. C'est un violent et un inconscient.*"[68] But when he looks back he's no longer even able to make out the beginning of that phrase. By the end of the story he's become separated from the humans around him, trapped in a time separated from the time of the world, plunging completely in the quest to find one meaning to start from:

> O abîme sans fond des significations: un mot, que je réussisse à épeler un seul mot! Il englobera tous les autres et leur redonnera à tous naissance! Je serai alors sauvé! Mais je suis pris d'effroi à la pensée que...
> Non, je ne veux pas me plonger dans ce délire; je vais découvrir le premier mot. *Le premier!...*[69]

The story gives a gloss of the Qu'ranic citation: the deposit of secrets with humanity, which the natural world was wise enough to pass on, leads into a desperate search to find secrets behind everything. This search opens onto a bottomless pit, that of meaning and also of the violent and ignorant retreat into a solipsism that demands to unearth secrets. The confrontation with the bottomlessness of meaning is, according to Charles Bonn, at the root of Dib's project of writing. Bonn has consistently argued, based on careful readings and a deep affection for Dib's work, that the main subject of Dib's writing, throughout his career, is writing itself. In Bonn's reading, Dib is concerned with the powers and particularly the limits of language, its ultimate failure to signify anything but itself. The quests in Dib's novels – *Cours sur la rive sauvage* or *Habel*, but also the political project in *Le maître de chasse* and even *L'Incendie* – are ultimately failed projects, running up against silence as a wall that no language can break down. On this basis, Bonn argues against what he calls "mystical" readings of Dib's writing:

> La tentation est grande, et plusieurs y ont cédé, de donner une interprétation mystique à cette quête initiatique qui sous-tend toujours à des degrés divers les romans de Dib. Or il me semble au contraire qu'il convient davantage d'y lire une sorte de représentation désertique de l'absence de signification [...] précisément, le dépouillement initiatique le plus abouti n'est-il pas dans l'acceptation du fait qu'il n'y a pas de sens au bout de cette quête? Dans l'acceptation donc, que non

67 Dib, *Le talisman*, 41.
68 ibid, 45-46.
69 Dib, *Le talisman*, 48.

> seulement cette quête exige du quêteur un abandon total de tout ce qui le raccroche à l'humain, mais qu'elle exige aussi l'abandon de l'illusion même d'un sens à trouver, illusion trop humaine encore d'un but ultime.[70]

If the quest for meaning opens onto an abyss, the relation to language ceases to be about a firm meaning that language leads to but instead becomes about language's own presence; the loss of language's transparence "invite son lecteur, non tant à la *traverser* pour appréhender un signifié extérieur à elle, qu'à *l'habiter* pour en saisir l'origine, l'être même."[71] The call to inhabit language is certainly descriptive of Dib's practice. And it is true that in the many places that Dib draws on "mystical" tradition, he saps it of any definite end or absolute value. Trance writing and dream give no guarantee of truth, and the quest leads to an ambiguous point or even a rejection of itself. But I am not sure that reading Dib's language as opening onto a void captures the full picture. The void of meaninglessness is not necessarily so different from the absolute sun of meaning, even though it takes on existentialist rather than mystical garb. Either case voids or empties out the world of experience. Although Dib's writing leads to breakdown, gap, and silence, his fascination with the figures of writing stretching out into the world and so on shows another endpoint – the disappearance of writing into physical traces. To see the inability of writing to hold its own signification, to contain its own meaning or answer, as leading only to a void or silence is to read only half the story, and to maintain the initial separation that kept writing, and meaning, apart from other things. An aesthetic of textuality, where script and world become continuous, hints at another limit to language. Oleg Grabar, in an essay on the omnipresence of writing in Islamic arts after the 10$^{th}$ century, suggests following Derrida's study in *De la grammatologie* in seeing writing itself, divorced from any signification, as already signifying.[72] This lets Grabar see writing as playing what he calls a "mediating" function – not giving art its meaning, but creating the framework in which art can come to carry beauty, or pleasure. Writing, doubly removed from its signified, creates a space in which meanings can play, in which life can be lived in a way that resembles writing – a space which, at least in elite culture, could extend from the architectural environment to the most mundane objects of dress or use. Here writing itself takes part in an aesthetics based on contemplative productivity rather than representational signification:

70 Bonn, "La steppe, le désert, la neige: fonctions de l'absence," in Khadda, ed., *Mohammed Dib: 50 ans d'écriture* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 2002): 287-288.

71 Bonn, "Les pouvoirs du langage," in *Itineraires et contacts de cultures*, 21-22 (1995): 159.

72 Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992)

> Writings also signified another reality than that of the words and thoughts they represent. They also signify sensory pleasure in the expression of everything. They argue that the perception of everything, even if twice removed from its source in the mind or in the collective memory and mode of action of a society—what Foucault called its *epistemé*—can be immediate, powerful, perhaps even pedagogic by being transformed for the pleasure of the senses. At this level, writing has become art.[73]

This generalized space of writing extends well beyond the book; Derrida took this point further, showing that the very attempts to divide between cultures of the book and cultures imagined to be without writing breaks down, since any system that connects meaning to signs, however those signs reach the senses, has already entered into the endless deferrals that writing actualizes. Once writing is accepted as a framework for understanding life and meaning, it extends down to the most basic gestures of thought, and outwards to largest recognizable forms.[74] Within North African space, the omnipresence of writing and writing-like signs was not limited to urban elite forms or even to Arabic, but is found, for instance, in Kabyle decorative arts or in Touareg art from the Sahara. Coming into interaction with indigenous forms of art that were sign-based and non-representational, Islamic art in the Maghreb came the closest to the caricature of an iconophobic art, with figurative art only entering via an imitation of Turkish miniatures in the project of constructing a proto-nationalist past.[75] All of this figures into the background of Dib's writing. His work tries to bring some of this extended sense of writing into the form where the clearest demarcation between the world of the novel and its outside had been established. In the process, he separates it from a foundation in a sacred word and opens it up to endless chains of signification. In a segment from one of the "Parabase" sequences, prose poems set between the small collections that make up *Omneros*, the graphic activity of writing is a voyage and the opening of a space for an ever-changing sign:

> *un pas dans le dessein et tout l'espace est franchi il n'y a plus d'espace il y a seulement le chemin que tu graves et il faut aller dans cette périphrase calligraphe chercher dans l'écriture qui t'écrit et cherche mais*
> *plus ta persévérance dans le dessin la somme de se dévoiler la presse de questions la sonde la scrute et*

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73 ibid., 113.

74 The deconstruction of the distinction between cultures "with" and "without" writing is central to *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chaktravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976). For "basic gestures of thought," see Derrida,"Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

75 On the adoption of miniature painting in the nationalist movement, see Mohammed Khadda's study of Mohammed Racim in *Feuillets Épars Liés: essais sur l'art* (Algiers: SNED, 1983).

*plus elle approfondit son mystère et c'est tout ce qui importe ce mystère*
*là est sa patrie un pays dont on se sait encore que le signe chaque jour variable une gerbe d'augures un faisceau de présomptions*[76]

Perhaps a better reference point for Dib's own work than the elite forms of decoration is talismanic writing. Talismans, strips or pages of writing often involving repetition of geometric arrangement, are designed to go out into the world quite literally, worn in an amulet or dissolved in water that is then drunk. Here the text itself is not even meant to be seen – written by the *ṭalib* and passed on to a client, it immediately becomes a physical object. The power or function of writing is entirely divorced from its meaning, or at least its meaning is able to be taken for granted. The shifting words and letters of *Formulaires* hint at talismanic writing, which Dib refers to specifically in the title story from *Le talisman*. This story concerns a man who, after death, returns to his village, razed by French troops. On site, he relives the experience of seeing his family and neighbours rounded up and executed in retaliation for their support of anticolonial fighters. When his turn comes to face execution, he closes his eyes and is confronted by the shapes moving in his field of vision:

> J'interrogeais, sur le voile rouge de mes paupières, des signes, des paraphes, des marques qui flambaient, tremblaient, dansaient. Dessiné à traits de feu, chaque symbole apparaissait, d'abord inachevé, avec des vides de place en place, puis se précisait. Des formes annelées ne tardèrent pas ainsi à s'articuler en une ligne enroulée sur elle-même à l'intérieur d'un carré aux côtés invisibles.[77]

He tries to understand these signs, and then finally realizes their origin: as a child, he had scratched incomprehensible "words" onto stones, leaves, wood, or bones, and then left them, hoping that each one would become a talisman for whoever came upon them. What he was seeing against his eyelids was the most powerful of these. Realizing that it was this that he saw against his eyes suddenly released him from the burden of chasing after meaning:

> L'interprétation de l'écriture n'était plus indispensable. Ce point, acquis, me procura la paix. Puis un vertige de certitude me prit: je partageais la bénédiction et la joie des êtres protégés! [...] Jadis, je composais mes talismans sans jamais penser à moi. Et voici que je m'étais adressé par-delà toute mémoire le plus souverain d'entre eux![78]

The meaning of the writing is no longer essential; what matters is that the writing is there, that

76 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes, Tome I: Poésies*, 105.
77 Dib, *Le talisman*, 119.
78 ibid, 121.

some form of meaning is available, linking times without giving itself up to be fully grasped and without being trapped in the temporal sequence of intended cause and effect or even of memory. This talisman, an impersonal gift that somehow returns to its sender, is what carries this narrator through execution and back to his village in a new kind of waiting: not for the revelation of absolute meaning, but for the return of those who will once again inhabit this destroyed place. Despite the advance of horror and destruction, the narrator's childhood actions have become part of life and testify to a durability, beyond any predictable cycles of return or logic of emergence, of the activities of interpreting and adding to the world. Along with this comes a realization of human existence as itself a kind of talismanic writing:

> Une homme est, de même, forme et expression, graphie tracée sur la matière illimitée, vocable indifférencié de ce qui est. Je suis donc fait à l'image des inscriptions qu'enfant je projetais sur mes palets d'os, de pierre, de bois, de fer, probablement même à l'image d'un seul de leurs mots, d'une seule de leurs lettres. Je suis calligraphié sur le tissu de ce qui est...[79]

If life itself is calligraphed, caught between visible form and invisible meaning, then human existence sits between two silences – the silence of the abyss of meaning, and the silence of the mute signs of nature. Here Dib shares much with North African visual artists of his generation. In what Jean Sénac dubbed "the school of the sign," painters and sculptors consciously drew on a tradition of sign-making that goes back at least to the rock paintings of Tassili n Ajjer in the Sahara. This work could be easily put in contact with the trends of abstract painting, in Europe but also in East Asia or in Africa, while retaining a local rooting. Artists manipulated script, created new signs, or isolated letters separating them from their meanings. The most helpful parallel to Dib I have found is his friend, Mohammad Khadda. Khadda's paintings are mostly landscapes, suggestions of cities, trees, vegetation, sometimes figures. At the same time, they resemble writing – the writing either superimposed on, but not separable, from the image, or indeterminately the contours of the image itself. But Khadda refrained from using recognizable characters, Arabic, Tifnagh, or other, instead tracing his own letter-like shapes. This keeps, as he was well aware, his work from being read through the various identity paradigms – religious, Arab nationalist, Berberist – that shaped the Algerian political scene, but it also establishes a kind of grammatology divorced from signification. Reading at once as place and writing, it gently raises the question of meaning, a question answered neither by pure abstraction or by

79 ibid., 121-122.

representation. The idea of the human as calligraphed into existence, a writing stretching from the soul to the horizon, opens up the chance to think of the void of language and the materiality of language together. Writing, human writing, cannot reach either; but the act of writing becomes a journey, through thought, feeling, and imagination, towards both: the unknowable core of subjectivity and the unknowable complexities of the world. The error would be to try to separate the two.

The techniques examined in this chapter each show the intertwining of the most private interior experience and the physicality of the outside world. This intertwining occurs in and through the imagination; writing becomes a tool to invite others to recreate imaginative space, different for each but tied to a shared world of physical spaces and inherited symbols. Spontaneous creation, appearing to its creator as a surprise or something foreign, is nonetheless deeply shaped by the specific world, physical and cultural, of its creator; narrative fragmentation and sudden movements may not be so much attacks on the idea of a continuous or coherent world as on the idea of an unchanging mode of experiencing it; and an aesthetics of contemplation highlights that every thought and every mode of psychological interiority becomes tied to a movement through a sensible world. These elements may be responses against a certain European model of literary construction, but, more importantly, they also play out insights that long predated the realist novel. Dib's "soufialisme," drawing on the past and acting on its present, performs the way in which different literary forms, adapting or interrupting each other, amount to so many ways of navigating a world of experience that in each moment spans between interior and exterior, feeling and thought, and certainty and surprise, weaving the invisible into a text that, on each reading, is projected back into the unseen.

## 1.4 : The world's appearing: consciousness, landscape, object

While the last two chapters took an interest in literary history across several centuries, this one is interested in something that on the surface involves a much shorter time-scale: the emergence, for each of us, of a relation between a self and a world out of an undifferentiated stream of perception. Not only the things of the world but also the observing self emerge from a field of sensation that writing can approach but never capture, a world whose fluid and changing nature keeps it always just out of reach of capture in images. Writing, even where it engages in play with words or abstractions of meaning, relies on the sensory, through the temporal process of understanding and the imagination's capacity for creating sensory information, as a site where it creates its effects. Situating itself in a relation between a perceiving point and a surrounding world, Dib's writing often works to rearrange the way that this relation is thought in an attempt to bring visibility not only to sights but to sight itself.

Beginning from a distinction between vision as a dynamic process and visual images as frozen approximations of it, the chapter moves through a series of ways of approaching the relation of self and world: as landscape and figure, as things approaching a point of perception, or as the gradual imposition of a network of names and relations over a wilder childhood experience. In each case, Dib's writing attempts to maintain the dynamism of the relation, by pointing towards what escapes the frame of the visual. Here, more so than in the previous chapters, the visual is understood in its most evident perceptual sense, and the framework of reference is the twentieth century, particularly phenomenological thought and ideas of a poetics aimed at materiality. But once again, the position of writing as moving between the visible and invisible means that it is more able to pose the question of what it means to live in the world of experience than to provide us with a dependable picture of that world.

*The Life and Death of Images*

"Ce qui est sûr", Dib wrote in a text that accompanied a 1996 showing of photographs he'd taken in Tlemcen in 1946, "c'est que je suis un visuel, un oeil. Cela ressort dans mes écrits et quel que soit le genre d'écrit: poème, roman, nouvelle."[1] The visuality of Dib's writing shows itself not

1 Dib, *L'Arbre à dires*, 111.

only in a predilection for constructing images, whether the description of physical settings in the novels or the surreal and hybrid landscapes or symbols in his poetry, but also in an attention to the process of seeing, the way the visibility emerges from an indistinct field of sensation. Visible things are not just there to be grasped or manipulated by their observers; they also seize us, call on us to respond, turning a point of perception into a subject inhabiting a world and turning receptivity into specific relations. “L'homme en proie aux images” is the title of a brief text on photography, which includes a reprint of Dib's notes from the 1996 exhibition. This text introduces the “Californian clichés” section of *L'Arbre à dires*, a set of memory “snapshots” from the year Dib spent as a visiting scholar at UCLA in 1973-1974. In his comments, Dib comes down hard on the way that photography immobilizes the dynamics of the moment, freezing the play of relations as it turns forces into images:

> La photographie capte l'instant et le fixe pour l'éternité. Là est le drame: elle assèche le temps, qui est expression de vie. Elle tarit tout ce qui, flux, s'écoule, passe, doit s'écouler, passer – et dès lors ne va plus s'écouler, passer.
>
> Saisi par l'objectif et, ainsi, ravi au temps, ce monde au tours changeant, ondoyant, incertain qui est le nôtre, en demeure interdit, figé dans son objectivité [...]
>
> Pourtant, ni l'image qui me représente n'est moi, ni celle qui m'offre le spectacle de la nature n'est la nature [...] Sidérant les forces qui concourent à nous faire être, elles pétrifient de surcroît l'obscur travail de la mémoire comme celui de la psyché.[2]

Fixing images into objects, far from giving us access to ourselves and our world, gives us instead lifeless versions of them, and in promising immediate recognition it proposes to bypass the work of the mind and of memory through which we come to understand the world and ourselves within it. Susan Sontag observed that “to photograph is to appropriate the object photographed,” setting a relation with the world that “feels like” knowledge and like power. Dib identifies this power as the ability to step outside the bounds of ordinary human experience, particularly the constraints of time.[3] The photographic images offer a power to interact with the world outside of the normal constraints of experience, to grasp knowledge of something from a distance; this, along with the capacity of images to outlive the people they represent – a variant of the more basic fact that they preserve an image or a state of affairs that is, in the moment of viewing, now no longer – makes Dib characterize photographs as “fetishes”:

2 ibid, 107
3 Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1977): 4.

> Qu'est-ce qu'un fétiche? Un objet qui, avec ses propriétés spécifiques, cumule celle d'entretenir des rapports avec des puissances occultes, un univers de secrets et de mort, dont il devient le signe et le suppôt. Nul doute que cette définition ne s'applique à la photographie et nul doute que celle-ci ne réveille l'instinct fétichiste de l'homme, ne réponde à son besoin fétichiste de détenir par elle une parcelle de ce pouvoir.[4]

The "power" that photography makes us feel is an occult power, the promise of a superhuman transcendence of death and limitation. On the one hand, then, photographs freeze, obscure, and render lifeless the flux and force of the world; on the other, they promise a secret connection to the work of those forces, a way of evading the changing flow of time. In both cases, life is understood a matter of dynamics and powers, not only of static appearances but of invisible forces that warp and change them, cause them to appear and disappear.

Writing, despite its relative lack of economy, compared to photography, in providing visual detail, seems at first to do a better job of conveying this instability of appearances. But Dib's comments, prefacing a series of verbal "snapshots," also serves as a warning against the tendency of writing to offer a kind of objectivity that, although promising control or reliability, is ultimately illusory. A writing that draws attention to vision as process as much as to the image seen can be a way to try to avoid the relation suggested by photography, which dries up lived experience while promising distant control, in favour of attention to the way images and thoughts both emerge from local constraints and surroundings. This is in keeping with phenomenological thought, which argues that the "reduction" of lived experience to its essence yields neither things nor meanings, the world nor the self, but both at once: "the openly endless life of pure consciousness," the flow of perception and thought that Husserl, borrowing from ancient Greek philosophy, would call *hyletic*, and also "the meant world, purely as meant."[5] But writing, no matter how abstract, is also caught up to some extent in the falsifying work that photography does, extending the moment by sapping it of vitality. Writing is defined, according to Jacques Derrida, by its ability to function outside of the moment of its composition, and beyond the existence of the particular living beings it is thought to be relating: it "must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the addressee or of the empirically determinable set of addressees," and "even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written […] whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support […] that very

4 Dib, *L'Arbre à dires,* 110.
5 Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 37.

thing which seems to be written 'in his name.'"[6] By its permanence, writing prolongs the relation between addressor and addressee, but it also dissolves their specificity as living, present beings, subject to change in position and opinion – as much as photography, writing has already made a pact with death. This, for Derrida, is not only an effect of official forms of writing or even of words on a page; it is rooted in language as a system of ascribing meanings that comes to people already formed. Fundamentally, the fact that humans give names to things in order to make them communicable separates us from hyletic experience and immediate life. If writing is to avoid the trap of thinking that it can present us with objects that are given to us and subject to control via our thoughts, it can do so only in reference to the flux of experience in each iteration of its reading, not to an original experience that can be reproduced, even though the writing owes its existence to that original experience. Images in the text, like photographs, obscure vision itself which, as a process, remains invisible, since once it is frozen into a fixed image it is no longer there. Death, as Blanchot had also pointed out, hovers at the edges of writing as well as of photography.

Prefacing a series of travel memories from two decades earlier with comments on the falsifying powers of photography reads as a tacit admission of the distortion performed by Dib's writing, something he revisits in a nostalgic mode towards the end of the series of "clichés" when he wonders: "Qu'est-il advenu entre-temps de tous ceux, événements, sites, visages qui, condensés en clichés pris sur le vif, perdurent, instantanés en suspens dans une mémoire?"[7] And in fact the tourist "snapshots" of "Californian clichées" are filled with Dib's own self-projections and perspectives that colour the people and places he describes, particularly in his desire to "Americanize" what he sees, a temptation that he was certainly not the only French intellectual to succumb to. This turns, for instance, a young woman's silence into an "inheritance" from her "Sioux ancestors." Somewhat paradoxically, a more directly realistic style results in a text that is in ways more obviously solipsistic, a reflection on the writer himself, than the ones written in styles that engage more overtly in formal and language play. Dib several times expressed that a documentary mode of writing was not what came most naturally to him, particularly in response to questions as to why his writing seemed to change so much after his first novels. In a 1983 interview with Eric Sellin, Dib described these early novels as having been "photographic" or

6 Derrida, "Signature Event Context", in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982): 315-316.

7 Dib, *L'arbre à dires*, 183.

documentary, written in a style borrowed to fit the demands of the moment:

> Dans mes premiers livres l'écriture est objective—c'est une écriture de constat—qui rend compte des événements; et le procédé lui-même de l'écriture est un procédé de photographie à la manière dont on filme un événement aussi grave qu'une guerre ou une catastrophe. C'est photographer dans ce sens. Et cette espèce d'écriture photographique était tout simplement empruntée à la manière occidentale d'écrire. Ce n'était pas une façon d'écrire qui m'était profondément personnelle, plus rattachée à mes antécédents culturels et psychologiques et métaphysiques; mais, comme il fallait rendre compte des événements pressés et importants en même temps, il fallait adopter cette objectivité. Il était impossible de faire autrement.
> Il m'a fallu d'abord écrire comme j'ai commencé par écrire pour pouvoir me rendre compte que ce n'était pas l'écriture qui convenait le mieux à ma personnalité, à ma sensibilité, à la sensibilité qui déborde mon état personnel et dont je fais partie.[8]

Dib did not entirely abandon a documentary style, particularly in his short stories. His enduring interest in American literature, announced early on in a brief article he wrote in 1947 on "La nouvelle dans la littérature Yankee," involved an affection for "slice-of-life" writing in fiction and poetry, something his LA memories in "Californian clichés" and the "novel in verse" *LA Trip* tried to pay tribute to. But the distinction between documentary and literary styles is not as obvious as Dib seems to depict in in the interview; of course, even *verité* filmmaking involves manipulation of what is seen, from the choice of what gets presented to the way it is framed and sequenced to what particular objects the camera lingers on. And Dib's early work, for all its ethnographic detail, is also concerned with making visible some things that do not present themselves easily to documentary reproduction: the idea of the Algerian nation, a growing sentiment of revolt, or – throughout *La grande maison* – the psychological effects of the overwhelming presence of hunger. The attention to the way that things appear, coming out of an indistinct field of sensation into clarity, is already a significant stylistic feature of these early works. *La grande maison*, whose visual palette and range of locales are mainly drab, makes extensive use of the auditory to explore the way things appear out of distinctness, or how solidarity or emotion hard to detect up close become apparent in a broader perspective. In *L'Incendie*, as the setting opens into the wider spaces of the countryside, the visual is more emphasized as a field where things and meanings move in and out of clarity and dissolution, in the description of the landscape and also in the way mythical images appear occasionally in the everyday life of the novel through the stories Omar hears from Comandar or the sudden – and unexplained – sight of

8 Sellin, "Interview accordé par Mohammed Dib," 21-22.

a white horse darting across the sky. Much of Dib's subsequent experimentation would involve the development of techniques already at work inside these books, even though they are primarily documentary works. The books draw attention to very visible miseries, and they work to bring them to the view of more people, thanks to the very thing that makes them incomplete copies of life, their freezing of dynamic life into instructive snapshots. But the books at the same time point to how much living stretches at and past the limits of what can be reproduced or reconstructed.

*Perceiving Landscape*

Dib's work abounds in evocative description of landscape; beyond serving as backdrop, the way that these descriptions come to appear, for characters or for the reader, serve as meditations on the way consciousness relates to the world around it. Consciousness exists in a world; it is not possible or even thinkable without its surroundings. This was a basic premise of phenomenology as it developed over the first half of the twentieth century. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who put physiological perception at the basis of his phenomenology, the experience of landscape opens up an intersubjective field – an awareness of the others who see and have seen this landscape – through the process of a "folding" of the self whereby the corporeal and the psychic, the body as a situated point and as on element in a larger field, occur together as the body finds itself in a world of things:

> Each landscape of my life, because it is not a wandering troop of sensations or a system of ephemeral judgements but a segment of the durable flesh of the world, is, qua visible, pregnant with many other visions besides my own [...] When I find again the actual world such as it is, under my hands, under my eyes, up against my body, I find much more than an object: a Being of which my vision is a part, a visibility older than my operations or my acts. But this does not mean that there was a fusion or coinciding of me with it: on the contrary, this occurs because a sort of dehiscence opens my body in two, and because between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things.[9]

That self and landscape overlap means that thought and perception overlap also. The self and its self-relation and relation to others occurs along with the sensuous experience of a material world; as Merleau-Ponty argued in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, even Descartes' "*cogito ergo sum,*" a gesture that abstracts thought from all contaminants, came accompanied by the sensation of the

9 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 123.

chair that supported Descartes' back, the temperature of the room he was in, and so on. Thought cannot be separated from matter because from the beginning the two are intertwined. Gaston Bachelard, the French philosopher of science who turned in his last decades to a voluminous exploration of what he called "material imagination" by studying the appearance of material images in poetry, extended this in arguing that perception of the material world is intertwined not only with conceptual thinking but with imagination. "Dreams come before contemplation," he wrote; "before becoming a conscious sight, every landscape is an oneiric experience."[10] The interaction of consciousness with its surroundings is not only one of identifying or naming; it also involves memory, unconscious linkages, or the provocation of movements of thought by perceived physical movements. To Bachelard, "le psychisme humain se formule primitivement en images," and these images involve their own doubled folding, a "double reality": "une réalité psychique et une réalité physique."[11] Images are at once impressions of the exterior world and creations of the mind, and landscape, the place in which I find myself, presently or in memory, is at once physical and imagined. Rather than making the world less real, doubling it with an unreal copy, this is meant to be read as asserting that the distinction between imagining subject and material is reality is actually a flexible connection, malleable but never broken or escaped from. To Bachelard, the recurrence of similar treatments of material elements in different poets is witness to not only the transmission of language but to basic patterns shared in the experience of the characteristics and dynamics of the natural world.

Some critics have used Bachelard's analyses of particular natural phenomena to interpret Dib's writing, but it's not necessary to adhere to Bachelard's particular interpretations − drawn primarily from 19th and early 20th century French poetry − to see in Dib a treatment of landscape with affinity to both Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard's frameworks. A section from *Tlemcen ou les lieux de l'écriture*, which, as its title suggests, is largely concerned with the effect of place, especially remembered places, on writing, gives Dib's own extensive reflections on the mutual constitution of self and environment in the experience of landscape:

> Au commencement est le *paysage*, − s'entend comme cadre où l'être vient à la vie, puis à la conscience.
> A la fin aussi.
> Et de même, dans l'entre-deux.

10 Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute for Humanities, 1999): 4.

11 Gaston Bachelard, *La terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (Paris: José Corti, 1948): 5.

> Avant que la conscience n'ouvre les yeux sur le paysage, déjà sa relation avec lui est établie. Elle a déjà fait maintes découvertes et s'en est nourrie.
> Les yeux grands ouverts ensuite, elle continuera. Secret travail d'identification et d'assimilation où conscience et paysage se renvoient leur image, où, s'élaborant, la relation ne cesse de se modifier, de s'enrichir, où le dehors s'introvertit en dedans pour devenir objet de l'imaginaire, substrat de la référence, orée de la nostalgie.
> D'abord, entre mon horizon et moi, le partage n'est pas fait. Lui et moi ne savons pas encore qui est l'autre. Puis nous le savons. Et dans le recul pris, le paysage, identique dans sa pérennité, s'érige en témoin des origines. [...]
> J'aurais peut-être dû me demander à ce moment-là: «Suis-je mon paysage?» Pour ne l'avoir pas posée, je n'ai jamais reçu de réponse à cette question. En aurais-je même reçu une? et qu'en aurais-je fait? Je vais jusqu'à penser qu'elle ne m'aurait pas servi à grand-chose. Bien plus: il me semble qu'on n'a aucun intérêt à se poser une telle question. Le paysage, lui, quelque nom qu'il lui importe de prendre, se demanderait-il jamais: «Suis-je Untel?»?[12]

In Dib's version here, life comes to space before consciousness, in a field where self and landscape are not differentiated; consciousness develops through a sharing of images back and forth between landscape and self. This process accounts for the development of an awareness in relation with its world, and also for the seizing of the imagination by particular landscapes which become recurrent reference points and material for thought and memory. This is an important part of Dib's writing, where the same or similar locales reappear across decades, testaments to the particularity of Dib's imagination and also to the landscapes that formed it. The precise separation of what belongs to the landscape and what to the individual, Dib suggests, only matters to one side of the relationship, for consciousness. For that field of life where landscape and self interpenetrate, separating out identities is not an issue. By accepting the overlap, the mutual constitution, this experience of landscape that englobes perception, memory, and imagination can be seen as a source of self, and of the thoughts and images it puts into play and into words. Rather than forming two separate and stable entities, landscape and observer are involved together in a process of unfolding over time.

Writing, which here would include spoken verbal art, has a particular ability to stage this emergence in time, to control the process by which a landscape becomes a landscape for the viewer (in this respect, many of the issues of visual representation in film were prefigured, long before its emergence, in poetry). The way landscape emerges in writing affects not just the visual material of the imagination, but also puts the reader in a temporal unfolding, as the order and the

12 Dib, *Tlemcen ou les lieux de l'écriture*, 43-44.

pace with which different aspects become clear create tensions and affect. This temporal unfolding may allow space for thoughts to play out, or it may undermine thoughts in favour of sensation; a back and forth movement between thought and sensation is an important matrix for Dib's poetics. Dib's frequent practice of having landscape appear out of indistinction, glare or cloud sets up a connection where the self is situated directly in the world of things, and where clarity, flow, and development of thought is connected to the ebb and flow of visibility. Particularly since Dib's writing mostly avoids interior monologues and other verbal depictions of unvoiced thought processes, the description of the visual does work to establish mood and to convey the states of the characters. Take, as one example from relatively early in Dib's career, this passage from *Un été africain*:

> Point noir au milieu de la campagne incandescente, le Grison portant son maître trotte mais ne paraît pas avancer. Peu après avoir quitté Selka, Marhoum a pris le chemin du retour. Il est près de midi. L'air sent le roussi; des fleuves indolents de chaleur roulent sur les terres alourdies de sommeil. La vie qu'avait réveillée la fraîcheur du matin ne continue plus qu'à contrecoeur. Le ciel déborde d'une lumière blanche et trouble.
> Indifférent à l'haleine de fournaise que souffle la plaine, Marhoum, le dos rond, somnole sur sa bête. A vrai dire, un travail intense, difficule à traduire en clair, s'accomplit en lui.[13]

The basic image here offers little to see: the landscape is a field of brightness, the only distinctive mark in it the character Marhoum and his donkey. The blinding sun runs throughout this novel, scattering characteristics – here a troubled light, a threatening breath – that seem to demand a response or to promise action, but that can only be met by waiting or finding pockets of disappearing shade. The atmosphere of waiting, staring at a scene that is indistinct but physically, sometimes painfully present, waiting for clarity to emerge is also the social and political atmosphere of the novel, set against a war (the Algerian War of Independence) that is always there as a more or less imposing background and whose outcomes remain to be seen. Here the scene, the black dot advancing imperceptibly, the day already exhausted before reaching its zenith, despite its distant vantage point also presents the movement of Marhoum's thinking as he tries to process his situation: his oldest son has joined the resistance, he's become a clandestine judge in his village, part of a parallel system designed to replace and undermine the colonial tribunal, and responsible for various duties of distribution. In the scene, Dib moves back and

13 Dib, *Un été africain*, 37.

forth between description of the landscape and describing Marhoum's situation; the work going on in Marhoum's thoughts is for the most part displayed not by trying to "clearly translate" his internal work but by this shifting back and forth between the individual and his physical surroundings. As this brief chapter moves from the almost flat white field that begins it to the houses and people in Marhoum's village, both the setting and Marhoum's predicament come into view together. Visual setting, affective tone, and individual thoughts unroll together in an overlapping process where the pulsating, rolling heat, and the perspective where the character and the impersonal observer coexist, form the backdrop out of which everything else emerges.

The movements of this indistinct background, and the way it surges towards and away from the things found in it, give the reader clues to reimagine both the surroundings and the state of the characters. This doesn't mean simply that the setting represents some inner state for the character. Nothing in the detail of the scene may have much clear psychological referent; for instance, in the scene from *Habel* cited in the last chapter, nothing in the cathedral, the other buildings, or the Seine symbolizes some meaning or feeling in Habel's mind. The subjective state called on is physiological, external, as much as it is internal, and the feeling conveyed has as much to do with making the reader go through delays and sudden changes, slides in and out of focus, as with the particular character of the setting. In the first scene of *La danse du roi*, the character Rodwan sits on the outskirts of Tlemcen looking across the countryside. The text shifts between sections of description that move through the onset of evening spreading across the scene, and sections spoken by an "intempestive voix recluse dans un temps impossible à préciser et pourtant familier" that tells an only partly coherent story to Rodwan, a story from the city's past. Nothing in either of these are "Rodwan's thoughts," properly speaking, but the effect of the oscillation between them is to suggest a state of being, physical as much as psychological, that conveys something of Rodwan, solitary and without occupation, haunted by memories but unsure how to categorize them or how to move on from them. The landscape descriptions, here two sections separated by a fragment of the italicized text that the unidentified voice speaks in, contain text that is both lush and evocative description of the effect of a daily shift in light and temperature and a depiction or summoning up of feeling of irreality, a sense that everything around might suddenly plunge into the past, into nothing, or into a senseless confusion:

> L'heure s'y acheminait sans que son éclat diminuât d'un degré. Les choses accusaient toutes une netteté impérissable, menaçant, précisément pour cela, de se dissoudre

> dans la lumière à chaque second, et proposant une présence toute de nostalgie. [...]
> Et comme la veille, comme les autres jours, en un instant l'air acquit une consistance et presque un goût de miel. Comme la veille, comme les autres jours, vaisseau à l'entrée du port dont l'invisible avance sur le miroir étale a toutes les apparences de l'immobilité, une irradiation plus vive plana. Et le soleil commença à descendre sur ces hectares d'oliviers bleus, de vignes clôturées de cyprès, tandis que l'excédent de clarté s'étiraitet se résolvait en vapeur. Leurs assises plongées dans l'haleine lumineuse où elles flottaient à présent sans attache avec la terre, les montagnes parurent vouloir en contenir la fuite: elles découpaient haut leurs crêtes, dressaient une muraille de sérénité hors du monde, hors du temps.[14]

As the novel progresses, the voice and its story are joined by scenes from Rodwan's childhood and from his adolescence during the war. Nothing connects these different pieces; they are suspended in between the physical surroundings Rodwan watches, and between the pieces of the book's other story, Arfia's endless recounting of her wartime memories. Nor does anything in the descriptions of Rodwan's reveries or landscape speak to what particular details in these stories, which are all run through by violence, shame, and uncertainty, are at the core of Rodwan's traumatization. Even when, at the novel's end, his relative socialization through the opportunity to join Arfia's theatre troop seems to offer a chance to move past some of his psychological stasis, Dib does not offer an interpretation of his condition or a key to make sense of the various fragments that run through his memory. The diffuse state that layers images, memories, and sensations is not offered a cure or a solution, even when other possibilities become present. The writing is not just a description of Rodwan's individual, troubled state, but is at the same time rooted in perception itself, in the landscape as well as the mind that takes it in. The point where images, objects and sensations become confused can be debilitating or maddening. But this is also a condition that appears in the course of everyday life, brought on in an observer face to face with the glare of the sun, the violence of the wind, in an overwhelming awareness of the surroundings. Dib works through this in another descriptive passage from Rodwan's portion of *La danse du roi*:

> Tout à coup, le vent se précipite en cascades bondissantes sur les arbres, échevelle les uns, fait courber la tête aux autres. Rodwan se réveille [...] Il ne semble pas que l'après-midi soit prêt à donner des signes de défaillance; la chaleur et la réverbération hallucinée étourdissent. Pourtant, les arbres demeurent en alerte.
> Et ses pensées sombrent, attirées par le gouffre de soleil bordé d'un halo bleauâtre dont la prunelle lui saute sans cesse au visage et recule. Vers ce foyer, se bousculent aussi toutes les images, toutes les sensations, en particulier ces éclaires noirs intenses qui balaient lentement l'espace; toute ombre s'y révèle comme object, ce qui exclut

14 Dib, *La danse du roi*, 10-11.

> l'idée même d'ombre; tout objet – ce fil d'araignée mollement arrondi entre deux pales d'agave, ces jambes que les arbres enfoncent dans la marne, ce ciel entretissé de ramures et cette toison de chaleur jetée sur les champs – s'y révèle comme perception, ce qui exclut l'idée même d'objet. Et partout se tend et se reconstitue l'intégrité d'un regard sans équivoque où la perception elle-même s'evanouit, où il n'y a place que pour le cataclysme du réel.[15]

The cataclysm of the real, what appears for a purely even gaze that creates itself through the disappearance of any particular vision, can be read in apocalyptic terms, the denial of everything human by an indifferent and destructive nature. But it is also the field from which images and objects emerge, out of which experience that mixes sensations and images, emotion and memory, forms itself. This space seems to be where much of Dib's poetry comes from. The "French" poems in *Ombre gardienne* made use of blurred or dissolved vision through fog, rain, or nighttime to convey something of the disorientation and openness of a stranger in France. But beginning with *Formulaires* this vision would come to blur the distinctions between language and setting, observer and observed as well. The first poem of the collection presents a space where space and the gaze cast on it overlap, where image, object, and name mix across the landscape. This space, mixing landscape and persona, language and sensation, lays out the forms of relation that make up much of Dib's poetics:

> pour toutes les formes de sable
> de vent et de vieillesse
> je t'apporte mon visage
> lunaire et très bas
> marcheur avançant dans son ombre...
>
> je viens demander foi
> aux salines de l'aube
> que garde l'inlassable image
> allant de la noirceur
> à la blancheur clémente
> sans poids cherchant un rêve
> de cyprès qui disjoint l'horizon
> des fleurs rouges au poing
> prodiguées par le feu
> que son corps au verbe d'air
> met aux brèves embuscades
> de désir et à la complicité

15 ibid., 129-130.

des place d'herbes folles[16]

The grammar of the text, without punctuation, moves each phrase on to the next rather than looping backwards, yielding a series of connected images more than a unified picture. Properties seem to move fluidly between the landscape and the speaker or walker addressing it; the speaker's face hangs like the moon, and the fire advances carrying flames while the speaker carries a request to the landscape. The space and the image that hangs over it seem to blur together: the image carries the fades in light that move over the space, and its verbal body is what lights the fires of the sunrise above. Who is dreaming or desiring is not clear: is it the observer, the space itself – whose grasses give their assent to the fiery breath that lights the horizon – or its image; and if the face of the opening lines superimposes itself on the breaths of speech at the end, can the three be separated? The process of reconstructing an image in reading makes any access to an original landscape behind these lines possible only along with the vertigo of a movement through the poem's phrases, carrying a desire along from point to point in their movement, blurring its visual image with a personal presence. Like Rodwan, the reader is at once in a locale with definite visual and imaginable features and in a whirl of images and sensations that have to be imagined anew each time.

There seems to me to be a continuity between the descriptive techniques used in the novels and the amalgams of image and language in Dib's poetry, one that troubles divisions between realistic and abstract writing by placing them in a continuum. Thought and landscape, interior and exterior, visible and invisible exist intertwined, and although the writing may focus on different points in this field, there is always the possibility of shifting suddenly to another point. In Dib's “Nordic” novels of the 1980s and 1990s, these quick shifts become a regular part of the writing practice, as the interplay of setting, image, imagination and consciousness becomes particularly condensed. Deeply marked by the landscape in his travels to Finland, in these works Dib used visual details to show the imbrication of self and landscape and of the imaginative and the material. The surreal and Sufi imagery that often emerged out of the encounter of self and landscape in Dib's early work largely disappear in favour of physical detail. Even the moments of yearning or bewilderment are created by terrestrial effects, and in particular by the play of light. The gleam of light reflecting on a lake calls the observer out of the surroundings, carving a self

16 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes: Tôme 1: Poésies*, 61.

out of the overwhelming presence of the physical world, but also absorbs and obsesses the watcher, blotting out other thoughts and allowing escape from concerns. In *Les terrasses d'Orsol* the narrator catches a glimpse from his car of a light reflected in the distance that "fixe sur moi, par-delà toute chose, comme un regard."[17] He tries to follow this light along a sinuous path that finally leads him to a hidden lake, the sight of which literally dazzles him, muting his comprehension and confronting him with a silence that, though still the refusal of recognition offered by an overwhelming nature, is also comforting and welcoming:

> De l'eau lèche le sol à quelques pas, une légère passerelle avance et vite y perd pied. Mon coeur se met à battre la chamade: je la découvre enfin cette lumière couchée, laiteuse, entr'aperçue du haut de la route. Sans bruit de fluides rouleaux la parcourent, la bercent. Mon coeur bat de plus en plus fort; jamais eau ne m'a paru aussi incompréhensible, ni pareille émotion ne m'a envahi en présence d'une eau. J'en tremble, secoué comme par une fièvre prémonitoire, je ne suis pas encore à l'air libre; aqueuse toujours est la clarté qui m'entoure... C'est l'éblouissement. Si subtile est l'irradiation qui m'enveloppe soudain, et si étendue, qu'elle touche à l'infini. Mais là n'est pas la chose extraordinaire. C'est le silence, *un lac c'est de l'eau silencieuse*.
>
> De l'eau silencieuse; étonnement devant l'incrédible et tout ce qui se répand à travers le mutisme de l'espace liquide, séparé à peine du ciel par une ceinture de brume, elle-même à peine moins bleue que l'air. Sensation de se porter au plus près de soi, aventure qui vous cherche autant que vous la cherchez. Et puis surgie, – d'où? une brise plie les plus hautes branches, dégage un peu plus l'horizon... J'envoie promener mes habits au loin et fends cette eau qu'acun déchet humain ne souille.[18]

This scene invites interpretation as a quest story, the narrator's transcendence of self in an overwhelming emotion that erases particularities and puts him face to face with a self that merges with the luminous silence of the water. But the scene does not need a transcendental interpretation to make sense: the play of affects, the mental obsession, and the sense of fulfillment at the end are all descriptions of an experience among physical objects. The gleaming water, like the shifting and singing star in *Qui se souvient de la mer* or *Cours sur le rive sauvage* but now firmly rooted in the terrestrial, calls the individual to a broader awareness, a self-questioning, and an undermining of the way things are categorized or understood.

The narrator of *Neiges de marbre*, as he runs through nostalgic memories in the wake of the collapse of his relationship and his present distance from his daughter, comes back repeatedly to the light, as something that seems indifferent to time and that eases him of the need to continue

17 Dib, *Les terraces d'Orsol*, 110.
18 ibid, 113-114.

narrating himself. One passage connects the light in a garden in suburban Helsinki to the dazzling light on the lakes:

> J'ai vu plus au nord des lacs dont l'eau semble avoir été surprise par un éclair d'éternité puis laissée à sa surprise, eau vivante à l'origine, retirée en soi dès lors, miroir d'un temps qui ne passe plus. Cela m'environne ici. En ce moment. Jardin, ciel, éclat du jour. D'une essence identique. Tout ce qui m'environne.[19]

Time, setting, observer blur together in this brightness, something that erases the narrative flow of time and the images that writing might bring forward. Self and landscape are reconciled, if only momentarily, in hyletic experience, as writing tries to find a way back to an immediacy of life by abandoning the forward movement of narration in favour of an eternity where light and sensation, origin and reception blur together. While these moments are not able to stop the progression of loss in the narrator's life, their repetition throughout the novel contributes to suggesting that narrative time and sensory time don't fall into a fixed hierarchy. The reflections of eternity on the water's surface become a surrounding environment through which consciousness makes its way, a surrounding environment into which temporal sequence and the narrating voice dissolve as the character the novel calls "celui qui dit je" moves along the edge of silence. While in early novels the experience of landscape served to open narrative time to the difficult movements of thought, in this later work it takes a more central role, enveloping rather than interrupting the rest of the text.

*Objective Affinities*

This experience of physical surroundings provides a way of pointing towards an undifferentiated or hyletic experience. But a lived experience, and certainly any one that can be put into words, is what arises up out of this background, divided into entities that can be named and known. What emerges, in phenomenological terms, out of darkness or a generalized field of sensation is a world of things, which present themselves to the observer as presences, challenges, or opportunities. When they appear they are already rooted in a world and in a relationship between that world and its viewer, whose participation is needed − our effort in focusing our perceptual senses is required for things to come forward out of the hyletic background. Even the confrontation of writing with a single physical object turns out, like the encounter with landscape,

19 Dib, *Neiges de marbre*, 98.

to introduce complexities and uncertainties. In *Neiges de marbre* and *L'Infante maure*, and especially in the poetry of *L'enfant-jazz* and *LA Trip*, objects – not only exceptional ones like dazzling lakes but flowers, windows, or furniture – get increasing attention, and the concept of a thing or of things takes on increased importance thematically. This summons up a different kind of attentiveness and experience than the all-encompassing blur of a figure engulfed in landscape, but, as we will see, both look towards an invisible, unspoken field of experience from which no observation or description can be separated.

We could probably make some link from the increasing interest in things to Dib's seeming affinity for the American West Coast poetry he discovered in his time in L.A., with its interest in colloquial speech and everyday life – what Paul Vangelisti, an L.A.-by-way-of-San-Francisco poet who became a friend, correspondent and sometime translator to Dib, has called "a kind of realism that distinguished the West—call it an attempt to orient oneself in the external world, the curiouser and curiouser physical reality we are daily confronted with here."[20] Dib's connection to this poetry leads to rather unexpected praise, from a poet known for abstraction and imagism, of the slice-of-life poetry of Charles Bukowski. But in all Dib's works from this later period, even *L.A. Trip* with its gestures towards what Dib called "dirty" fiction writing and an Americanness he felt was captured by mid-century American realist painting (Edward Hopper, Grant Wood),[21] his own voice, distinctly heightened and poetic, remains. The is more to be found in the parallels with a French poetry of objects, and especially that of Eugène Guillevic, who Dib considered a friend and whose work he praised very highly.[22] Guillevic, who published under his surname alone, wrote poems, usually long poems written as a sequence of separated short ones, in a condensed

20 Wanda Coleman and Paul Vangelisti in conversation, *The Conversant* ( Jan. 2014). http://theconversant.org/?p=6155

21 For useful information on Dib's understanding of his project in *LA Trip*, see the excerpts from his correspondence with Vangelisti, the translator in what Dib saw as a bilingual proejct, in Béatrice Mousli Bennett, "«Tous ces souvenir du Pays merveilleux de Californie restent ancrés dans mon coeur»", *Expressions maghrébines*, 4 no. 2 (2005): 145-155.

22 Dib and Guillevic"s friendship seems to have been based in personal affinities as much as in artistic similarities. These may have had to do with both upbringing and a position as liminal Parisians. Both had grown up poor and been involved in politics as Communists, and both were poets living in the Paris area whose poetry had a strong connection to landscape somewhere else. Guillevic's relation to Breton language, which he never learned although his family spoke it, and cultural heritage was not without some parallels to Dib's situation coming from colonized Algeria. Although the incorporation of Brittany and other regions didn't involve the racist denial of full humanity involved in Africa, and although the subjects of this Francisation were meant to be incorporated into the national economy, rather than excluded in large part from it in favour of a imported settler economy, in Brittany language and culture were repressed with military force, and the economy was peripheralized in favour of central France, contributing to high unemployment and poverty.

and direct language that addresses itself directly towards the things it takes as subject matter. His poems move around the subject at hand, whether an object, a memory, a geometrical figure, or a serious political situation, approaching it from different angles, questioning it, in a tone that can slide playfully to sentimentality or irony. He addresses questions and ascribes emotions, intentions, or actions to the things he writes, famously to the ocean in his long poem on his home town, *Carnac*, or to trees, flowers, bees, household objects, and so on. But he insisted that the words in his poetry were not abstract or metaphoric, and that these poems say what they do not in order to anthropomorphize, but in the conviction that whatever sentiments and reactions we have owe something to the objects around us, that our creations are in relation to the world around us, present or in memory.[23] Poetry happens, he wrote in his book-length poem *Art poétique* – he wrote several poems directly about the act of writing – when things approach him:

> Quand j'écris
> C'est comme si les choses,
>
> Toutes, pas seulement
> Celles dont j'écris,
>
> Venaient vers moi
> Et l'on dirait et je crois
>
> Que c'est
> Pour se connaître.[24]

Poetry comes out of this meeting between the poet and the thing, where the ability to distinguish what properties belong to one and what to the other is suspended. The poem doesn't come from the poet or the thing, but from what happens between them:

> Lorsque j'écris nuage,
> Le mot nuage,
>
> C'est qu'il se passe quelque chose
> Avec le nuage,
>
> Qu'entre nous deux
> Se tisse un lien,
>
> Que pour nous réunir

23 Guillevic, *Living in Poetry: Interviews with Guillevic*, trans. Maureen Smith (Dublin: Daedalus Press, 1999): 129-130

24 Guillevic, *Art poétique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989): 11.

Il y a une histoire,

Et quand l'histoire est finie
Le roman s'écrit dans le poème.[25]

Abstract concepts emerge out of the encounter with things, as in the example of the bark of a cherry tree, "Modèle / De ce qui s'offre / À l'entourage, en même temps // Qu'il cerne / Une vie organisée sur soi-même."[26] Poetry comes from an engagement in the world of things with the whole of the self; "living in poetry," he said, is "prolonging the real not by the fantastic, the marvelous, images of paradise, but by trying to live what is concrete in its true dimension."[27] In this prolongation, trying to separate what is self from what is thing is ultimately impossible, since human thought and language are rooted in the experience of the world; the subject who would look for this separation would be already invested in this engagement. This means that a poetry of objects or things is not an "objective" poetry, looking from the outside, but one that needs to put itself at the heart of things.

Jacques Derrida's comments on Francis Ponge, whose works like *Le parti pris de choses*, *Savon*, or *Table* probably epitomize a French late-mid-century poetry of objects, help to lay out the issues involved in a writing that aims to capture "things" as they appear in experience. Derrida rejected the opposition between "anthropomorphic" and "objective" approaches to things. In the first, we would project our own characteristics onto things, re-making them after our image, and in the second we would be able to draw from things only the characteristics they possess. Instead, both possibilities stem from a shared situation: that a "thing" is not something that we make out in conformity with set laws, subjective or scientific, but instead the thing is what sets out the need for the law, lays down the law, in response to which we engage ourselves:

> For him [Ponge], the thing is not something you have to write, describe, know, express, etc, by foraging within it *or* within ourselves, according to the alternating circuit of the rut. […] The thing is not just something conforming to laws that I discuss objectively (adequately) or, on the contrary, subjectively (anthropomorphically). Beforehand, the thing is the other, the entirely other which dictates or which writes the law, a law which is not simply natural (*lex naturae rerum*), but an infinitely, insatiably imperious injunction[...][28]

25 ibid, 12
26 Guillevic, *Creusement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987): 24.
27 Guillevic, *Living in Poetry*, 11.
28 Derrida, *Signéponge / Signsponge*, trans . Richard Rand (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984): 12-14.

What is written in response to things, far from capturing or objectifying them, is an acquiescence to the impossibility either of fully subduing the thing or of living up to its demand for law-abiding behaviour. That there are things for us, which we inevitably approach from different sides and in different ways (perceptual, linguistic, intentional), precludes the possibility of objects being given beforehand by a set of laws of behaviours. Instead, they appear as injunctions, challenges, impetus for action.

This lesson, of knowledge as emerging only from an unreserved engagement with the otherness of the world still applies, and of the awareness that a poetry that would be "materialist" would not by virtue of that be "objective" or clear, is applicable to Guillevic or to Dib's attempts to write objects. Poetry, in a definition of Guillevic's that Dib liked to cite, "c'est autre chose." For Guillevic, in an orientation that Dib seemed to admire, poetry is an activity, or an attitude, aimed at engaging in non-exploitative relations with things, a way of drawing value from the world without using it up, a kind of attitude that the openly atheist Guillevic referred to as relating to the sacred:

> The role of the poet, I believe, is to make it possible to live what is sacred... The sacred has always to be re-invented. And because the poet is a language person, he or she has a privileged role in this perpetual invention. [...] In my view, the poet should help others to live the sacred in daily life. The sacred, that sentiment that exalts you, forces your respect, puts you in touch with something that magnifies you and can destroy you. The risk of total joy.[29]

He adds in the same long interview that the sacred also has to do with actions, gestures of wonder or adoration prompted by strong feeling. Dib's praise for gleaming water strikes a similar tone, and the use of religious language by some of Dib's characters makes an explicit connection between what that language evokes and what may be provoked the sight of water, light, or sky. What is at stake seems to be actions performed simply for their own enjoyment, outside particular aims, and the extension of this attitude to all the gestures performed in daily life without much thought of their function. This gratuitous enjoyment is for many exemplified in writing poetry, allowing things to appear, beyond their initial impression, through the time taken to allow thought and language to form in response.

Dib borrowed particular ideas from Guillevic: the section "Dits à la mer" in *Ô Vive* takes the same conceit as Guillevic's *Carnac*, a long address to the sea, which here moves through different

29 Guillevic, *Living in Poetry*, 113. [translation modified slightly]

hours and states of the water, portraying its movement, the light of dawn or sunset on it, or seeing its movements as the shifting of a great body. But in *L'enfant-jazz* and *L.A. Trip* Dib comes closest to imitating his friend's style and the spareness of the presentation of the encounter between a figure and things, as in the first poem of *LA Trip*, "Ces choses americains":

> Les choses ouvrirent
> d'elles-mêmes les yeux.
>
> Il s'émut en silence
> de leur silence. Lui,
> en mourait d'envie.
>
> Ces choses présentes.
> Lui qui leur était étranger,
> qui leur rôdait autour. Non,
> pas chagrin. Silencieux.
>
> Puis d'inconnues
> elles se firent proches
> pour son envie de vivre ici.
> Il s'émut en silence.[30]

Here, as in Guillevic, we have things approaching the human figure, and a silent exchange that registers in emotion, as the presence and silence of things elicit a response. The stark encounter with unspecified American things sets the tone for the collection, as Dib's protagonist moves through a Los Angeles mostly characterized by open empty spaces – wide streets, the panorama of the city viewed from the hills, out at the ocean – that remain opaque to him. The opacity even carries over to his own reflection, in the wake of a failed love affair and his struggle with his inability to belong. The relation to things involves not only a strangeness but a foreignness; the protagonist here, and in most of Dib's late work, is a stranger, and the things he confronts challenge him by the way they seem to belong to their place, while he is in transit. For Guillevic the confrontation with things involves a kind of immobilization of time, allowing him to rediscover childhood sources or even to share, in his experience of the Breton coastline, something of the experience of the people who millennia before erected the menhirs, the standing stones found through the region. But Dib is in transit, and what arrangement can be found with things as he passes through is fleeting rather than permanent, not rooted in the solidity of the

30 Dib, *Oeuvres Complètes, Tôme I: Poésies*, 425.

things or of the self but in the transient glow between them. This segment from "Gloire," another poem in *L.A. Trip*, shows this not rooted in the particulars of what there is but rather in the fact that there is, the existence of things more than their characteristics:

> Rien que jours trop chauds.
> Rien que nuits trop froides.
> Et rien autrement n'arrive,
> et autrement que merveille.
>
> La vie autrement ou rien.
> Et la gloire dans la vie
> comme on l'aura souhaité.
> Toute partout, la gloire.[31]

The moments of glory are not enough to root the stranger, who continues on and ultimately says his goodbyes, but they have the capacity to transform his strangeness. This poem ends with a bit of english, "*Yah, blessed, them folks*," one of many fragments of not-quite-right English scattered through the book, which ends in a sort-of blues written by Dib in English: "*There ain't use crying, yeh Sir, / that's gospel true, Let's us git...*" Without belonging, this language makes some halfway arrangement with the American things inspiring it, a voyager's signature to mark the abandoning of the conflict with things, a tentative agreement.

Guillevic referred to Dib as a "pérégrin", a voyager or a pilgrim, and so someone engaged in an always-shifting questioning.[32] *Le coeur insulaire*, Dib's last collection of poems, was dedicated to the memory of the recently deceased Guillevic. Its final section, "O ombra del morir," named after a Michaelangelo sonnet in praise of sleep, the "shade of death, through whom the soul at length / Shuns pain and sadness hostile to the heart,"[33] is made up of landscape poems that can be read both as tributes to his friend's nature poems and as an example of the role of transience in Dib's poetics. Here the landscape appears less as an all-enveloping sensation or cataclysm than as a series of objects approached in turn. In these poems, the human figure – either the figure passing through the landscape or the one superimposed in it – is reduced to a minimum, often absent from poems that watch forest, streams, or rocks or address them in the second person without hinting at the voice's persona. Where another figure appears it is waiting for the relation

31 ibid., 463.

32 See Amel Imalhayène, "Mohammed Dib et Guillevic: le mystère de la connivence", in *Expressions maghrébines* 4, no.2 (2005): 45-63, which also establishes the basic details of the two poets' friendship.

33 *The Sonnets of Michael Angelo Buonarotti*, tr. John Addington Symons (London: Smith, Elder & co., 1904). Text available at <<https://archive.org/details/cu31924014269975>>.

between things and self, the question or the meaning, to be posed:

> La prairie est
> devant toi
> claire à neuf.
>
> Et si elle était
> la réponse?
>
> Convient-il
> de poser la question
> maintenant?[34]

The conversation is, not surprisingly, constantly deferred, the movement of the language along with the movement of night and day continue moving, unless they reach their destination in a sudden, unspoken realization:

> À fond d'arbres
> le jour fait halte.
>
> Et le veilleur
> oublie.
>
> La figure d'appel
> était pour lui.
>
> Le temps s'encombre
> de pas lointains.
>
> Et il
> oublie.[35]

Michaelangelo praised sleep, like death, for blunting emotions and stilling the heart. In Dib's version, the emotions simply disappear, merging into the landscape. The movements of day and night are premonitions of mortality, but also images of a world continuing to exist and move irrespective of death. Question, answer, and voice all disappear into the movement of sun and water. The writing points to its own silence not as a void but as the closing of one, the incorporation of the relation of self and world into a constantly moving language of things that have no need to be named in order to continue silently posing its challenges. Just as landscape experienced as a totality, in haze, blur, or gleaming, made thought inseparable from the whirl of

34 Dib, *Oeuvres complètes, Tôme I: Poésies*, 403.
35 ibid, 420.

matter around it, so here a starker presentation of the world as a set of named things (the trees, the day, the observer, the plain, the question) is not static but sets up movement, as the names raise as many questions as they answer. This motion calls attention to a play of distinct and indistinct out of which names arise, an experience that underpins and includes poetic experience, and of which one could ask whether language clarifies or rather obscures it.

But if a life of continuous passage moves towards the indistinction promised by the shadow of death, it also emerges out of another indistinction, that of infancy, where things have not yet taken on names, where the field of sensation has not yet solidified into a world of named and separated objects, where visibility has not yet coalesced into a visible world. It was in reference to childhood experience that Dib created his most developed considerations of the relations of things, names, and sensations.

*Translating Childhood*

In the poems of *L'enfant-jazz* – which form a narrative, though a minimal one – and the two novels and other texts that centre on the little girl called Lyyl in *Neiges de marbre* and then Lyyli Belle in *L'infante maure*, Dib tried to write childhood experience, both from the child's perspective and from outside. More than an exercise in narrative voice, this was an opportunity for Dib to look again at how the world comes to emerge for us, and to think about the relation of language to that emergence. The author's note to *L'enfant-jazz*, which follows a mostly speechless young child discovering the world around him, describes a poetry that's been reduced down to a child's voice, a reduction that "humiliates" poetry but can't stop its essential capacity of being with things but at the same time elsewhere, in a doubling of things that happens even without the aid of thought:

> Elle est ailleurs. Elle est dans ce que je regarde sans penser à elle, sans penser à rien, là où regarder s'appelle voir, c'est-à-dire dévisager au fond de soi ce qui est devant soi: ce même paysage, ces mêmes arbres, sinon ce même arbre; ce même ciel, cette maison-là et, dans cette maison, les objects, strictement à leur place, qui la meublent. C'est là. Vous êtes là. Et tout *est*.[36]

The child of *L'enfant-jazz* starts out doing just this: making out the objects in the space around him. But this simple activity ends up bringing with it other states of mind – expectation, confusion, curiosity, and so on – and then continues to discover an "ici" that includes changes in

36 ibid., 311.

seasons and other more complicated objects, and then ultimately in the second and third sections stepping out into the landscapes of a broader world. The very first poem, a direct encounter with objects, also manages to describe a thought and focus that wavers, with a timing pushed and pulled at by forgetting and by distraction:

> Il y avait une table.
> Il y avait des chaises.
>
> Et il oublia quoi.
> Il retenait son souffle.
>
> Il y avait une pendule.
> Il y avait un buffet.
>
> Il y avait une fenêtre.
> Des oiseaux y passaient.
>
> Il leva les yeux.
> Il les vit passer.[37]

The discovery of the world for the child is also a discovery of the patterns and rhythms of thought, of tracing connections between things, of learning to anticipate or to name changes. The things include household objects, and also things less immediately tangible: the night, some frightening images, and some things that may not be physically located or given images but that shape his mind and behaviour, for example this poem called simply "la chose":

> On ne savait quoi.
> Une chose, dit-il.
>
> De ces comment dire
> Choses tranquilles.
>
> De ces choses calmes.
> Qui restent sur place.
>
> Lui aussi restait là.
> Elle ne le savait pas.
>
> Il dit : bonjour.
> Il mit un genou à terre.
>
> Le garçon attendit.

37 ibid, 313.

Il mit l'autre à terre.

Puis il n'attendit rien,
Les genoux à terre.[38]

A child's ability to sense, and be strongly moved by, things that are emotional states or relations between people more than they are objects is also something Dib is an important part of the chapter of *Neiges de marbre* narrated from Lyyl's point of view. Lyyl's world includes, along with the things of the house and the backyard garden, "things" that are nameless but are the sources emotion. She talks about one gladdening one to be sought out: "Mais quelque part, il y a une chose. Je ne peux pas savoir quoi, elle est seulement perdue. C'est une chose perdue qui est tout le temps là. Elle donne de la joie."[39] There is also a thing that seems to accompany her parents, what her father will identify as the tension and upset between them, which Lyyl describes as "la chose qui est sur le point de se faire rappeler et je vais me rappeler, moi aussi, mais je ne laisserai pas mon chagrin monter plus haut que mes genoux."[40] Things act, too, not only by being present but also by being possible, anticipated: "On attend toujours quelque chose, ça pourrait être n'importe quoi. Ça pourrait être la plus belle chose au monde. Ça pourrait être terrifiant aussi. Tout deviendrait alors terrifiant."[41] Lyyli's world includes not just objects but the possibilities that those objects might be changed by the arrival of some other thing.

Dib's picture of childhood emphasizes how the child's discovery of her surroundings doesn't proceed first by physical objects, then moving on to other concepts more complicated spatially, temporally, or by degrees of abstraction. Rather, physical things are learned alongside logical and emotional patterns, temporal suspensions and lags, creative imagination and fear. All the complexity of life emerges from the simplest experiences. This also means that poetry can and does spring from anywhere. The "jazz" of the title is in homage, Dib's author's note suggests, to the jazz and blues music that came out of the creation of artistic and poetic "spaces of liberty" by people who had had nearly all of their freedoms violently stripped away from them. In the poems, it is the child's endless curiosity, a calm face turned to the chaotic world around him, that helps carry him through the war. These works are not shy about coming close to sentimentality – especially *Neiges de marbre*, where the psychological work done by nostalgia is almost a theme – but

38 ibid., 326-327.
39 Dib, *Neiges de marbre*, 34
40 ibid, 36.
41 ibid, 40.

they also look back to Dib's very first works, where the condemnation of the miseries of the colonized poor went together with the affirmation of Omar's ability to discover, grow, and explore even under these crippling conditions. Dib's writing of childhood experience can be an attempt at prolonging this early *poeisis*, the making of a complicated world to inhabit out of the situation at hand.[42]

But childhood experience can also make the work of writing seem inadequate or even pointless. Lyyli and her father often discuss language, and much of his adult way of speaking and writing seems absurd to her. In the short story "La fille dans les arbres," Lyyli sees an absurdity in the way that we give names to objects, since it cuts off a two-way communication and replaces it with our own speech:

> - La forêt, les arbres, comme les mots, fabriquent aussi des questions. Ils le font pour quoi, tu le sais, papa?
> - J'ai bien conscience de ça. Mais la conscience d'une chose n'est pas forcément une chose qui peut se dire.
> - Les choses ne nous ont même jamais dit leur nom, ni même si elles ont un nom, un nom qu'elles-mêmes se donneraient.
> - Jamais. Et j'ai l'impression que ça leur est égal qu'il en soit ainsi.
> - C'est nous qui parlons tout le temps pour elles et elles nous laissent débiter les sottises les plus invraisemblables.[43]

Lyyli prefers just to go out into the forest with her father, pretending to be wolves, where she can immerse herself into a world that does without the arbitrariness of human naming, one where "les choses parlent toutes seules quand elles veulent. Ce qu'elles font maintenant, autour de nous. Inutile de les presser de questions ou de parler pour elles."[44] This "communication of matter," to use Walter Benjamin's phrase, is not muteness, and to call it that would be expecting things to be like us, not themselves. A fragment published in *Simorgh*, likely written for one of the longer Lyyli works, has a young girl chiding her father, a writer, to this effect:

> Mais n'oublie pas que même si tu trouves un nom pour cette chose, elle, comme elle ne parle pas, elle n'a pas dit son nom, pas dit si même elle a un nom. Il n'y a que nous qui parlons, et parlons pour les choses. Tu vas me dire, je te connais:

42 This process is not only relevant in situations of deprivation: Walter Benjamin commented that "every childhood achieves something great and irreplaceable for humanity" by binding "the accomplishments of technology to the old worlds of symbol" – childhood undoes the shock of the new because everything is encountered with curiosity as unknown; everything appears as both new and harking back to an unfathomable past before the child's existence. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002): 461.

43 Dib, *La nuit sauvage*, 57

44 ibid, p. 58

> «Alors le monde est muet.» Non, papa, tu ne devrais pas te fâcher pour ça. Mais ce n'est pas comme tu crois. Le monde ressemble à ces enfants sans paroles, qui refusent de parler, qui s'en passent et vivent très bien sans ça, parce qu'ils ont autre chose à dire. Comme le choses. Et pourquoi ne pourraient-ils pas ressembles aux choses s'ils en ont envie? Eux aussi sont des choses, et nous aussi de choses. […] le monde, d'être plein de choses, c'est sa façon à lui de parler. Donc ce n'est pas à la chose de parler.[45]

If the world can speak on its own, and does so through things, not words, then the writer's work seems futile, an attempt to impose a structure on a world that doesn't need it and hasn't asked for it. The child's experience reproaches the adult, speaking and writing, for misrecognizing the world, for not respecting its infant-like wordlessness. But despite this seeming endorsement of childhood existence as capturing a presence that is then lost, the child's world is also fragile, and it relies on adults for its survival: this is true in terms of the care and sustenance that parents bring, but also, for these fictional children, in terms of the work the writer does to bring this image of childhood experience to others. The passage into proper speaking is also a passage towards learning to translate the individual's sense of the silent language of things into a spoken language that can be shared. Giorgio Agamben has written that the way language separates wordless – infant, etymologically "without speech" – experience from itself is what makes the possibility of knowing things or putting them into relation:

> For a being whose experience of language was not always split [...] in other words, a primordially speaking being, primordially within an undivided language – there would be no knowledge, no infancy, no history: he would already be directly one with his linguistic nature and would nowhere find any discontinuity or difference where any history or knowledge might be produced.[46]

Infancy and language form a circle of reference, relying on each other. Lyyli comes to discover herself not just by being among things but by narrating this experience to herself, imitating her father's speech even as she criticizes it. Dib's author's note to *L'enfant-jazz* quotes Bataille as saying that poetry is childhood rediscovered; but if poetry is the rediscovery of childhood, childhood only takes on the nostalgic meaning this suggests by being rediscovered. And if childhood creates a world – in the sense that it establishes ties, gives forms, stitches together new and old – it does this because the world is already given, written into the language the child grows into.

If wordless childhood experience becomes translated into adult language, this implies a

45 Dib, *Simorgh*, 101.
46 Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 1997): 52.

model of translation that is not about creating a duplicate but about extending the reach and increasing the permanence of the world of things. "L'arbre à dires," a section from the book of the same name, initiates a discussion of translation through a scene where a little girl asks her father to write down what she dictates to him, descriptions of the four seasons. It begins with Lyyli Belle asking her father, "Quand on traduit, on fait quoi?" Her father explains that translation is what she is already doing: speaking to someone one who can't understand her language in his own. In the novels, Lyyl / Lyyli is learning to speak to her father in French, since he doesn't understand the Finnish she learned first. He, a stranger in the country she was born in, is deaf to the people around him without a translator. But Lyyli, in turn, can't write yet, and so she asks her father to write for her - "tu peux écrire pour moi [...] ce que je vais te traduire." What we read is the result of a double transposition: from Lyyli's (private) language to her spoken words, and from them to the writer's rendition of a child's speech into written prose. The reader, of course, reaches it through a third level: the relation between Dib the writer and the writer-father in the story. What is true of Lyyli is also true of the narrator:

> Ce qu'elle fait, quand nous nous entretenons tous deux: traduire de sa langue, elle vient de l'apprendre. Mais elle ignore toujours que je traduis aussi de ma langue. Non, elle ne se doute pas que nous usons, elle et moi, d'une parole tierce.[47]

When Lyyli begins her writing, we as readers hear this "third voice." Lyyli understands that writing has a relation with what is absent, so since it's summer outdoors, she decides to start by writing about winter. Once she starts, the voice sounds remarkably like Dib's: "L'hiver quand les images du monde s'effacent et que sans bouger les choses s'absentent..." The layers of translation collapse momentarily for the reader, as the fact that all this is Dib's translation from his own "inner language" surfaces. Even LyylIi pauses, asking if this is a stupid way to begin. In response to this her father assures her that writing about things in the process of disappearance is a way of holding them back from disappearing, helping to make the world stronger. Despite what it loses of things, translation between silent languages allows transmission, contact, not only of their outward forms but also what accompanies them. Reaching back towards childhood isn't able to recover the muteness, a world without language; it unearths a "third voice" that still speaks without belonging to the adult or the child, a voice that calls the child and leads her into imitating the adult she will become. Similarly, writing transforms not by what it contains in its silent

47 Dib, *L'arbre à dires*, 83.

existence but by the way it is translated into the reader's life, and produces effects not by the magic of words that command change in their hearers but distantly, by giving the space where another voice arises, speaking change when it is still only in the process of arriving.

*Disappearance*

But if writing can help give solidity, or take the position of helping or "watching over" the world – an attitude that the Bedouin grandfather Lyyli imagines in *L'infante maure* recommends to her – it is also fragile itself and folds back into the world. *L'enfant-jazz* ends with the titular child disappearing into the landscape at the end of poem, leaving tracks in the snow but vanishing himself. The speaker, "celui qui dit je," of *Neiges de marbre* disappears in the last pages, leaving only the voice which in turn goes silent. The poems of "O ombra del morir" seem to want to disappear into the landscape they hang over. The disappearance of the figure into the voice, and the voice into the landscape, connects what I have called the two intentions in Dib's writing: to bring the poetic voice as close as possible to the details of life, and to bring that voice to its own dissolution. By disappearing the writing voice comes to merge with the details of the world; this is of course impossible to attain inside the writing, which continues to be the exchange and movement of words. By disappearing into the landscape, poem and life would be brought together, and writing's function in extending the self beyond its own life would become indistinguishable from the continued existence of the world it rises from. If this disappearance could be put into writing, it would be the achievement of an image that made no attempt to freeze time at all, that threw itself into the flux of the world. But in its incompletion it is also the spectre of death, the challenge to think a world without us.

The last poem Lyyli dictates in "L'abre à dires" deals with this absence. She presents it as an adventure, but it reminds the narrator of his own death, particularly in his awareness that he writes at a time when Algerian writers were being assassinated at home. Lyyli is concerned with who will watch after the world without us:

> *Vers une lointaine planète*
> *un jour nous serons partis.*
> *Mais notre pauvre terre déserte*
> *je penserai à elle.*
> *Qu'elle ait été notre maison*
> *et qu'y viennent d'autres gens?*
> *Sauront-ils au moins, ceux-là*

*où se trouvent les choses?*
*La place des bols, des poêles,*
*des balais, du fil à coudre?*
*Chacun de nous aura laissé*
*tout en ordre derrière lui.*
*Predront-ils soin de tout,*
*du reste et des arbres aussi?*[48]

Who will watch over things in our absence? What the narration of the disappearance of the speaker, the voyager, the subject who passes through would suggest is that they don't need watching over any more than they need names, or that even in the absence of someone to watch they would still be watched, that our observation actually brings nothing to them that would not be there without us. The experience of writing as an approach to silence, to its own extinction, does not need to point to a nihilism or a subjective existentialism, because the poet's silence is not the world's. One sign among others carved into the world, rather than the unique addressee of those signs, which are there either for themselves or for one addressee who would already be everywhere present, the writer is able finally to settle not in the ever-changing chain of meanings but in the things themselves, in their muteness. Even here this gives no guarantee of the course of those things; the self gives up the pretence of being able to control them, and Dib's writing continues to be shadowed by beginnings and ends of the world, sudden revelations and fiery destructions.

* * *

Returning to the ideas that began this half of the dissertation, the drive towards disappearance of poetry into things corresponds with something Glissant called "l'*intention* des langages." This fundamental intentionality of writing reaches towards something that would have been in place "bien avant que les rudes clartés des histoires ne divisent les espaces et les échos des voix," a "poème originel" "née déjà de toutes choses au monde," expressed in the flame of the flowers in the tangle of plants along the ocean.[49] Such a world without us is inaccessible, and this fusion, which would also be a dispersal, is only thinkable after the disappearance, the death of the poet; it could never be presented in language, only hinted at as something invisible behind it. In attributing this intention to language itself, Glissant generalizes his idea of poetic intention as a

48 ibid., 103-104.
49 Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de relation: philosophie en étendue* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009): 11-12.

drive towards the world in its fullness. Here human existence in language is not an attempt to surmount the world, to distance itself into otherworldly abstraction, but to match its expression to what is around it which, once the threshold of language is crossed, appears as expression itself. This intention would be desire for even the most final passage into the dissolving sun to also be a return to the world, an immersion in the life around. And the writing left in its wake would be at once part of the world and an invitation to follow this same path, a dissolution that leads back to the awareness of where we are.

The image of the speaker's disappearance into the landscape in Dib connects the footprints and traces of pre-Islamic poetry, the Sufi quest for self-annihilation, and the dream of a poetry that could do justice to matter. It gives us a chance to think of all of these together, not as the same, but as connecting together in the same, never fully describable, intention. While these various influences, and others, can be looked at as exercises in copying, moving away from the writer's own position and wandering elsewhere, they are also, for Dib, ways of coming back to his own starting point. Surprisingly, a writing that engages in so many detours moves in a way to disallow the dream of a true, complete departure: either into a recreated past or a modern present cut off from the flow of history, into a void of consciousness separated from sensation or into a world of images no longer tied to experience in the outside world, into a pure and accurate description that would freeze the world in duplicate or into a mute buzzing of the senses. The trajectory that weaves all of these routes together is one of return, but one that, informed by its wanderings, can no longer see the visible as fully given, but feels it as changing, a movement in and out of the unseen that is not only a trick of consciousness but that roots deep in the knowledge and experience we have of the world.

The second half of the dissertation moves from considerations of imagery, language and poetic form to the treatment and depiction of events. But here again it will be a question of asking how to live with the visible in acknowledgment of the invisible. Even the most wide-eyed and adoring existence, basking in the light, unfolds inside of a history that shapes it and at times brutally interrupts it. On the other hand, even political events best suited to a logical and strategic description happen to people in the uncertainty, terror, and wonder of everyday life. Seeing life as historical extends our considerations to human action, as well as to the constraints put upon it, and to collectivities, not only as they appear to individuals but as they shape the world where

those individuals act. For Dib, the history of Algeria and of the world more broadly in the 20th century was one or heroism and disaster, hope and disappointment, new capacities and terrible inabilities. It is, probably like any other, one that – with both inspiring and terrifying consequences – escapes all our capacities for taking control of it, without offering any other route of escape. The path, once again, leads back to the world.

# Second Part: History (in Writing)

## 2.1 : Living History

Reflecting back on his career, Dib wrote of how he turned to writing: "Je ne me suis lancé dans l'écriture, en fait, que la mort dans l'âme, qu'en désespoir de cause."[1] He didn't elaborate on the sources of this despair. But before turning the bulk of his energies to creative writing in the 1950s, Dib had spent more than a decade engaged in more directly political work: journalism, union activity, and teaching, along with jobs in industry (including designing carpets for a weaving factory, an experience that would provide background for *Le métier à tisser*). He was a member of the Algerian Communist Party; the "progressive milieu" in Tlemcen was one of the rare places, he said, where Algerians and Europeans could come into contact, and was where he met his future father-in-law, Roger Bellisant. Although Naget Khadda describes this membership as a "passage alors quasi obligé pour tout intellectuel de gauche de l'époque,"[2] Dib, looking back, emphasized how significant his involvement, which began before he was old enough to join, had been: "Toujours en compagnie des memberes du Parti [...] assistant même aux réunions de cellule, un permanent ne pouvait être plus présent que moi parmi eux."[3] Many of the ideals of communist internationalism – which the actions and positions of the PCA did not always match – would continue to characterize Dib's work: support for the coexistence and cooperation of different communities, a commitment to the lives and needs of the most excluded and exploited, and the hope to see a new civilization emerge from these excluded margins. The way Algeria would win its independence, through a long bloody war that involved uprooting much of the population and led to the collapse of the French Fourth Republic, would have heavy costs, and its outcomes would be far from satisfying the hopes of the "progressive milieu." Dib's first works take a clear nationalist stance, but one can read in them too the impasses that would lead to the war and the seeds of post-independence divisions. At independence, in Boualem Sansal's clever phrase, "la lutte du peuple algérien pour son indépendance a été privatisée le jour même du cessez-le-feu,"[4] taken charge of by a group of military men – many of whom had spent the war

1 Dib, *Simorgh*, 67

2 Khadda, *Mohammed Dib: cette impestive voix recluse*, 12

3 Dib, *Laëzza*, 190. This section of Laëzza, "Recontres," four autobiographical accounts of his earliest encounters with Europeans in Algeria, was originally written for the collection *Une enfance algérienne*, edited by Leïla Sebbar, published in 1997.

4 Boualem Sansal, *Poste restante: Alger. Lettre de colère et d'espoir à mes compatriotes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006): 43.

outside the country or even defected late from the French army – and transformed into authoritarian bureaucratic rule. Dib would never make his peace with this new government, and would live in France the rest of his life.

History would present Dib with more reasons for despair: the exclusion of immigrant populations in France from the life and benefits of the Republic; the transformation of communist and liberation movements around the world into repressive governments; the bloodshed Algeria would sink into in the civil war of the 1990s; the collapse of the Soviet bloc leading to a post-Cold War world marked by ever-greater inequality and a wasteful and destructive consumer culture. All of these disappointments would leave marks in Dib's work. The situations he presents are always suffused with uncertainty, threatened with being swept away by the events of history moving beyond their control. But despite dwelling on difficulty and failure, Dib's work does not read as despairing. Turning to writing may have meant accepting a course of events that diverted and betrayed the goals of activism, but it was also a way of claiming a small gesture against those trajectories, making visible things and lives with little place in the narrative of major events. In a passage from "L'arbre à dires" cited at the end of the previous section, the narrator reassures a little girl dictating a text to him when she's concerned that what she is saying (talking about winter when it's summer outside) is foolish: "Parler des choses qui s'effacent les empêche de s'effacer. Et quiconque les aides à résister travaille à rendre le monde toujours plus fort."[5] Describing the winter landscape is not much as a form of activism, of course, but it suggests that all details, any detail, could come to have meaning. Speaking, or writing, events and figures as they slip by makes history into something livable, a space that is always being reshaped by history but that leaves space for meaning and action.

This chapter gives a quick overview of some theoretical concerns regarding history and the writing of history. After briefly situating Dib among other Algerian writers, it considers a series of discourses on history that risk separating history from its experience. A Eurocentric or colonial history that excludes regions and lives that don't fit its explanatory model, and a nationalist or "mythic" history that proposes a unified image of the national community to cover up conflicts and disagreements both evade the kind of challenges, ambiguities, and decisions that literary writing is well-positioned to uncover. I see in Dib's work, again, a kind of phenomenological approach to history, one that begins from lived experience but tries to account for the presence

5 Dib, *L'arbre à dires*, 83.

and effects of history as linking separate existences into an interconnected whole. This attempt can quickly lead to constructing mythic histories, turning significant events, of historical community, or of the course of history into images invested with an importance that may provide an anchor for understanding or a support for authority but that have little relation to history as it is lived, and may serve to promote further violence and oppression. The attempt to present marginalized, compromised, or violated lives as neither excluded from history nor simply an effect of history is a more complicated matter than it might seem. The rest of this half of this dissertation will examine Dib's writing as one approach towards this problem.

*Writing history in Algerian fiction*

Algerian literature in French from the period before independence and into the decades following is characterized by "une conscience historique aiguisée," Beïda Chikhi claims, stronger than in other North African literatures.[6] We can choose a few striking examples: Kateb Yacine's labyrinthine novels and tragedies overlay political history, legend, and family history, looking from the colonial period back to the period of Ottoman rule and earlier to the eleventh-century Arab invasions, and his theatre connects resistance to oppression across continence and centuries. His poor working protagonists become a relay of nomadic historical subjects moving through the "guerre de 2000 ans."[7] Assia Djebar's novels scour histories – of the 1954-1962 war, of the colonial period, the pre-colonial period, or, in *Loin de Médine*, the first decades of Islam – for the silenced or occluded voices of women, drawing attention to the historian's work of retrieval and recreation and drawing shared lines between contemporary and earlier forms of oppression, weaving together first-person narration, archival reconstruction and storytelling to draw connections between past and present silencing.[8] Rachid Mimouni used the language and structures of popular legend, storytelling and poetry to show how post-independence history maintained continuity with the struggles, divisions, allegiances and conflicts that came before. At the same time, his narratives confuse and resist the way literary forms and popular understandings of social divisions shape history ahead of time; they try to push against the cycles of violence that turn the community back on itself, as, in Kateb's phrase, "les ancêtres rédoublent

6 Chikhi, *Littérature algérienne: désir d'histoire et ésthetique*, 9.
7 See Kateb Yacine, *Nedjma* (Paris: Seuil, 1956); *Le polygone étoilée* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) (novels); *Le cercle de répresailles* (Paris: Seuil, 1959); *Boucherie de l'esperance* (Paris: Seuil, 1999) (theatre).
8 See, among others, Assia Djebar *L'amour, la fantasia* (Algiers: ENAL, 1985); *Ombre sultane* (Paris: J-C Lattès, 1987); *Loin de Médine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991); *Vaste est la prison* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

leur ferocité."[9] These authors don't only use historical material as narrative or background, but engage history as a central subject for their writing. Not a neutral backdrop, history appears as a problem, something to be grappled with and reworked.

The question of how to pose the problem of history in writing points to a gap between history and the ways in which it can be depicted, a gap that is filled in by different ways of modelling the world in its temporality. Structuralist thought names two widely different ways that this can be plotted: in terms of diachrony, showing how situations and events derive from each other along a temporal line, and in terms of synchrony, showing how a particular moment holds together many different social and historical dynamics. The two frameworks work against each other: a diachronic perspective undermines the stability of any synchronous picture, while the perspective of complexity shows that any linear arrangement of history involves arbitrarily prioritizing certain linkages while ignoring other factors. As Fredric Jameson has argued, "diachronic causality, the single string of causes, the billiard-ball theory of change," lends itself to linear narrative structuring, depicting "a causal line which might have been different." The synchronic, "made up of innumerable simultaneously coexisting cells or veins," calls for other forms of representation.[10] In either case, what is under discussion is a mode of modelling history, a poetics of forms, rather than of establishing history as an object. The diachrony-synchrony distinction, as the anthropologist Johannes Fabian argues, is concerned with arrangements of signs rather than time itself; it "*naturalizes* Time by removing it from the sphere of conscious cultural production."[11] Writing negotiates between linear diachronic time, frozen synchronic time, and the lived time of experience in which it takes place. The formal experimentation of the body of Algerian literature concerned with history shows how various these arrangements can be. Exploiting the experimental novel's capacity for mixing registers, forms of narration, and degrees of self-reflexivity, each writer traces complex and different paths between present and past, determination and indeterminacy, and the limitations and possibilities that define the historical present.

9 See, among others, Rachid Mimouni, *Le fleuve détourné* (Paris: Stock, 1982); *L'honneur du tribu* (Paris: Stock, 1989); *La ceintrue de l'ogresse* (Paris: Stock, 1990). Other novelists who would need to be studied in an overview of approaches to history in Algerian writing would include, among others, Mouloud Mammeri, Rachid Boudjedra, Tahar Djaout, and Malika Mokaddem.

10 Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: the Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005): 88.

11 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983): 53.

Literary treatments have more flexibility with regards to plotting history than do usual journalistic and political accounts. The exclusions and simplifications involved in straightforward diachronic presentation can be a stimulus to writers to produce more complicated counter-accounts. The heightened concern with history in French-language Algerian writers is surely influenced by how the history of Algeria in the second half of the 20th century has tended to be overshadowed by major events, which lend themselves to a schematic and simplistic diachronic presentation of history. This history tends to be read as a series of exemplary events: The 1954-1962 War of Independence; the experiments of the Ben Bella and Boumediènne governments with "Algerian socialism" and their portrayal of Algiers as the "capital of the Third World"; and the civil war of 1990s. Algeria has been presented, in the discourse of the state as well as in views from outside the country, as providing an archetypal version of, alternately, anti-colonial revolt, Third World state, and the clash between secular statism and fundamentalist terrorism (or between an authoritarian state and the "anger of the dispossessed"). A glimpse at the English-language literature on Algerian history on the library shelf shows the reduction of history involved: a huge collection of works on the War of Independence, and another on the civil war, with very little in between; as a result, violence, crisis, and linear-oriented historical questions along the lines of "what went wrong?" tend to dominate. Algerian writers found themselves torn between a solidarity with many of the causes at work in these major events and a resistance to the simplifying and mythologizing effects of official history. They wrote with a double relation to what Nietzsche termed "monumental history," with its "approximations and generalities [...] making what is dissimilar [look] similar."[12] On the one hand, they were aware of the power of constructed and reconstructed histories to combat the seeming immovability of present oppression, and on the other of the need to undermine and wear at these histories when they in turn become tools for rigidifying and reinforcing domination.

Out of the work of his generation of writers, Dib's is at first glance not the most likely candidate for a study of history in writing. His stories are sharply situated in space and time, many of them limited to the Western Algerian city of Tlemcen and its immediate surroundings, and they dwell on the domestic and everyday more than on major events. Where other times and places emerge into the text, they usually do so obscurely or with little context, as rumour in the

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 67

first trilogy, as hallucinated voices in *La danse du roi* or *Le maître de chasse*, or as sudden flashes of recollection in later works like *Le sommeil d'Ève* and *Neiges de marbre* that are mostly centred around personal relations rather than the social. Dib's main characters are not significant historical actors; they are for the most part peripheral figures, spectators. *La grande maison*, which covers just over a year in and around a housing complex in Tlemcen, with minimal awareness of the broader world, established Dib's practice of working within restricted spatial, temporal, and social fields of representation. But these local scenarios are fundamentally shaped by history; the restrictions to their fields of action are the product of what has come before, the conditions that determine their possibilities are shaped by events happening to the side or elsewhere. Claiming those spaces excluded from history does not only mean restoring great accomplishments or acts of revolt; it also involves the mundane, the everyday, and the seemingly insignificant.

Dib's work contradicts colonial historiography and the historiography of the post-independence state that presents state and people as a united whole. He also rejects the position, which many francophone North African intellectuals would take, that confronts postcolonial states with Europe as the proper model of development. The Paris of *Habel*, the fictional Nordic city in *Les terraces d'Orsol*, and the "first world" locales of later stories are flawed and divided, their facades concealing violence and inequality. Rather than emphasizing the making of history, Dib's works show what it is like to live history, and in the process point to how history is, more than a story made by major individuals and collective abstractions, made up of the many lives that are shaped by and shape it. From this standpoint, history is invisible in its great outlines, shaping lives in unpredictable ways; but its flow is nothing other than the lives it forms, as marginal as they may seem. Even where the grand gestures of a monumental history seem to lead to disappointing and despairing conclusions, Dib turns his focus to the details of lived history, aiming in his writing to hold them back from erasure, from the exclusion from history that both the actions and the discourse of the powerful seem to push them towards.

*Excluding history and situating history*

During the period of conquest and colonization, both conservative and progressive European understandings of history tended to be marked by a double exclusion. This can be read programmatically in a few comments from Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history. First, history was geographically situated, as a kind of relay race between civilizations, one from which

Hegel famously excluded Africa altogether (although he considered North Africa separately). And second, "happy periods" devoid of great deeds are "blank pages for history."[13] These exclusions from progressive history were not only an issue for philosophical debates. The French colonial project, whether as *mission civilisatrice* or as a settler project, relied on history for justification; Abdelmajid Hannoum argues that, in French Algeria, "historiography became the dominant mode of colonial knowledge, and historical knowledge became the means of integrating new territories into the colonial state."[14] The historical model was sometimes simply that of one form of life replacing another, transplanting European civilization by displacing what was already present, and sometimes explained by reference to Algeria's Roman past as a reintegration of North Africa into European history. Either way, the dual exclusion was at play: the territory was incorporated into history only by becoming European, and only events involved in this European history were considered historical. The others were assigned to a cyclical and anti-civilizational movement-in-stasis held to characterize Islamic or Arab society, filling time in North Africa with stagnation while Europe moved forward. History was in a sense spatialized: what had begun in one place would come to spread elsewhere, and colonial advance, as the movement of history into unhistorical areas, amounted to historical advance. What was denied here was, to use Johannes Fabian's term, coevality: that both parties, both places, belong to the same historical world.[15] An anticolonial position would need to claim back both exclusions, by speaking from a position geographically outside the assumed centre of history, and socially from those excluded from or actively crushed by the march of progress. This reclaiming of blank pages and dark spaces went together with a challenge to the view of history as an object that could be used to manipulate populations, a tool in the hands of its masters; and to avoid replacing one oppressive master with another, it would have to accept that the retrieval of the excluded past would also happen within the limits of historical life.

Within Europe, philosophers working on the question of time in the early 20th century had come to insist on a non-objective approach to history, most famously via Heidegger's argument that historicality, the constitution of situated being as belonging to a temporal process stretching

13 G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. H.B. Nisbett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 26. On Hegel's portrayal of Africa, see Robert Bernasconi, "Hegel at the Court of the Ashanti," in Stuart Barnett, ed. *Hegel After Derrida* (London: Routledge, 1998): 41-63.

14 Abdelmajid Hannoum, *Violent Modernity: France in Algeria* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010): 138.

15 See Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 55ff.

from past into future, is more fundamental than objective history. History is possible because historical being finds itself in a world "handed down" to it already constituted, and exists "outside itself" in such a way that it is always anticipating the future.[16] But insisting on situating history within a world of experience does not necessarily undo geographical and social exclusions from history. In the first years of Nazi rule in Germany, Heidegger notoriously saw his approach as compatible with nationalist and ethnic historiography: being rooted in the flow of history, "taking over the historical being in the knowing will," could be read as being rooted in a national, soil-rooted destiny, "reforming of the inevitability of being into the dominance of a structural order of a Volk."[17] Although the criteria used is existential rather than civilizational, the model is still that of one authentically historical species spreading to replace the unhistorical, a conflict between origins, and so amenable to racist and particularist interpretation. Heideggerian though could also be adopted to forms of "traditionalism," where the pivot for history was not defined in ethno-national terms but as an authentic tradition imagined as one single esoteric history working subterraneously through different regions. Although orientalists or comparativists working along these lines could be sympathetic towards anticolonial movements, this model still holds to the idea of an authentic history, a programmed current that, if it could be freed from the inauthenticity of the masses and the violence of instrumental reason, could unfold according to its own logic. History still divides between those who belong to its development and those who don't, and the project of reviving tradition, as with religious revivalism, ends up with little to say to postcolonial political, social and cultural developments.

An alternative to seeing history as a given that needs to be actualized or reactualized in order to spread out in space, is to read it as an ongoing movement inseparable from what is going on, challenging claims of achievement with a "not yet" and promising change without guaranteeing what it will be. History as situating restricts whoever might want to live or to make history to a particular set of possibilities, but the totality of those possibilities remains inaccessible, opening it up to contingency and unpredictability. In this view history can serve, sometimes surprisingly, as a friend and ally of the oppressed. When Frantz Fanon, writing nearly at the end

16 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010): 363-366.

17 Martin Heidegger, *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language*, trans. Wanda Torres Gregory and Yvonne Unna (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009): 136. This text is taken from Heidegger's summer lecture course in 1934, where he uses the figures of Hitler and Mussolini (or, specifically, the airplane that transports them) as examples of the authentically historical.

of the Algerian War of Independence to which he'd dedicated himself, called on post-colonial nations to leave Europe behind and "start over a new history of man" aware of the accomplishments of the past victors but also of their crimes, he gave a much-quoted form to this desire for a something new that would break out of all the old modes. Coming at the end of an account that imagined the oppressed breaking past their own identity as subservient, their inherited identities, and even the forms of leadership that had advanced their cause, Fanon announced the need to "make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man."[18] This massive project goes far beyond anything the anti-colonial movements would accomplish following independence, but its vision of an open future rooted in the very places excluded from the masters' history animates Dib's writing like many others', although Dib writing more than Fanon's puts the promise of the future side by side with the horrors of the way in which that future was arriving.

Achille Mbembe, claiming lineage to Fanon in his discussion of decolonization and its aftermath on the African continent, has characterized anticolonial thought as having been particularly concerned with the future, inaugurating "le temps de la bifurcation vers d'innombrables futurs."[19] Although these futures would be the product of what came before, emerging within the limits set by the past, what would come would not reproduce any blueprint for history, the colonial project or some lost past greatness, but would be something new built to the demands of its own situation. Anticolonial thought was

> [A]nimée par la quête d'un futur qui ne serait pas écrit à l'avance; qui mêlerait traditions reçues ou héritées, interprétation, expérimentation et création de neuf, l'essentiel étant de partir de ce monde-ci en direction d'autres mondes possibles. Au coeur de cette analyse se trouvait l'idée selon laquelle la modernité occidentale avait été imparfaite, incomplète et inachevée. La prétention occidentale à récapituler le langage et les formes dans lesquelles l'événement humain pouvait surgir, ou encore à exercer un monopole sur l'idée même du futur, n'était qu'une fiction. Le nouveau monde postcolonial n'était pas condamné à imiter et à reproduire ce qui avait été accompli ailleurs. L'histoire se produisant chaque fois de façon singuilière, la politique du futur − sans laquelle il n'y avait pas de décolonisation pleine − exigeait que soient inventées de nouvelles images de la pensée.[20]

The project of creating new images of thought, Mbembe notes, often finds more leeway in

18 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004): 238-239.
19 Achille Mbmbe, *Sortir de la grande nuit* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010): 12.
20 ibid., 10-11.

imaginative work than in fields of institutionalized politics. To create a new postcolonial subject "supposait un énorme travail épistémologique, voire esthétique," a rehabilitation of forms of language and knowledge, and creation of new forms. The force of history and of meaning creation overlap: "le futur, en retour, était l'autre nom de cette force qu'est la force d'autocréation et d'invention."[21] For anticolonial movements that saw themselves as rising from the oppressed population itself, the openness and unpredictability of history was important. When what is being opposed are systems of oppression that have created fragmentation and stultification, illiteracy, malnourishment, and the breakdown of networks of communication, education, and trade, the possibility of change and the incompleteness of any historical subject are both important. Insisting on the loose construction of any historical subject and the potential depths of the archive of the oppressed are not only textual issues, but directly relevant to political practice. Anti- and post-colonial writers have been able to imagine a complex and open relation to history, where the past nourishes the future without dominating it, that goes well beyond the accomplishments of post-independence nation-states or the histories advanced by nationalist, religious or cultural movements. In this sense, and thanks to the long temporality that characterizes literature, the work of these writers becomes a place to look for the continuance of history in its openness and unpredictability, one that carries possibilities even where social and political situations seem to militate against them.

*Myth and interruption*

Of course, not everyone opposed to colonial rule embraced this future-oriented model. Nationalist movements in the colonized and ex-colonized countries could and did make use of the same models of history as the colonists, and much of Dib's work from the 1960s and 70s is concerned with challenging attitudes among the powerful in Algeria that excluded the poor and those who didn't conform to the narrative of cultural authenticity from their view of history. Réda Bensmaïa has borrowed the terminology of myth and its interruption from Jean-Luc Nancy to outline stages in Algerian literature as it related to "the process of the formation (or narration) of the nation" through the shift from anticolonialism to nation-building.[22] Nancy characterized literature as "the interruption of myth" − myth being the net of meaning that defines a

21 ibid. 56.

22 Réda Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations: or, the Invention of the Maghrib*, trans. Alyson Waters (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983): 23.

community as complete, fully formed, the living incarnation of its past. In the creation of myth, a community − Nancy has in view the construction of "the West" − tries to "appropriate its own origin," to define a social self-consciousness around "its own pronouncement and its own birth."[23] In Bensmaïa's chronology, the Algerian literature of the 1950s was involved in "mything" thinking (*la pensée mythante*). The founding of the nation is elaborated in thought, where "art, poetry, creative imagination were called upon to promote an Algeria in the making, an Algeria to come, that was to be created by the 'new man' Fanon had envisioned." This writing of myth tended to define its own terms of reception; because it was calling up a new entity, and because it performed the interruption of another myth, the colonial myth, it denied existing forms of measurement and asked to be evaluated by a measure not yet in existence:

> To write (the fiction of) Algeria was to write Algeria; it was to yield up an Algeria that, although mythical, was no less real, no less authentic, because it was "necessary" − and it was *necessary* because it was desired, desirable. Caught in the twisted logic of mythical self-fictioning, myth was no longer presented as the product of a *sui generis* truth, but tended to become truth itself [...] What they narrated about Algeria (through myth) was true, and the truth that mything fiction conferred upon the myth—of a single, unified Algeria—would continue to be reinforced during the first decade following independence.[24]

This "mything" thought was anti-mythic in that it targeted colonial myth in the name of an open future. But in turn it contributed to fashioning a new myth, of a unified Algeria endowed with revolutionary legitimacy. Bensmaïa sees, afterwards, a new phase in Algerian literature that, rather that proposing a counter-myth, interrupts myth. This writing, exemplified for Bensmaïa by Nabile Farès' writing in the early 1970s, introduces a "dissonant voice." This declared that "the 'new myth' called 'Algeria' (one that came on the heels of the myth of French Algeria) was not only dangerous but also vain and misleading" − both because, as fiction, it was incommensurable with the "real" Algeria and because it was blind to its own nature as myth.[25] Myth limits itself, it obscures and excludes; Farès and the other figures of this new phase constructed a poetics that would reveal this forgetfulness. For Bensmaïa, still borrowing Nancy's words, the literature of this phase of interruption speaks "*in a mythical mode without being a mythical speech (parlant comme le mythe*

23 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991): 46.
24 Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations*, 23.
25 ibid, 24.

*sans être en rien une parole mythique).*"[26] This writing would make the mechanics of nationalist "mything" visible without itself presenting a new myth. Through the cracks in the myth, the voice of a divided community could seep through; this loosened structure could allow the project of re-making the idea of the nation, central to the earlier phase, to continue rather than ossifying into its own exclusionary myth.

Bensmaïa does not mention Dib in his chronology, but the contrast between the two periods resembles the shift in Dib's practice and outlook from the pre- to the post-independence periods, leading to what Naget Khadda has called a "neorealism of disillusionment" in Dib's novels of post-independence Algeria, *La danse du roi* and the diptych *Dieu en barbarie* and *Le maître de chasse*.[27] These later novels show a society divided along lines of class, gender, religion, and geography, and haunted by the instability of its own founding myth in the Revolutionary War. The early work, however, can't be entirely classified as "mything." Even as the novels of the first trilogy work to establish the presence of an Algerian community, they also perform, in places, the interruption of this myth by a community that is divided and ungraspable. Increasingly from book to book the community that is in the process of appearing is already divided, marked by conflicts, by a lack of agreement on its form and by the incompleteness of its emergence. The post-independence novels, interrupting the new myth of Algeria, are also interested in showing older layers of myth at work (along the logic of the *cryptostase* discussed earlier). They are also not devoid of a kind of mythic desire, along Fanonian lines, what Habib Tengour has described as the project of "l'édification de la cité nouvelle sur la cendre des exclus."[28] This quickly came to be divorced from the national project, and, as Tengour notes, it fades during the cycle of exile novels following *Habel*, but it persists into the last decade of Dib's writing. This project, a community that would have its origins in the excluded, would not, if it were possible, be exactly myth, since a myth with its set origins would require some group as its own excluded. We can see here the delicacy of the distinction between myth and non-myth since, as Bensmaïa also says, the interruption can only speak with the words of myth. To claim a literature wholly divorced from myth would be itself a version of myth, maybe the barest one: a way of speaking that would be its own origin, the dream of beginning from absolute zero, destroying the past. This temptation is also part of the mythic background of Dib's work, whether in the claim of a modernity to have

26 ibid, 25.

27 This is a chapter title in Khadda, *Mohammed Dib: Cette impestive voix recluse*.

28 Habib Tengour, "Preface" to Dib, *Habel*, 2nd edition (Paris: La Différence, 2012).

fully separated itself from the past or in the apocalyptic desire for a complete destruction and new beginning. The counter-proposal, the one that undoes the claims of mythic history, can't avoid using the words and forms passed down to it.

But despite using borrowed words, the interruption of myth does allow something to appear, although it appears without substantiality, only as a trace of itself; this is the community, but the community as ungraspable, in action but without the finality or direction of being "at work." Nancy writes:

> In the interruption of myth something makes itself heard, namely, what remains of myth when it is interrupted – and which is nothing if not the very voice of interruption, if we can say this.
>
> But this voice is the voice of the community, or of the community's passion. If it must be affirmed that myth is essential to community – but only in the sense that it completes it and gives it the closure and the destiny of an individual, of a completed totality – it is equally necessary to affirm that in the interruption of myth is heard the voice of the interrupted community, the voice of the incomplete, exposed community speaking as myth without being in any respect mythic speech.
>
> This voice seems still to hold to the declarations of myth, for in the interruption there is nothing new to be heard, there is no new myth breaking through; it is the old recitation that one seems to hear. When a voice, or music, is suddenly interrupted, one hears just at that instant something else, a mixture or halfway form of silences and the various noises that had been covered over by the sound, but in this something else one hears again the voice or the music that has become in a way the voice or the music of its own interruption: a kind of echo, but one that does not repeat that of which it is the reverberation.[29]

Literature here, as myth's interruption, is a kind of echo chamber for the remains of mythical self-descriptions, for the traces they leave in memory but also the "negative space" their absence puts forward, as when the sounds of the environment surge forward when the main focus of listening fades out. This doesn't provide a counter-story, but lets the available stories be heard otherwise, simultaneously bringing them closer to the community they rise from and challenging their claim to give that community its final form. Framing myth in the space where it reverberates lets historical accounts show in their interpenetration, in their effects, but maybe most importantly in the historical situation of their circulation. The stories given to explain a community exist only in the space of that community, and exist in motion, as deployed and interrupted rather than as completed.

29 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 61-62. [Translation slightly modified]

Nancy describes history as being this non-essential and non-appearing space of the community in the essay "A Finite History" (which he appended to *La communauté désoeuvrée* in publication). He argues that history "does not belong primarily to time, nor to succession, nor to causality, but to community, or to being-in-common."[30] Being-in-common doesn't refer to an integrated and predictable whole (what Nancy, following 18th-century European philosophy, calls "nature"), but to the coexistence of different things in the same world, without their relation being defined, what he often calls "spacing." Rather than a thing, spacing is something that happens and as such, history is "an event, more than a 'being.'" Being-together can't be reduced to a named and clearly delineated entity; once a historical collective can be given a name, something of its living historicality has already faded.[31] History as such should be thought of as "unable to be made visible, unable to be idealized or theorized";[32] community is not a subject or substance that moves through history, but "history is community, that is, the happening of a certain space of time", neither an identity nor a collection of different stories.[33] Holding together without unifying, history would be what these identities or stories are embedded in and what sets them in motion beyond themselves. Experiential, lived history overflows any figuration that it might be given, but is the only ground on which it is possible to say "we," to speak the spacing of what exists spread across time. This spacing is always heterogenous, never reducible to an origin; without stretching Nancy's meaning we could say that when the voice of myth is interrupted, it is in this space that it echoes and flattens into its background, forming the spacing of a non-unified but undecomposable history.

To carry out a phenomenology of history, to identify how history appears within life, would be like carrying out a phenomenology of that moment where a voice goes silent; it is present only as a continuation of what came before, but made up of something other, something unfixable. It is inescapably situated in temporal flow, but it is what interrupts that flow, what lets the significations it carries resonate towards other, unheard possibilities. In Dib's fiction, the auditory, present but lacking a substantial body, often figures the repressed past or a suppressed future, in the form of overheard songs, voices without clear speakers, interruptions into narrative flow. This

30 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes and others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993): 143. (This essay was originally published in English, then translated to French for inclusion in *La communauté désoeuvrée*).

31 ibid, 159.

32 ibid, 149.

33 ibid., 156.

drifting, invisible history shapes the stories through which it becomes expressed, while at the same time undoing them. History is at work in the mode of the invisible: although the material of experience is shaped by it, it does not appear as a formed object. And the temptation to try to follow it, to unravel its secret language, is what leads away from experience into myth. Whether by conceiving of history as an object for manipulation, by administrators or bureaucrats, colonial or domestic, or by submitting to history as an inescapable force of destruction, this movement leads away from life. The challenge posed by history as invisible is to make an acknowledgment of its forming power lead back to the matter of experience, the lives of those who are shaped by and move inside history. This is why it is a matter of community, in Nancy's sense: not ascription to this or that community within a history that is divided into exclusive groups and ages, but the navigation of a being-with that needs to be re-formed in each moment. Dib's characters find their sense of belonging challenged both by events and by the presence, in others around them or in their own lives, of aspects and attributes that contradict the historical character they might like to ascribe to themselves. Here claims to a fixed, and laudable, national character, but also those to an individual existence that is self-grounded and not dependent on its social surroundings, find themselves shaken. To experience history is to experience life on the edge between appearance and disappearance, where the subject is inextricably caught up in history without being able to claim to be at its centre, where what allows for intelligibility and connection is also most threatening. The sun that illuminates is, again, also the sun that blinds; to face up to it means acknowledging myth without falling into myth, standing at the edge where it is neither voice nor silence, but reverberation and ambience, environment and world.

*Between process and account: history as tool and framing*

This edge is implicit in the way, in French or in English, “history” is used to refer both to a lived process and to written accounts that describe that process. History as it is “lived” or “made” is at a remove from history as described, whether that description be diachronic or synchronic, linear or cyclical, heroic or catastrophic. But these accounts have power only if something like history seems to have meaningful application to life. Fredric Jameson, worried that emphasizing the textual aspect of history can imply that history has no referent at all, made a suggestion that resembles Nancy's in that it removes history from any of its figurations. He proposes that:

> [H]istory is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization.[34]

But it is not self-evident how this "absent cause" will be conceived. Robert J.C. Young, in a classic text of "postcolonial theory," attacked Jameson for using this model as cover to maintain "'History' as a metahistorical category," smuggling in the "White Mythologies" of Young's title: "a range of ethico-political concepts, such as 'progress', 'human freedom', 'necessity' and the like, which then form the basis of the regulation and authorization of historical interpretation."[35] This, to Young, has at least two consequences: specific struggles between interpretations of history are dissolved into one great global struggle (for Jameson, against Capital), giving up their urgency to an urgency that is always located somewhere else, on a level of abstract organization; and the whole "unfinished story" (Jameson's phrase) that they belong to is set up as one that appears from a certain point of view, the locales of capitalist development in the West.[36] Although this history offers to encompass everyone, it is not equally accessible or engageable. To take seriously history as invisible, without any ascribable form, would require accepting, along the lines of Ibn 'Arabi's divine real, that it appears differently from each perspective, without losing its reality. Every locale, every life, must be a point where history can appear. But to follow Young entirely in making history only a question of "the relation between different significations, and the ways in which such differences can, or cannot, be articulated and unified"[37] seems to me to give up history as an experiential category. The accounts or significations given to history are not arbitrary, but are themselves historical, shaped in response to external constraints and circulating through available and changing channels. As Young knows, not every individual is able to figure history in the same ways, and not every signification has the same mobility. And these accounts are tested not only in relation to each other, but against their capacity to give meaning to lived history. This interaction establishes the limitations on how history opens up at each point.

A decade after Young, Dipesh Chakrabarty proposed a methodological distinction between "History 1" – the unitary and unifying processes, exemplified by Capital, that affect everywhere in the same manner as they spread – and "History 2s" - the specific local forms of experience that

34 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981): 35.
35 Robert J.C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990): 22.
36 ibid, 113-114.
37 ibid, p. 22.

are always "charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1," and that provide the necessary pre-existing material for it to work on.[38] This, too, aims to unseat European experience as the single example on which others are modelled, and to stress the historical importance of modes of experience – for Chakrabarty here, particularly those expressed in religious terms – that don't adapt well to the universalizing language of unified history. With this framework he's able to hold onto history as a unifying category while acknowledging that it appears everywhere different, and that its progress is ultimately incalculable since subject to unevenness everywhere. No matter how elegantly History 1 may be imagined as a system, "history writing assumes plural ways of being in the world," since lived experience is richer and stranger than any causal framework.[39] But it seems to me we can stretch this still further. History 1 is nothing but History 2s; even as elaborate and unifying a system as global capitalism is only experienced at the points where it touches particular lives, and it may appear very differently from one life to another. To ignore this complexity and intertwining of different stories is only a temporary option; as soon as one framework of interpretation loses relevance, another myth rushes in with a vengeance, as is so often seen after the triumph of a political movement or the end of a conflict. Living through history means to move through different perspectives, to come to see larger levels of historical embeddedness that earlier were invisible; this is as true of the most isolated subject as of the grandest historical actor. Each of these perspectives opens onto the whole, at least potentially; each can close itself off. That certain forms of language and order have spread further in the world where we live will only imply that others are incapable of speaking to all if we're willing to see history as weaving its way around blank pages and dark spaces, only available to some.

Of course, different languages and modes of expression do have different weight, different alignments with power and with institutions, and to say that each has meaning does not mean each has equal power. Part of the value of fictional and poetic writing is as places where different modes can be placed alongside each other in ways that don't happen socially. Dib's work looks at history where it is least expected, interrupting lives that are called on to produce meaning to explain it, rather than having explanations ready-made; it captures history as a mode of experience applicable to a child, a bureaucrat, to activists or to the casualties of war, exile, and

38 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000): 66.
39 ibid., 101.

unemployment. We can glimpse, in the early novels, a picture of society divided into classes, embedded in an economic structure, but the dedication to a limited perspective keeps this from becoming the kind of overall social picture or general historical narrative of much contemporaneous socialist fiction. The later novels, especially in the 1980s, where the social seems to fade as a concern and the central viewpoint is focused on individual and family, are still interrupted by outside details. In all cases, the reader is called on to make a transposition or translation from this perspective to her own. From every position, history appears as a challenge: to follow myth away from the demands of life, or to turn back to life, allowing it to appear in more complexity and so with more possibility. This process, appearing separately for each but inseparable from the situation, the community, and the world, can be poetically described better than it can be calculated. Édouard Glissant speaks of a "poetics of relation": within the "tout-monde" or "chaos-monde," the un-totalizable whole, works of understanding need to be able to reach out towards the whole without losing their particularity:

> [J]'appelle *Poétique de la Relation* ce possible de l'imaginaire qui nous porte à concevoir la globalité insaisissable d'un tel Chaos-monde, en même temps qu'il nous permet d'en relever quelque détail, et en particulier de chanter notre lieu, insondable et irréversible.[40]

Dib shares with Glissant, and with Nancy, a sense of the need for a *poiesis* of meaning to accompany a world whose chaotic totality is increasingly visible. In a world becoming more and more connected, globalized, by economic and population movements, the lack of meanings able to span this diversity and connectivity shows the contradiction, already noted by Marx, of a world at once more than ever transformed by humanity and simultaneously alien and meaningless to this same humanity. Nancy points out that being-together can take, at its barest, the form of the mass grave; and he writes of a need for creating "a form or a symbolization of the world," an "extremely concrete and determined task" that involves calling every gesture and conduct into question.[41] Such a form would obviously need to not be along the lines of myth, a unified form with a single origin. Glissant praises the capacities of writing in this respect, since the "démesure," the disorder or chaos of the world:

40 Édouard Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997): 22.

41 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World: or, Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007): 53.

> [E]st explorable par la démesure du texte, oui, et c'est en révélant les invariants de la première, les lieux de recontre fugitifs, les pertinences des rapports, ce qui rapproche les silences et les éclats, que la second fait plus qu'en épouser tristement la littéralité.[42]

The adequation of two "démesures" proposes a way of bringing meaning to the world that would not expect the world to conform to the standards or shapes of meaning that have been previously, and culturally, defined. Thought, while bringing meaning to history by expanding the range of possible relations it makes visible, would be endlessly engaged in adapting itself to history. While thought can and must bring form to the world, the world can only be expected to conform to these images brought to it at the cost of exclusions and of thought blinding itself to the full range of historical experience.

In Dib's late work, the desert comes to stand in for the space of life in need of figuration and signification, and the seemingly bare space where this signification needs to be sought out. This is a metaphor, one that geography and literary history feed into, but also something more. The desert, the Sahara whose "doorstep" northern Algeria sits on, and the one on the Arabian peninsula, are today sites of destruction – of the environment, of languages, cultures and ways of life – and of the spread of war as a generalized state of life.[43] Although Nancy speaks of his "task" as a struggle of "the West against itself," it's worth bearing in mind that the forms of signifying the world available today are already strongly biased in favour of some places and peoples over others. As tentative as Dib's efforts to find meaning may be, they should be read as something more than sad or nostalgic "literature."

Of course, experimental writing in French is far from the most effective mode of addressing the crises of the world. Even to trace the influence of a work of literature demands a timeframe that dwarfs the urgency of the present. Dib's approach to history does little as a predictive or a prescriptive tool; other forms of speech and writing fill these demands. In some ways, literature may act as a critique of those forms, a warning of their tendency to substitute explanation for experience. But most of all, I think, it should be read as an invitation to a kind of historical thinking that begins from the details of a connection from life to life. In reinventing and stretching itself to speak things that are disappearing, it serves as an invitation to perform the same process. This is a turning away from despair, not by denying the reasons for despair, but by recognizing

42 Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde*, 162.

43 As I write this, Algeria is seeing the most significant protest movement in recent years organizing in the far South around plans for exploiting shale gas ("fracking") near In Salah.

that despair offers nothing to be seen, that it leads away from the world. In turning towards the things in the process of disappearing this thinking aims, in a small way, to "make the world stronger."

The remainder of this half of the dissertation is divided into three chapters. The first looks at Dib's focus on spaces and characters at the margins of historical process, and the ways that his writing allows history to appear within or alongside these, beginning from his earliest novels. Dib's choice to focus on characters at the edges of history means that history appears in these works through techniques other than narrative development or cause and effect. History may interrupt the narrative, or it may appear in poetic spaces that break away from the narrative – which Dib does through sensation, dream, or fantasy. Poetic devices allow the creation of spaces where history can appear through clear meanings or confrontations that would be impossible within the ordinary experience of the characters. But this marginal presentation of history introduces a tension in Dib's work between a desire for simplification and a desire to remain true to the confusions and uncertainties of marginalized lives.

The second chapter looks at Dib's attempt to chart a course between official histories that repress the details of everyday lives and the desire to discard history altogether in the hopes of starting from a blank slate. The chapter examines how the temptation of substituting an image of a desired future or a clean break in place of the complexities of life leads history to appear as a choice or decision, between holding to the world or abandoning it. The difficulties facing the Algerian community in the period leading up to the War or in its aftermath confront Dib's characters with the choice of either embracing their belonging to this beleaguered community or abandoning it favour of a more appealing imagined collective. These concerns lead Dib to draw on religious language and tradition, as community, violence, and authority take on the forms of myth or of ethical obligation.

The final chapter looks at history figured as continuity or tradition, and particularly at the way that claiming the past as a means of providing tools for constructing the present can become inverted, turning tradition into a source of violence that condemns the present but offers no alternative than an impossible dream of regression. For Dib, these thoughts crystallize in response the violence of the 1990s and the rise of fundamentalism, but they can be traced earlier in his work. The chapter considers family dynamics, indebtedness, and religion as sites where historical

continuity demands an imaginative recreation of history to avoid the repetition of violence. It closes with a consideration of how childhood and literary imagination provide Dib with models of thinking how such a relation to history could be possible.

## 2.2: Marginality and Exteriority

*La grande maison* and *Le métier à tisser*, the first and third books of Dib's initial trilogy, end abruptly with the intrusion of an outside event. The outbreak of the second World War, in *La grande maison*, and the arrival of American troops in Algeria in *Le métier à tisser*, end each book with a sudden change in mood and a sense of uncertainty. Something breaks into the largely self-contained world of Tlemcen, coming from an outside and from a flow of history that the novel is only at the edge of. A lack of communication with the outside world forms part of the stifling atmosphere of the trilogy. When outside history intrudes at the end of the novels, it confirms the marginality of the figures in the book – the urban and rural poor from a mid-size and heavily segregated colonized city. But it also inserts them into a broader history: even though outside events sweep them along, they take their place as part of this flow; not masters of the future but definitively moving towards it, despite the stagnancy of the world around them.

Throughout his career, Dib had a preference for setting his stories at the edges of history. Whether his characters are trying to maintain their daily lives against the buffeting of outside events, or trying to make their way to the heart of things, to understand the workings of events evidently beyond their control, they are marked by their distance from the centres where events are determined. This chapter looks at two kinds of marginality or exteriority: marginalization from the decisions and processes that shape characters lives, and an imaginative or psychological detachment from events taken by Dib's characters or by his own practice of writing. The relation between the two is complex. Poetic constructions allow for spaces where the movement of history, and particularly possibilities that go beyond the constraints of the present, can appear even when they are foreclosed by the events that make up the realistic narrative. The detachment offered by fantasy and imagination can provide support allowing characters to live through difficult and confusing situations. But the distance between lived history and a history whose form would be easily readable in major events and characters means that what can appear in imagined, sensed or dreamed spaces cannot appear directly in the events and decisions the characters face. This sets up a problematic both for literary form – where narrative tension is resolved not in the flow of narrative but in its interruption and reshaping by momentary or fantastic appearances – and for the idea of history as lived.

Where a history going on outside the visible frame breaks through into lives and spaces that are partly exterior to it, something may be glimpsed that can't be read off the events themselves. These effects are implicit in Dib's work of writing: by working in the novel form, he is forced to engage with narrative, and with the tension between cyclic times of everyday life or of contemplation and the forward movement of the novel. They also point to a politics, or the germ of one – an attempt to think historical community as made up of many small and tentative gestures, rather than split between tragic or triumph actors and blank pages of historical unimportance. Working at the margins, whether these are represented spaces of social marginality or fictionally created spaces outside of the dominant mode of representation in a work, Dib presents history as something that overflows its figuration. This both transforms the way everyday life is seen by showing what in it pushes against the restrictions that shape it, and tests grand figurations of history against everyday experience, pushing against the tendency of revolutionary history to solidify into what Ratiba Hadj-Moussa has called the "ideology of history", which "is a yoke that chokes everyday life, melds it with what remains, and yet, so to speak, determines the being-in-the-world of Algerians."[1] But this leaves a tension in Dib's work between the desire to make the force of history visible and the knowledge that this visibility is only available at a remove from history as it is experienced, one that leaves characters and readers faced with the need for imaginative transformation of limited life and the knowledge that this transformation cannot replace the need to face each moment in its uncertain opacity.

*On the outside*

Dib's 1970 novel *Dieu en barbarie* begins with a discussion of marginalization. It opens with Dr. Berchig, a success story of post-independence Algeria – educated, influential, wealthy, a war hero – situating the new nation:

> Vous savez que nous sommes des espèces de tribus vivant aux portes de grands empires qui s'appellent: Europe! Russie soviétique! Chine! Des espèces de peuples des confins remuants, hantés de rêves excessifs, incapables de se réunir jamais eux-mêmes en empire, – et rien de plus![2]

1 Ratiba Hadj-Moussa, "The Past's Suffering and the Body's Suffering: Algerian Cinema and the Challenge of Experience," in Ratiba Hadj-Moussa and Michael Nijihawan, ed., *Suffering, Art, and Aesthetics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 153.

2 Dib, *Dieu en barbarie*, 9.

Throughout this first scene, an evening conversation at the doctor's villa, the situation is discussed as a political question: is the appropriate action to align with whatever great power seems to have the most to offer, and wait until the nation's "destiny" shows itself, as the doctor suggests (perhaps more in a spirit of provocation than out of conviction)? Or, as Kamal Waëd, just back from education in France and at the start of a bureaucratic career, argues, is it to overcome this condition by resolutely taking responsibility for the nation's condition and seizing its destiny through active modernization? A third character, the French teacher Jean-Marie Aymard, in the process of choosing to make a long-term stay in Algeria, gives this rather abstract political discussion an affective (though still abstract) twist: to him, the Algerians, in or even because of their poverty and marginality, are in possession of "riches." He finds "une ouverture de coeur, une foi mise au service de la vie [...] un sens du bonheur" missing in the "technocratic" society that he comes from.[3] Dr. Berchig quickly replies that whatever Aymard is feeling, this situation is an effect of underdevelopment; as education and comfort reach Algeria, he will soon see how similar everyone is. But the question hangs in the air: is there a virtue to marginality, to a distance from the centres of event and decision-making? And is this distance something that might be, or ought to be, maintained or guarded?

The conversation breaks off without clarity or conclusions, and the issue of political history isn't explicitly addressed again in *Dieu en barbarie*. But marginality, and the desire either to live with it or to overcome it, are a problem throughout the novel, as they are in much of Dib's work. Dib tends to choose the side of the excluded, and the characters he gives most dignity – Hakim Madjar in this book and *Le maître de chasse*, Aïni in the first trilogy, the Hagar of *L'Aube Ismaël*, and others – are those who accept their limiting circumstances and opt for a persistence in small actions rather than grand gestures. But Dib's protagonists are more often more like Kamal Waëd, characters whose dissatisfaction with their surroundings, often combined with an idleness, leads them to live their internal life at a distance from their surroundings.

The topography of Dib's novels abounds in marginal spaces. There are the cramped spaces of the housing complex in *La grande maison* or the weaving *atélier* in *Le métier à tisser*, places where those who have been pushed aside crowd together, but most striking in Dib are the empty or near-empty spaces at the edges of activity or human settlement. When Omar, the young protagonist, arrives at the villages just outside of Tlemcen at the beginning of *L'Incendie*, the

3 ibid, 16.

narrative closes its description of the huts crowded on the rocky, arid hillside with a grim pronouncement:

> La civilisation n'a jamais existé; ce qu'on prend pour la civilisation n'est qu'un leurre. Sur ces sommets, le destin du monde se réduit à la misère. Les fantômes d'Abd El Kader et de ses hommes rôdent sur ces terres insatisfaites. Face à d'imposants domaines, suffoquent les noires cagnas des fellahs.[4]

The misery of this denuded outside space undoes history, presents it with its unimportance. Instead of the progress of civilization we find the ghosts of the defeated resisters of Empire passing through a misery that resists development.

This tone, which gives a ghostly significance to an otherwise realistic description, recurs sporadically in the novel, and feeds into the anticolonial politics that runs through it: the socio-political situation is holding back a force that, unable to express itself, is always on the point of exploding. But the description of this barren place that undoes the claims of civilization also contains, as Charles Bonn puts it, the seeds of an opposition that develops throughout Dib's work, "entre la ville et son envers, plus ou moins désertique."[5] These blasted spaces appear in the even poorer landscape of the peasants in *Le maître de chasse*, in the poetic desert of *Le désert sans détour* or of *L'Aube Ismaël*, and in many impoverished or arid places in the late short story collections. These places are empty but also explicitly *emptied*, the results of a previous process of dispossession or desertification. In this way the villages of Bni Boublen can be both the product of colonial repression and expropriation and the denial of colonial, and all other, history. These frighteningly denuded spaces have their counterpart in spaces that are equally barren but dazzling rather than oppressive: the sea in *Qui se souvient de la mer*, much of the unreal worlds of *Cours sur le rive sauvage*, or the nordic lakes of *Les terraces d'Orsol* or *Neiges de marbre*. These outside spaces have a powerful ambivalence in Dib's geography: what negates history's claims to advance is also what offers the possibility of something else.

This ambivalence is captured in a memory that comes to Kamal Waëd at the very end of *Dieu en barbarie*, as he walks along the old city walls through a space that is itself marginal, shadowed and potholed, where "ni la clarté diffuse tombant des étoiles, ni les lampes étiolées disposées çà et là ne réussissaient à percer l'obscurité."[6] He remembers seeing a peasant girl riding

4 Dib, *L'Incendie*, 8.
5 Bonn, "La steppe, le désert, la neige: fonctions de l'absence," 279.
6 Dib, *Dieu en barbarie*, 215.

a donkey across the ruins of a Roman town. This memory comes up in conjunction with his recalling Hakim Madjar's vision of a society of the poor that would come to occupy the great public spaces of the world. The peasant girl, though she may be the poorest of the poor ("la plus commune fille sans doute du fellah le plus vulgaire et le plus misérable"),[7] is, in her indifference to the monuments she crosses, the figure of a continuity that counters any particular figuration of history. Her sheer determination, not a product of a conscious decision but a corollary of her existence, is both what undoes history and what makes its continuance possible, what promises that any present form will be replaced with another.

The opposition of the city to its barren other points back earlier, too, to the idea of history put forward by Ibn Khaldun in the Maghreb of the 14th century. There history is figured in cycles, urban societies emerging and then fading as the social solidarity that holds them together weakens, against the backdrop of the continuity of nomadic life, which both dissolves civilization and represents the strongest form of the group feeling (*'asabiyya*) that holds it together. Ibn Khaldūn sees the nomadic Bedouin as barely human: "They are the most savage human beings that exist. Compared with sedentary people, they are on a level with wild, untamable animals and dumb beasts of prey."[8] Spreading into the city, they destroy the marks of civilization; when Kamal, after becoming the spokesman of centralized power in *Le maître de chasse*, describes the *fellah* as "la force qui détruit toutes les valeurs," he speaks in Khaldūnian terms.[9] But the soundness of their *ʿaṣabiyya* and their rejection of the corrupted culture of the city also makes the Bedouin more good than sedentary society. As Aziz Al-Azmeh puts it, this is "because of the evil that attaches to man when, in an urban setting, he pollutes himself with his unchecked desires. Urban civilization itself is the end of civilization, its passing over into decomposition."[10] In the confrontation of city and steppe, the city is is destined to lose ultimately. Dib's city, Tlemcen, seen

7 ibid, p. 216.

8 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History (abriged)*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989): 93. Aziz al-Azmeh analyzes the role of the Bedouin in Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah*, comparing it to romantic and post-modern idealizations of anti-social life in Al-Azmeh, "Civilization, Culture, and the New Barbarians," *International Sociology* 16, no.1 (2001): 75-93. In Dib's depictions, the power of this marginal position is always balanced by its misery – the nobility of marginal life only appears in those moments that break away from the continuity of historical narration. Dib's noble poor are not noble savages but victims of injustice.

9 Dib, *Le maître de chasse*, 69.

10 Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldūn: an Essay in Reinterpretation* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003): 63. Al-Azmeh reads Ibn Khaldūn, here and in "Civilization, Culture, and the New Barbarians," as the representative of a ruling class, and compares his treatment of the Bedouin to romantic and post-modern idealizations of anti-social life.

in his time as in the 14th century as a model of urbanity, one of the achievements of Islamic civilization in North Africa, figures an urbanity that is, in Dib's work, consistently set against or threatened by its outside. As in Ibn Khaldūn, history appears both in the accomplishments of society and in the force that negates those accomplishments, both as silence and emptiness and as the continuity of a human life indifferent to achievements touted by the powerful.

Ibn Khaldūn has seen many uses, claimed by nationalist historians in the Maghreb and earlier used by colonial authorities as proof that Arab-Islamic society was immune to progress, or to justify divide-and-conquer strategies opposing Arabs and Berbers.[11] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari famously adopted Ibn Khaldūn's historical dynamic for their "Treatise on Nomadology," valourizing the nomad as the force that everywhere opposes the power of the State, waging war on it, and deterritorializes its claims of possession and power, rooted in its own movement, velocity, and ability to surprise.[12] But the value that Dib gives to the marginal is offset by his strong awareness of the misery found there; where Dib praises the poor it is not as noble savages but as the victims of injustice. The goal as he imagines it seems to be to try to undo the opposition itself, to see the "barbarity" in the heart of civilization and to look to the excluded not only for what destroys unjust civilization but for the seeds of a new form of society.

Bonn points out that Madjar's vision – "nous camperons sur la place de la Concorde, dans Hyde Park" – partakes in the spirit of the European and American 1968.[13] We could also find in it an echo of the "Third World Marxism" of Samir Amin, who argued that it is at the margins of economic power that new forms of organization develop. For Amin, just as feudal Europe, much less developed in terms of infrastructure, trade, and urbanism than the Asian empires of the same time, was where capitalism took root, so the "backwards" regions of the ex-colonized world might be the sources of a new and better model if they could avoid imitating pre-given models and focus on their own needs.[14]

But in Dib's work, while the denuded spaces at history's edge allow it to appear in forms that challenge the form of the present, this is without guaranteeing any outcome, offering the

11 On nationalist historiography, see McDougall, *Memory and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*; on colonial appropriations of Ibn Khaldūn, see Hannoum, *Violent Modernity*, chapter 2.

12 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), chapter 12.

13 Bonn, *Lecture présent de Mohammed Dib*.

14 See most famously, Samir Amin, *Unequal Development: an essay on the peripheral forms of capitalism*, trans. Brian Pearce (London: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

paired possibilities of improvement and decline. While the city's decay may yield the seeds of a new beginning, it may also herald the further spread of immiseration. When Dib, at the end of his life, described the Parisian suburbs (where he had lived for nearly four decades) as the crucible of the future, it is not with any particular optimism:

> Nous habitons là où la capitale cesse d'être un corps vivant pour se convertir en un entassement, certes, ordonné, un beau damier d'immeubles, mais sans âme, exemple d'endroit où se forge déjà le nouvel homme primitif. N'appartenant pas encore au pays, nous en étions à espérer être en passe néanmoins de faire partie de la ville capitale. Non; nous restons plus proches de l'étranger que nous ne l'avons jamais été.[15]

Dib's characters, and maybe his own self-image, become exemplary of those who live through history without the comfort of claiming to be at its centre; who know that the forces that shape their lives exceed the limits of their visible world, rendering it for better and worse provisional and subject to change; whose relation to the whole and the future is always filtered, resting on a tenuous identification or a belief in what will or should come. The challenge this presented him from his earliest work was to try to show what cannot appear or can only appear partially – to, without falsifying the miseries and challenges at hand or claiming a knowledge of the course of events, show what stretches beyond the confines of a restricted world and looks towards something better.

*Narrow worlds*

This is perhaps seen most clearly in Dib's first trilogy, which aimed to be an ethnographically accurate description of the lives of the poor as Dib had observed it. The historical situation Dib represented in his first novels imposed the choice of marginality on him. The experience of French settler colonization, for most of the indigenous population of Algeria, was that of being pushed to the margins of the best lands, of the commercial centres of the cities, of the legal system and of decision-making. This marginalization was imposed by an outside force, one that was certainly resisted but that, after the initial phase of conquest, was able to maintain its control. The colonial project presented itself in historic and progressive terms, but the version of progress that *l'Algérie française* presented to itself was based on the exclusion of the indigenous population. Even where French policy claimed integration as a goal, this project of incorporation

15 Dib, *Laëzza*, 132.

was never provided adequate resources or goodwill to be successful; in Jacques Berque's words, France "asked for more than she received, she promised more than she performed, she undertook more than she could accomplish."[16] What did continue, successfully and with support, was the expansion of the colonial farms. This showed, in physical terms starker than the ideological, the exclusion of the majority population. Berque writes of industrialized agriculture:

> What was now most obvious was not its capacity to conquer, but the extent of its occupation; not the trees it had made grow, the buildings it had put up, even the wages it paid, but the immense extent of the areas where it diminished the number of cultivators, even if it increased the number of workers, as conventional economists strive to prove. Whether or not they are right, the Maghribi peasant refused to accept the system. The human emptiness of the *colon*'s domain contrasted with its prosperity. The exact opposite prevailed among the surrounding peasantry: a growing mass, growing ever poorer. The contrast was pregnant with danger.[17]

The experience of being crowded into the margins, cramped and impoverished, linked to the spacious outside only tenuously – partially proletarianized without being proletarians, reliant on wages but with a crushing absence of work – is the setting for Dib's first three novels. The "grande maison," Dar Sbitar (its name identifies it as an old hospital or madhouse repurposed as living quarters), the villages of Bni Boublen crowded on the slope above the fertile plain in *L'incendie*, and the subterranean weaving *atélier* in *Le métier à tisser* are all overcrowded, stagnant, enclosed spaces. All are in the city and outskirts of Tlemcen, but they provide a panorama of different situations of living and working, all of which are characterized by constriction: the female-dominated space of Dar Sbitar, reliant on piecework, remissions, and charity; the day labourers in Bni-Boublen-le-haut, working for the *colon* on the plain and living in makeshift houses, and the small peasants of Bni-Boublen-le-bas, better established but still poor; the male-dominated space of urban labour at the edge between handicraft and industrialized production.[18] Their situation displays the results of a previous history. For the peasants, this is the policy of "cantonnement" in the first decades of colonization, chosen as an alternative to extermination or expulsion, which, in Mohamed Cherif Sahli's words, "consistait à enlever aux paysans et aux collectivités rurales les

16 Jacques Berque, *France in North Africa: the Maghreb between two world wars*, trans. Jean Stewart (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1976): 65.

17 ibid, 56-57.

18 Another key labour structure, male migration to France to "benefit" from fuller proletarianization in factory and extractive labour, is only hinted at in Dib's work (Hakim Madjar in *Dieu en barbarie* had spent some years working in France, for instance), but appears significantly in the work of some other Algerian writers, for instance Kateb Yacine's *Le polygone étoilée*.

terres, que l'on jugeait être un superflu par rapport à ce que l'on considérait comme leurs besoins minimals [...] [et qui] revenait pratiquement à les dépouiller des bonnes terres situées dans les vallées et les plaines."[19] This displacement was followed by legal measures that facilitated the breakup and transfer of communally owned lands to the *colons*. In town, the unequal treatment of the Algerian population, in highly segregated spaces, meant that the government's presence was felt mainly via police and military rather than public works or conveniences. Beyond this, the effects first of the global depression and then the second World War drove the Algerian poor, belonging to a peripheral population of a peripheral region of French territory, further into misery – less work, fewer goods, restrictions on movement and rationing.

Affected by events stemming from decisions made far away from their own reach, Dib's characters are engaged in passing time as much as in getting by – like the narrator of the title story from *Au café*, who spends his days beside an empty glass in the café, staying late to avoid having to tell his wife and children that he has found no work and has nothing to feed them. Even where Dib presents events that break with this passivity towards history and allow direct engagement – the political rally Omar walks in on *La grande maison*, or most significantly the agricultural workers' strike in *L'Incendie* – these quickly amount to very little: the police break into Dar Sbitar looking for activists, or the titular fire burns down the striking peasants' huts, driving them back into work under worse conditions. Actions are overridden, subject to a flow of history stronger than them; and if the growth of something – some presence or historical power – develops over the course of the trilogy, it happens otherwise than as the direct effect of unfolding of the actions of individuals (or even of readily definable groups).

To some extent Dib here is simply following the course of events as they occurred. The growing nationalist movement had few victories to show in the 1930s, and the agricultural strikes on which Dib based the events in *L'Incendie* were violently suppressed.[20] But the distance from grand history in these books has as much to do with the mode of presentation as with the material presented. The choice to work political events into the text almost in passing, worked into a flow of scenes that are not otherwise structured around them, shapes the novelistic form and its effect. The classic novel of personal development is a form that displays a certain relation to history – the expectation that the story will unfold with observable causality, and that its progress will usher

19 Mohamed Cherif Sahli, *Décoloniser l'histoire* (Algiers: ANEP, 1986): 192.

20 On the sources for *L'Incendie* see Déjeux, "A l'origine de *L'Incendie* de Mohammed Dib," and Bouzar's interview with Dib in *Lectures maghrébines*.

the characters (at least the protagonist) into a comfortable or clearly antagonistic place within the field it describes. To tell the story of people largely waiting at the sidelines, receiving the effects of history as unpredictable blows and struggling not to find a place but simply to make some kind of mark on their position, will require another form. *La grande maison*, and the trilogy in general, has some of the marks of the European *Bildüngsroman*, a novel that charts the protagonist's education and coming-of-age. The novels chart Omar's childhood together with the lessons he learns: from the French school (until he drops out, his mother deciding for him: "«Apprends un métier! Tu ne tireras rien de tes livres»");[21] from the stories Comandar, the old war veteran, a double amputee who sits overlooking the fields and the workers' huts, tells him during his summer vacation; and from the men he meets in the weaving atelier. The books are also clearly meant to show a community coming to the point where it can see itself as such, through shared suffering, discussion, and (sometimes) action. But this emergence isn't able to actually appear within the narrative of the novel, whether because of Dib's commitment to representing a history of failure, or because of the novel's structure, where narrative development happens through the accumulation of fragments rather than linear development (foreshadowing, unfolding). Instead it appears via other literary devices.

Bonn argues that *L'Incendie* allows its political point to appear through a work on language. He writes "ce roman met en évidence la nécessité pour agir de trouver d'abord un langage producteur d'avenir et d'Histoire, lequel n'existe pas encore dans l'espace décrit."[22] Much of the novel is taken up with long accounts of discussions between the peasants, or with descriptions of the natural environment. Either in the development of a collective voice, or in the wordless experience of nature, Dib works to capture a language that would go beyond the constricted world of colonized reality. But as each scene fades into the next, such a language never emerges. Bonn says that the novel, while in the service of an anticolonial ideology, undermines that ideology by showing the difficulty of reconciling a language that would capture reality with the stuttering pace of life. In this way, it prefigures Dib's later work, where the problem of language appears much more directly in the text, as textual flow dissolves, breaks off, lapses into silence, or is interrupted by other strands. Part of the political value of the *L'Incendie* and the rest of the trilogy was anti-ideological: to show to a French reading public a situation that would not be

21 Dib, *Le métier à tisser*, 11.
22 Bonn, "Les pouvoirs du langage," 151.

“solved” by a few half-hearted legislative gestures, but demanded an overhaul of the categories of collective and individual recognition. These novels obey the unity of the biographic form, which the critic György Lukács saw as unifying “the discretely heterogeneous mess” of diverse material by “relating of each separate element to the central character and the problem symbolized by the story of his life,” and so allowing the novel to approach its main function of tending towards totality, towards a unified picture of the world.[23] But if that character is not allowed to emerge, if the story is a lack of story, then instead of a totality governed by a “regulative idea,” the novel defers its closure; it pushes the appearance of the idea elsewhere.

*Historical appearance as sensation*

A character, individual or collective, whose development can't be smoothly narrated because that development is actively blocked, can only appear in marginal ways. If historical movement appears in Dib as an arbitrary outside force, interrupting the world of the book to forcibly reroute it or keep it in stasis, it also interrupts as potential in places where the book breaks away from its usual flow, in shapes and spaces that break the mode of representation. Rather than fitting into the logical flow of the book, these stand out from it, suggesting unstable possibilities. These vanishing flashes show, as much as the possible developments they announce, the gaps, conflicts and divisions that block their appearance.

The outbreak of war at the end of *La grande maison* creates an occasion for the community whose growth has been hinted at through the novel's presentation of shared suffering to suddenly appear. The last section of *La grande maison* stages a kind of tentative version of a *Bildüngsroman* ending, the appearance of a fully formed (collective) character, as people rush out into the street as the news of the outbreak of World War II reaches Tlemcen:

> Les Tlemcéniens s'étaient donnés le mot; ils sortaient dans les rues d'un commun accord: il était facile d'imaginer qu'ils avaient quelque chose de la plus haute importance à se dire. Mais on attendait toujours celui qui prendrait la parole le premier. Cela, naturellement, n'arriva pas. Que voulait exprimer cette foule si imposante? Pourquoi était-elle la? Voulait-elle protester contre la guerre? Mais pourquoi, pourquoi alors se taisait-elle? Elle relevait la tête lentement: elle était sûre d'elle-même, de ce qu'elle portait en elle, gauche encore mais puissante et farouche. On les avait toujours aidés à ne pas penser; à présent surgissait devant eux pleine de menaces, obscure, têtue, leur propre aventure; et tous ces hommes, toutes ces femmes demeuraient nus devant eux-mêmes. Ils avaient laissé leur coeur

23 Georg Lukàcs, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971): 81.

> disponsible, en repos. Mais le malheur les touchait de son point et ils se réveillaient. Combien alors se sentaient vivants? Bien qu'ils aient encore la bouche amère, ils commençaient à rire de se retrouver ensemble. [...]
> Il [Omar] n'était plus un enfant. Il devenait une parcelle de cete grande force muette qui affirmait la volonté des hommes contre leur propre destruction...[24]

Although it narrates a collective coming-to-consciousness, the uncertainty in this passage is palpable. The crowd has formed without a clear message or purpose; although it appears in response to the news of the outbreak of war, its relation to that event is uncertain. This tentativeness is the source of the crowd's revolutionary energy and potential, but it is also a product of the situation in its limitations – these are people who've been “aidés à ne pas penser” – and of a sense of something missing from it: this crowd as subject of its own adventure, of a story that has no readable direction but that points beyond the world shown in the novel. The crowd is the sudden appearance in tangible form of a solidarity only glimpsed through cracks in the restrictions that hem in the world of the novel, and it disperses shortly after since there is no place for it in this world. This resonates with what the French philosopher Jacques Rancière calls the “part of those who have no part” [*part des sans-part*], whose appearance characterizes politics in the sense he uses: before any demands or slogans, a political moment is the appearance of a collective figure that has no fit within social structure, and it is this “part or party of the poor” that “causes the poor to exist as an entity.”[25] Dib emphasizes the diverse make-up of the crowd; it even includes two Frenchmen (the only ones who appear in the book), whose speech marks them as leftists (probably communists) – this is a grouping that couldn't even appear elsewhere in the social world of the novel. The crowd alters the reader's perception of that world in its appearing, but it disappears as suddenly as it arises.

The transitory nature of the coming-of-age is explicit where it relates to Omar individually, as he remembers the experience:

> Ce qu'il y avait eu d'inusité dans l'atmosphère de la ville, durant cet après-midi, happait encore sa pensée. Curieusement, il eut la sensation d'avoir soudain grandi depuis que les cris de la sirène avaient retenti. Tout en se sachant encore un enfant, il comprenait ce que c'était que d'être un homme. Mais cette intimité imprévue avec ce qu'il serait plus tard se défaisait rapidement. Omar rouvrait les yeux sur son horizon d'enfant. Il ne lui venait plus à l'esprit de se retourner vers

24 Dib, *La grande maison*, 184-185

25 Jacques Ranciere, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004): 11.

cet avenir enveloppé d'une obscurité qu'aucune force ne pénétrait.[26]

A maturity that appears in a flash but is then set aside, hanging in an impenetrable obscurity: this captures the sense of a (personal) history constantly deferred, appearing not as a logical succession but as a sudden break. On the level of the novel's structure, such glimpses hint that the reader might be able to take up all the scattered scenes of the novel and see them fall into some pattern leading to this moment; but the thread of narrative is taken over by the passage of time, by events – here the outbreak of war – that lead off in other directions. There is some echo here of what the German-Jewish Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch thematized as the “not-yet-conscious,” equivalent to the unconscious in its inaccessibility to thought, but fading towards the future rather than the past. Bloch understands history as a material and dialectically progressing process, but one made of fragments and experienced in fragments and symbols; because the process is considered as having fundamental existence, consciousness embedded in it can be meaningfully said to be influenced both by the past (the unconscious) and the future (the not-yet-conscious).[27] As historical process moves from fragmentary form to fragmentary form, the fragments coming into being provide material for artistic process. While the unconscious encounters repressed material on an individual level, the resistance to “intuitive material to be formed” occurs on a social level in what Bloch calls a “historical block.”[28] Works of art let the contours of these blocks be shown, even as the movement of history continues unpredictably and in unfixed forms.

In *L'Incendie*, the second book of the trilogy, Dib uses a network of imagery to present glimpses of what runs invisibly alongside the narrative. This is presented both on a collective level, through the struggles of the agricultural workers, and a personal level in its adolescent protagonists. The fire that gives the novel its title refers evidently to the one that burns the striking workers' huts, but also to something less tangible, a discontent or a hope that smoulders rather than erupting. One character, Slimane, looking at the aftermath of the fire, says to himself:

> Un incendie avait été allumé, et jamais plus il ne s'éteindrait. Il continuerait à ramper à l'aveuglette, secret, souterrain; ses flammes sanglantes n'auraient de cesse qu'elles n'aient jeté sur tout le pays leur sinistre éclat [...]
>
> «Les énergies du pays ne se sont pas encore réveillées», se dit Slimane. Les gens se trouvaient plongés dans un état somnambulique; ils marchaient avec des

26 Dib, *La grande maison*, 188-189

27 Ernst Bloch, *The Principe of Hope, Vol. 1*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997):, 115.

28 ibid, p. 127.

expressions endormies.

« Mais là-dessous, en profondeur, songeait Slimane, une volonté de révolte incommensurable, débordante, s'apprête à secouer le système tout entier et sa carcasse de plomb.»[29]

This tension, an "energy" suppressed but on the verge of boiling over, suffuses the novel. Although it doesn't lead to anything within the narrative – the workers' movement is suppressed, and the workers return to the fields under worse conditions – it gives *L'Incendie* the character that made the Egyptian-French novelist Albert Cossery hail it as "la sorte de livre qui précède les révolutions."[30] Something unable to take place clamours for space, threatens to break through the sequence of events.

The political story of suppressed energies in *L'Incendie* is paired with a story of personal development; a force of growth threatened with being choked out runs through the landscape and through the young characters who figure in the novel. Omar and Zhor, a friend from Dar Sbitar, have gone together to Bni Boublen, where Zhor's sister Mama moved after her marriage. Both are coming of age in a society which doesn't offer them a secure or predictable place. Zhor, older than Omar, is going through puberty; this heightens a sexual tension between Omar and her that was already hinted at in *La grande maison*, and also makes her subject to stares from Kara, her sister's husband. Kara is jealous and violent; he is the one responsible for the burning of the striker's houses, in collusion with the *colons*, and probably the closest thing to a villain, following a recognizable socialist-realist type, anywhere in Dib's novels. Dib puts Zhor's (and Omar's) growing awareness of her body side by side with the natural beauty of the countryside – descriptions which, alternating with descriptions of human misery, give the novel much of its particular character. When she runs panicked from Kara's staring, she follows the path to a spring, where her thoughts circle around the strange energies she feels in the ground:

> Autour d'elle, on ne savait quoi grondait dans le coeur des montagnes et de vallées. Ça n'était pas le vent, ça bougeait à l'intérieur, frappait les plaines puis remontait vers les hauteures du pays. La terre en était secouée, tout tremblait, les champs nus tressaillaient, et l'on entendait sonner jusqu'au fond de l'horizon ce torrent de forces captives qui allai un jour inonder le pays.[31]

This setting had appeared once before in the novel, when Omar, hidden in the trees, had seen

29 Dib, *L'Incendie*, 154-155.

30 Cited in Déjeux, *Littérature maghrebin de langue française* (Ottawa: Éditions Naaman, 1973): 149.

31 Dib, *L'Incendie*, 204

Zhor bathing. There, the movement and sound of the water had been paired with a discovery of bodily and sexual energies. Here, the sexual overtones are not explicit, and the circulation below the surface of the ground points more towards dammed-up collective energies. But, like these, Zhor's maturity is confronted with its likely fate: these energies will be rerouted and repressed. The final scene of the novel shows her dozing, undressed, while (unknown to her) in the other room of the house Kara is beating his wife, Zhor's sister, who has confronted him with his responsibility in setting the fire. After graphically describing Mama's bloodied body, Dib suddenly switches to Zhor, dozing and dreaming of running in the fields with her sister:

> Dans son sommeil, elle passa la main sur son corps, qui était lisse; elle sentit que sa chair était très douce. Un grand apaisement affluait en elle tel le courant d'un fleuve invincible. Doucement naquit une source: sensations confuses et lumineuses qui se mélangaient et l'entouraient de sécurité.[32]

The comparison between the two women is explicit: Mama's mouth fills with blood, Zhor's with saliva; both are sprawled, supine; both caught between a self-assertion and a surrender to their situation. Making the final image Zhor's bodily sensations ends the novel on a hopeful, even sentimental note. But the direct juxtaposition (on the same page) with Kara's violence against Mama points out what, in the narrative world of the novel, will be the likely outcome of Zhor's maturity. Early in *Le métier à tisser*, we learn that Zhor, now 15, left Dar Sbitar to be married and has been sent back to her mother by her much older husband, and also that the militant Hamid Saraj has been taken to a prison camp in the Sahara. Neither character will appear in this novel. These two revelations are like a door being shut, and introduce us into the even more closed and constricted world of this third novel.

*Literary form and staging history*

Dib's use of sensation as a way of hinting at possibilities closed off by the main course of history is also a way of seeking the reader's active involvement. As with the contrast between the beautiful setting and the difficult lives in *L'Incendie*, a reader's attention is pulled in multiple directions, heightening attention to the contradictions the work presents. Similarly, deferring closure, presenting historical outcomes in potential rather than in completed form, becomes a way of interpolating readers, showing the ambivalence and risk at play in history. Although

32 ibid, 188.

novels are unable to change, rather than reveal, the situation they describe, they take action in engaging their readers. Dib's treatments of the War of Independence, and the notes he wrote to them, give particular attention to the mode in which history appears as a way of involving the reader. Once again, this is a question both of allowing to appear what might otherwise go unseen and showing the complexities and difficulties in what might be presented in an artificial simplicity.

Dib's "mot au lecteur" to *Un été africain*, written for the Bulgarian translation in 1961 and included in the second and subsequent editions of the French, discusses the relation between novelistic form, historical events, and the role of the reader. *Un été africain* concerns the first years of the Algerian War, but the war itself takes place in the background: the novel presents a series of snapshots, interweaving stories, that show how the war affects the lives of a range of different inhabitants of Tlemcen and its surroundings, even when the war is not openly discussed or is referred to euphemistically as *les évènements*. What the novel presents is largely acts of "everyday resistance" – people continuing to live their lives despite the incursions of military patrols and checkpoints, communicating information on the sides of their work, seeking out news of sons or relatives in the *maquis.* Many of the characters, especially those from the more privileged classes, are marked by cowardice or confusion more than any kind of heroism. The book is taken up with waiting and repetition as its characters try to adapt to what is going on beyond their control. Dib's note describes the book as a tragedy, but one stripped of most of its classical characteristics:

> Avec ce roman, nous entrons dans la tragédie, mais personne ne le sait, je veux dire: aucun des personnages présents. Ce livre a été écrit pendant que les événements relatés se produisaient; même un peu avant, pour certains. Ce n'est que rétrospectivement, aujourd'hui, que les protagonistes pourraient parler de tragédie. [...]
>
> Dans cet ouvrage, il y a bien des acteurs mais ils ne sont nullement préparés aux rôles qu'ils vont jouer, ils ne savent pas qu'ils vont participer à une tragédie, ou à quoi que ce soit de semblable, il n'y a pas de plateau, aucun rideau ne se lèvera... C'est au lecteur qu'il appartient de découvrir, à partir du libre jeu de leur comportement et de leurs pensées, mais aussi de la nécessité où ce comportement et ces pensées s'inscriront, la réalité tragique qu'ils véhiculent à leur insu. Cette réalité sera dans sa conscience, non dans celle des personnages.[33]

This novel, written alongside events happening outside of it, is only retrospectively put together into a representation of those events as a whole, but this reconstruction is itself an important part of the novel as Dib sees it. This drama that opens not onto the diagrammatic portrayal of

33 Dib, *Un été africain*, i-ii.

inescapable fate, but onto confused characters acting unaware of their presentation as exemplary figures, becomes a tragedy only once inscribed into a necessity that belongs to the reader. The reader's reconstruction also has to take place alongside events: its structure doesn't follow a "dénouement" but fits into an "«évolution», l'évolution des événements, des choses, des conduites, des histoires individuelles, de l'Histoire en général"; the reality the novel refers to is not its own internal completion but the reality of the reader, understood "comme membre responsable d'une société."[34] This model of writing differs from classical tragedy, but also, Dib says, from the "roman traditionnel," "centré autour d'une intrigue qui circonscrit le conflit entre les caractères et se garde de faire référence à l'horizon de mystification dont ils sont victimes en tant qu'êtres aliénés."

Dib's critique here is a familiar one, of the bourgeois novel as ideological; the restriction of the novel to the world of its characters makes the novel blind to the preconditions for those characters' coherency as a social group. Dib's suggested alternative is not to correct this form, putting the characters in their "true" social situation, but to acknowledge that the contradictions in the novel stretch outside of it, denying the catharsis derived from establishing and resolving a problem. The conflicts and contradictions of the novel are instead inscribed into the evolution that the reader is caught up in:

> Acteurs et conjonctures de la comédie humaine, rien n'existe qu'en marche dans un monde en marche, qu'en perpétuelles divisions et réconciliations en soi, avec soi et hors de soi. En cours de route, ou de roman, les individus sont loin évidemment de manifester toujours une lucidité exemplaire. C'est alors que le lecteur est invité à exercer son esprit critique en espérant de lui que, ce faisant, il assumera ses responsabilités.[35]

This is a vision of the novel as didactic tool: the lacunae in its representation, of events or of their motivation, invite the reader to form her own judgements, to assume the tasks of interpretation left open by the characters. Dib's note here leaves open the hope that an after-the-fact perspective might be able to perform a clearer interpretation. In his next novel, the second to take the period of the War as its setting, he had the opposite concern: a retrospective perspective might lose aspects of events, affective and psychological, that were of central importance but that fade after the fact. Explaining the fantastic and disorienting style of *Qui se souvient de la mer*, Dib explained

34 ibid, p. iii.
35 ibid, iii.

that he had tried to capture some of the horror of the war: a horror whose “caractère illimité” is matched only by its “usure extrêmement rapide.”[36]The disorientation and terror of the events as they were lived fade away quickly, becoming “qu'une péripétie banale.” “L'horreur ignore l'approfondissement; elle ne connaît que la répétition,” Dib wrote, and worried that this kind of horror, repeated, was already coming to define the century, as “cette immense nuée démoniaque qui plane au-dessus du monde depuis tant d'années” and that threatened to dissolve into “l'enfer de banalité dont l'horreur a su s'entourer et nous entourer.”[37] His response was to try to convey to the reader some of this sense of history that might otherwise escape. Dib did not set out with this as a clear intention, he said, but writing the book proved to be “une expérience profondément vécue, un engagement, un affrontement total,” and he invites the reader to pick up some repetition of this disorienting and draining experience. Again, the reader is caught up in an historical relay, although here it comes directly from the writer; the characters, settings, and images are tools for staging an experience of history that might otherwise dissolve into the chronicle of the war as an event stabilized into directional historical meaning.

In *La danse du roi*, staging is explicitly used as a device to deal with the aftermath of the war, the blindnesses and shortcomings of the characters and the repeating wounds left by the trauma. For one of the protagonists, Rodwan, this staging happens inside his consciousness, as pieces of memory and unspecified voices from the past move through his thoughts. But for the second main character, Arfia, the staging takes place in the social world: in her recounting of her experience in the maquis to anyone who will listen, and in the play put on by the theatre troupe she belongs to, satirizing contemporary conditions. When Dib adapted *La danse du roi* for the stage, as *Mille hourras pour une gueuse*, he left out Rodwan's half of the book entirely; as a result, rather than representing the period of the war or the contemporary period, most of the play provides a space to present representations. The emphasis is shifted from “what happened” to how what happens is lived, discussed, made continuously actual. Dib's note to the play points to a reversal of the usual relation between speech and events:

> On pourrait y voir (dans cette pièce) une tentative de théâtre différent par le fait que la parole y produit les personnages, les événements, qu'elle est le lieu de l'action et de l'Histoire, et non l'inverse comme cela se passe d'habitude. Ce qui importe alors, c'est d'observer comment cette parole se met elle-même en scène en

36 Dib, *Qui se souvient de la mer*, 189.
37 ibid, 190.

vue d'un sens - pas toujours sûr.[38]

Speech isn't what comes after the fact; instead it's what creates those facts, for the spectators but also for the characters trying to construct a historical meaning out of what they've inherited as trauma or confusion. Dib's claims may overstate the novelty of his approach – an emphasis on meta-theatrical devices and on the telling rather than the told characterized much of experimental theatre globally during the 1970s, and the model (here and in *Un été africain*) looks back to the German communist playwright Bertolt Brecht's idea of a theatre that would alienate rather than enchant, engage rather than engulf the spectator.[39] Prioritizing speech highlights the theatricality of the work: we're aware that what we're receiving is a particular telling of events from the war, not those events themselves – and Arfia, personally invested in her retellings, is not a character who inspires full confidence. Dib does not aim to make the character simply a function of the narrative; he says that the play attempts to "montrer l'homme vivant l'Histoire et faire en sorte qu'il n'apparaisse pas comme un simple objet de l'Histoire," but – perhaps paradoxically on a first reading – this doesn't mean that Man is presented as a subject either, as the operator of history. Instead, "l'homme vivant l'Histoire" lives it as a swarm of effects and memories, material to be reworked and recounted, its fit with life repeatedly retried. This is not to say that history itself is repetitive and directionless – Dib keeps the capital "H" – but that it is lived circuitously; and in its circling, what it makes visible first is not a fully constituted and graspable meaning.

*Mille hourras pour une gueuse* is constructed so that the base level of representation is not an exceptional and heroic scene, but something banal: an ex-maquisarde telling her story, and her somewhat less savoury friends performing a street-theatre style play with cheap and minimal sets and costumes. The work, as novel or play, is a commentary on the way messy and dissatisfying events get worked up into a monumental heroic history of the war, but also on the personal construction of meaning, as its characters' situation locks them from constructing a meaning that would allow them to move on. Arfia's speech, her working and reworking of history, is explicitly a

38 Dib, *Mille hourras pour une gueuse*, back cover.

39 Theatre writers and directors in Africa, north and sub-saharan, used, like Dib does in the second half of *Mille hourras*, metatheatricality to bridge between traditional and contemporary forms of performance, or to link political issues to popular art. Ngugi wa Thiongo'o discusses theatre extensively in *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1976); for Algeria, see Kateb Yacine's comments on his theatre in *Le poète comme un boxeur, entretiens 1958-1989*, ed. Gilles Carpentier (Paris: Seuil, 1984).

work on herself. The play begins:

> Arfia: Après tout, pourquoi pas? Pourquoi que je reprendrais pas toutes les choses que j'ai déjà racontées? Parce que, à force de les raconter, maintenant je sais comment elles se sont passées. Même, à force de les raconter, que je n'ai plus besoin de me les rappeler. Elles sont toutes ici (*elle pose ses deux mains sur sa poitrine*) et comme à la minute où elles se sont passées.[40]

This attempt to seize the past exactly as it was fails; by the end of *Mille hourras*, the characters slip away from her and she is left ready to start over again. But Arfia's desire is at least in part satisfied: although the events don't take on a final stable form, through their representation something is passed on from the story to the character who has been telling it. Slim, a soldier under Arfia's orders who died in front of her and for whose death she feels responsible, serves in the story both a dissenting voice from the heroic interpretation of the war and as Arfia's most direct counterpart (the novel includes an unexpected sexual encounter between the two that is left out of the play). In the final pages of the novel, he seems to present two different attitudes towards the closing of the story, and of his own life. At first he is railing against his exclusion from the future: he cries, "pourquoi qu'elle n'existerait pas pour moi aussi, cette journée? [...] Pourquoi que j'aurais pas le droit de demander un peu de vie?" This message resonates in the novel and play, which are concerned with those who have been written out of the history of the war and left out of the benefits of independence. But then almost directly after, he accepts death, leaving Arfia saying, stunned, "tu connais, toi, des gens qui se sont accomodés de la mort? Non!"[41] Whether this difference between rejection and acceptance involves two contrasting versions of the story Arfia is trying out, or two sequential moments in what "really happened" is not particularly important. Either way, Slim, the character whose sarcasm undercuts the heroism of the situation throughout Arfia's story, leaves a final irony: it is his voice, his name, that calls against the myth of unity in the post-independence nation, insisting on a place for the excluded; but he, dead, doesn't take responsibility for this – this falls instead to Arfia, who continues to live. Arfia's own lack of fit in her own world, together with the way book and play end with a suspension of the story rather than a resolution, invite the reader or spectator to take up this relay of responsibility.

None of these works provides a resolution to the historical difficulties that they present. But in each case, the work, and Dib's commentary on it, suggest that writing, in the relationship

40 Dib, *Mille hourras pour une gueuse*, 11.
41 Dib, *La danse du roi*, 201, 204.

between text and reader or as a sign of a more general process of working-through, provides a way to engage history in a lived present. Through the process of bringing meaning to bear on situations that pose a block to meaning, history appears not as a completed and graspable story but as an ongoing struggle to create meaning adequate to the demands of life.

*Exterior spaces*

The kind of fluid distancing from events that writing allows, creating not an absolute separation but a space where meanings can be developed, can appear in the text as it plays with its own relation to recognizable reality. Through the irruption of fantastic elements or the arresting or scrambling of time, Dib uses striking images and undefined places to allow something that exceeds the story he is telling to appear, without resorting to direct commentary. While these may seem to move away from the concerns of history, they can also be a kind of way of stepping into the centre of a history that is lived from the side, allowing conflicts and processes to appear with a clarity that they don't have in the complexities and confusions of life.

For example, the only place in Dib's first trilogy where the conflict between colonial authorities and Algerian patriots appears directly is in a long dream-like sequence in *L'Incendie*. The activist Hamid Saraj, after undergoing torture, feels his consciousness slipping into a space whose contours "appartenait à un autre univers, parvenait d'un monde qui fuyait, qui cessait d'exister dès que la pensée tentait de l'étreindre."[42] This experience sets him into a chain of hazily organized remembrances, at the centre of which he finds himself in a strange space, an amusement park at night, empty but filled with thousands of tiny lights, lights he identifies as the phantoms of the dead. Here he has a conversation with "the Agent," a partially seen figure responsible for the death and torture that has filled the space with phantoms. Saraj converses with him about responsibility and accountability. In this impossible space, lifted out of temporal continuity and into the labyrinth of hallucination and memory, a direct confrontation can take place that is not possible within the historical world of the novel; here between the man fighting for freedom and the man tasked to stop this fight. It might seem Saraj's torture, explicitly violent, would provide the starkest representation of an opposition, since nothing mediates between the two sides. But here, as would continue to be the case in Dib's writing, violence usually happens in the dark, or through a haze of recollection or distraction. For confrontation to appear, the book

42 Dib, *L'Incendie*, 148-149.

needs to take distance from the disorienting sequence of events.[43]

From a much later period, the story "Une partie de dés," from Dib's 1995 *La nuit sauvage*, also uses a space set off from the action around it to let a conflict, here the civil war of the 1990s, appear in the stark form of a confrontation between two characters. Here Dib stages a conversation between a young man, recruited by an armed Islamist group, and the older man he's been sent to assassinate. The scene is set off dramatically: the young man enters the building, along with another fighter, through an unlocked door; as soon as they enter an electronic surveillance system is triggered, closing the door behind them, the second fighter is shot dead, and the older man's voice begins speaking over a loudspeaker system. These "high-tech" elements function, like the dream world in *L'Incendie*, to disorient, and to freeze the action and flow of time. The two men converse and play dice beside the body of the dead fighter, creating a space where an airing of grievances and a comparison of narratives explores the conflict in a way precluded by the violence with which it plays out in narrative (or lived) time. Within this space, the terms and causes of the conflict, and the characters standing on both sides, are explored and clarified, but not resolved. Once the fighter leaves the compound, the action picks up again immediately, and the role reversal established in the first paragraphs – where the would-be killer becomes the target – maintained: the young man carries his partner's corpse, with gunfire chasing behind him.

In this story what Dib is concerned to show is not a stark opposition but a complicity; the confrontation between the two is not between two separate communities but a fissure in one single one. In an interview in 1994, Dib insisted that the violence of the civil war implied a responsibility for all Algerians (including those, like himself, living outside of Algeria's political borders):

> Quand un meurtre est commis par un autre Algérien, que je le veuille ou non, je partage la responsabilité de ce meurtre [...] Les Algériens doivent avoir honte d'être Algériens, parce que d'autres Algériens commettent des crimes, pas seulement en leurs noms, mais moralement en notre nom à tous.[44]

While Dib says in the interview the solution can only be political, since illogical violence tends

43 Salah El Ouadie's novel *Al-'aris*, translated to French as *Le marié: Candide au pays de la torture*, trans Abdelhadie Drissi (Paris: Paris-Mediteranée, 2001), based on his experience in Moroccan jails during his country's "years of lead," vividly presents torture as disallowing any real connection, communication or confrontation between torturer and victim. The drastic gap in power, and the disorientation and confusion brought on by confinement and violence, ensure that the two sides are never part of the same conversation. The moral judgement of torture can only be made from the outside.

44 In Zaoui, *Algérie: des voix dans la tourmente*. 175-176.

towards cycles of revenge and aggravates the situation, he is quick to add that dialogue cannot by itself heal a country that "a été disloqué comme un corps qui, miné par une maladie des organes touchés sérieusement"; this healing can only take place through time. Shared responsibility leads only to a limited effectivity within a train of events beyond the actors' control. The ambiguity of the short story captures some of this: freezing narrative time, it allows a dialogue to play out which defines the characters differently than the action might, showing a cross-implication underneath the stark opposition entailed in an assassination mission. But it is powerless to stop the unfolding process of the confrontation.

This confrontation is not presented as being between two morally equal sides; the young fighter comes off poorly. He is blindly following his leader, he has little knowledge of the religion in whose name he claims to be motivated, and he is unable to connect his stammered rage at betrayal ("vous les homme qui… qui nous avez précédés: aussi, vous avez… vous avez trahi la confiance que… que nous avions placée en vous")[45] to the actions he is carrying out. But the old man sees him and his fellow fighters as part of the same group, the playing out of an ongoing and unfinished history. He says:

> Au fond, tu n'es, vous n'êtes, toi et tes pareils, que nos démons. Nous n'avions jamais cessé de vous porter en nous. Et, parce que nous n'avions pas pu, ou pas su, vous tenir enchaînés là d'où vous n'auriez jamais dû sortir, vous voici libres d'aller, libres d'infester la terre et, loups hurlants, de reconvoquer les temps anciens.[46]

One of the lessons is to understand that history goes well beyond the way it's figured in the current conflict. What the confrontation between these two figures reveal is not a point of decision where history will be determined, but a point of insertion into an ongoing history than can only be accommodated, not immediately dispatched or resolved. The old man says,

> Elle a été inaugurée, cette partie, depuis longtemps, fils. Elle l'a été avant que tu n'aies mis les pieds dans cette maison, avant que tu n'aies commencé à brandir ton couteau contre les tiens, avant ta naissance même. Avant tout. C'est à toi de jouer maintenant, qu'attends-tu? On croit pouvoir décider de la marche des événements et, ce faisant, du cours de son destin. Jamais. Impossible. On ne fait que différer les échéances qui, plus elles sont repoussées et plus brutalement, plus efficacement destructrices, elles reviennent.[47]

By taking his place in this pre-written game, he tells him, the young man is able to keep himself

45 Dib, *La nuit sauvage*, 136.
46 ibid., 241.
47 ibid, 237.

blind to what role he's taken on it: that of a murderer. That he is allowed to leave and to live at the end of the story lets a margin stand, however narrow, where this lesson might take root. The game is left open; and despite the artificial clarity of the story – a direct spoken conversation between two sides – the image that is that of but two generations each marked by their failure to take charge of their historical situation. While earlier Dib had been concerned to let contradictions appear within in a historical situation that was unclear in its overwhelming horror, here he tries to override a narrative that presents the situation as a simple two-sided confrontation by showing mutual implication. Whatever becomes clear in the separated space of the compound and the dice-game, those contradictions play out in the larger field of social narrative, back in the flow of time that was artificially frozen for the purposes of the story. This movement shuttles between past and present, reactivating violence and oppression. What falls to individuals is not to control this course but to situate themselves with regards to it.

*Fantastic clarity*

Faced with this difficulty, the distance offered from the course of events by spaces of strangeness, fantasy or imagination may serve as a buffer from or a source of strength in dealing with the ambiguities and difficulties of a life hemmed in by difficult and violent history. The disorientation and confusion brought by living through events, and the clarity than can only be reached at a distance from them, is on display throughout the fantastic world of *Qui se souvient de la mer*. Many of the novel's fantastic elements – words turning to stone in characters' throats, people turning into statues or pools of blood, walls moving mysteriously – invite allegorical reading as descriptive of the spatial reorganization and emotional toll brought on by the war. But the book's unreality also marks the narrator's detachment from this world around him. His fantastic experiences provide both a physical detachment, letting him break free from the petrification and enclosures around him, and a mental distancing, as he tries to comprehend "toutes les pièces de la machine qui tournait avec la superbe aisance d'un cyclotron."[48] The distance that lets him see the war as a machine, something at work behind its horrific effects, also involves a complicity with this machine. After he narrowly escapes an explosion, he sees himself dematerialized and reconstructed by the machine, granted a detachment from it because he's been consumed by it:

48 Dib, *Qui se souvient de la mer*, 25.

> Je constatai à cette seconde que le souffle de la machine, comparable à une flamme de soudeur, m'avait consumé très vite et, avant même que je m'en sois aperçu, restitué dans ma forme première mais à partir d'une disposition différente, inconnue, de la matière. Je flottais en l'air, endolori un peu, léger.[49]

This floating existence distinguishes him from those who are simply caught in the machine, but also from those, like his wife, Nafissa, or his friend, El Hadj, who are actively engaged in struggle, working in the unseen "underground city" that is being constructed as the one above is being destroyed. The narrator's distancing marks him with a different type of exteriority than the poor and marginalized, but one equally present in Dib's work. This character is one caught up in reverie, lacking the symbolic keys to understand his (always his) surroundings, or haunted by fragments of the past – usually images of childhood or of violence – that don't find a place in a clear narrative. This imaginative separation from his surroundings usually accompanies affects characters who fit strangely into the social order, like the narrator of *Qui se souvient* children of a leisured class in decline since colonization, remnants of a decaying social order that has not morphed into a new one. The obsession with finding a place, already there in *Un été africain* in the character of Djamal Terraz, who prefigures the narrator of this next novel, can lead him away from the events around him and into fantasy, but it also provides resources that help him continue through a world altered irrevocably from its previous state.

The titular sea in *Qui se souvient de la mer* stands in, among other things, for the assumed stability of the old order. The sea sits outside the city, and its rhythms have marked the city from its beginnings. It is protecting, calming, and clarifying, a space of stable continuity that stands aside from the actions and violence of the city's interior. The narrator recalls "l'époque ancienne où nous continuons à l'avoir à nos pieds, où elle changeait toutes les rumeures en fabuleuse chronique et nous parlait d'innocence. [...] Notre destin, à pas mesurés, s'avançait vers nous. La paix de la mer nous entourait."[50] His parents, he says, could never have imagined a world without it. But in the present of the novel, the sea is for the most part unseen, present as a rumour, a distant sound, a faint smell, but blocked off by the city's walls, and pushed further and further by the shifting walls and new constructions that are remaking the city. But where it does break into the novel, it is a source of support. At night, unseen, it floods the city and washes away traces of blood and dirt. And as the violence of the novel reaches its height, the narrator suddenly breaks

49 ibid, 27.
50 ibid., 114-115.

through a wall and finds himself face to face with the sea:

> La mer éclairée, resplendissante, endormie mais modulant une seule note, en quoi je reconnais l'appel. Je la contemple, oscillant dans son sommeil. Elle avait disparu depuis un si long temps que chacun a égaré au fond de soi l'image d'elle que je vois s'offrir à mes yeux. Tandis que son miroitement grandit, je me laisse submerger par la voix que j'avais presque oubliée... Je regarde la mer. Soutenu par cette certitude, je me retourne [...] Je m'en vais sous la protection du même chant.[51]

The sea's steady oscillation, its sound and the play of light on its surface introduce a rhythm that overrides the turbulence of the city. This irreality, saturated with sensation, characterizes the sea throughout the book. In the few places where *Qui se souvient de la mer* presents a recognizable geography, the city still seems to be the Tlemcen of the earlier novels, not, for instance, Algiers, which is actually on the water. The sea is not integrated into the city's life in the usual manner of a maritime city, which heightens its unreality and sense of exteriority. Its movement, washing away the traces of conflict, and its connection back to immemorial time make it figure a steady history that eclipses the events of the present, in something of the way that for Fernand Braudel the blue of the Mediterranean became the symbol of a "geological" temporality that dwarfs any human history.[52] Whether in its cyclical cleaning of the city or the suspended time of the narrator's encounter with its oscillations and sounds, the sea offers a glimpse of clarity, of certainty and a possible surrender to fate, that the chaos of the war prevents from appearing.

But this steadiness, although it is able to support the protagonist through the phantasmagorical horror of the novel, ultimately finds no place in this narrative of war and the collapse of the colonial order. At the novel's end, the narrator finally makes his way into the underground city just as the one above is collapsing and about to be covered over by the sea. The new city he finds resembles the old one, but with the difference that it is no longer held in by limits – either those of the walls or of the sea. Turning his always-interpretive gaze on the new city, he finds:

> A première vue, ces structures ne sont que la réplique de celles de la ville d'en-haut, leur image renversée en quelque sorte et cachée dans les stratifications inférieures. Mais où commence à s'imposer la différence, c'est dans la découverte du fait que la ville du sous-sol ne connaît pas de limites, que ses derniers retranchements ne

51 ibid, 160.

52 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans Siân Reynolds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). For a powerful reflection on the relation of temporality, event, and writing in Braudel's depiction of the sea, see Jacques Rancière's *Les noms de l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), chapter 6.

> sauraient être atteints par l'un quelconque de ses habitants ou par un moyen d'investigation, si puissant soit-il; et son domaine s'étendrait encore plus loin. Pour tout dire, selon moi, elle plonge ses racines non pas dans le sol, au sens restreint du terme, mais d'une façon générale, dans le monde, avec lequel, par une infinité de conduits, d'antennes, elle entre en communication comme jamais ne l'a fait la ville de l'air.[53]

The new world, after the war, presents itself as a limitless task of interpretation. This new city gives no certainty as to its definition, but presents an endless task to a subject who, like the narrator, begins from a position of not knowing. As a repetition of the old city, this new world does not escape history. But the constricting limits of the old city are gone, and with that its insertion into the comforting periodicity of the sea's movements. The sea's reassurance exists only in the narrator's memory – the novel's title is echoed in its closing lines – and the new city faces an uncertain future, becoming a task for interpretation for the narrator and the reader alike. Instead of rooting itself in the reliable and predictable cycles of the sea, it is infinitely rooted in the world as a whole. And in its endless network of connections, this new city includes its own spaces of exteriority. The previous quote continues:

> Cette disposition lui a permis de créer de nombreux plexus vitaux et surtout - surtout! - une réserve de ceux-ci, à l'abri de toute attaque, même par surprise, de toute infiltration, même par ruse. Chose qu'on aurait pu imaginer mais nullement réaliser à la surface. Ils constituent, ces systèmes de réserve, la plus remarquable défense qui se puisse concevoir: ils offrent des zones de refuge inexpugnables autant qu'ils forment des accumulateurs – qui, en cas de besoin, se convertissent d'eux-mêmes en sources! – d'énergie.[54]

In the end the novel itself, where the hopeful and transfixing space of the sea interrupts the unreal horror of the war, with all this phantasmagoria laid on top of the banal interactions of everyday life, might be a model for the new world Dib announces. The strange reserves of energy, refuges within the city, suggest an exteriority that doesn't require breaking with or negating the world in which it takes place. As the narrator enters the new city, losing the distance that kept him safe, but unavoidably caught up in, the old one, the externality that sustained him is embedded in the new terrain. The ahistorical, affect-laden, transformative space of the sea offers something that stretches beyond evental history, but without being able to present itself on the same level. Instead, it appears as a subterranean echo, in the unassailable reserves that a history of

53 Dib, *Qui se souvient de la mer*, 185.
54 ibid, 185-186.

inexhaustible relation holds against attack. As the poetic elements in Dib's texts stretch them away from the situations they represent, and as the gleam of the sea or the star pulls his characters away from the constraints of their lives, the reserves of memory and imagination stretch away from imposed history, but without replacing it.

Beïda Chikhi has distinguished between “le fantastique” and “la fantaisie” in Dib's writing. The former is a distortion of the world, like the one that transforms the wartime city into a landscape of mummies, living statues, and magically moving walls. It marks the place where the character or reader lacks access to the code that would interpret their surroundings, and leads to a confusion that, while it may be dazzling, offers no escape. “La fantaisie,” on the other hand, “se laisse cueillir comme un saveur, une couleur, un son, un parfum”; it exists within the world around it but, exceeding the form of representation around it, presents “le bonheur comme lumière, amour et détente, c'est à dire fin de la tension et de l'antagonisme.”[55] In this reading, the end of *Qui se souvient de la mer* would indicate an exit from “le fantastique,” while keeping “la fantaisie.” The first would be an exteriority or remove that leads away from lived experience, the second one that arises from and remains in contact with it. This distinction is helpful for tracking the importance of responsibility in Dib's work, as the next chapter will explore. But the distinction between the two is difficult to draw clearly; as discussed in earlier chapters, the curative or empowering force of imagination is never far removed from the threat of madness. The release that “la fantaisie” promises remains at a distance from the challenges of historical life. It may show the promise hovering at the edges of visibility, but it does not pass over into solidity.

*Irreality and idealization*

The stakes of this distance between beneficial fantasy and challenging life become clearest when what appears in the poetic glow is not impersonal but the figure of a historical actor. For Dib, the guiding fantasy often appears in the guise of a woman; this is true most clearly but not exclusively in explicitly dreamlike works. Along with the sea, the other source of comfort and support in *Qui se souvient de la mer* is the narrator's wife, Nafissa. Like the sea, she is largely absent from the actions of the novel – most of her time is spent in clandestine activity the narrator is only dimly aware of – but appears to the narrator in dream and spectral forms. Nafissa is a symbolic

55 Beïda Chikhi, “Poème, amour et fantaisie,” in Naget Khadda, ed. *Mohammed Dib: 50 ans de l'écriture* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 2002): 220.

figure, as is suggested by her name, which can mean "breath" or "spirit" but also can refer to the "self"; she presents the narrator with a kind of alter ego, a peaceful and engaged way of living through the war that contrasts with the narrator's confusion. Dib also uses a the homophony in French of "mer" and "mère," as Nafissa has the same calming, reassuring, and dazzling effect on the narrator that the sea does. In Winnifred Woodhull's words, Nafissa is at once "a vanguard figure marking engagement in and historical consciousness of the transformations being wrought during the war" and, like the sea, a figure that "marks the end of an era in which certainty—the source of Nafissa's serenity—is still possible."[56] The distance that Nafissa maintains from the confusion and disorder that mark others' experience of the war lets her figure a pure commitment, the appearance of a progressive history, but it also renders her unreal; her position can't appear inside the uncertain flow of events the novel opens onto. Woodhull points out that Nafissa is not the only female figure in Dib who is idealized, while leaving the work of navigating uncertainty to the male characters. This treatment reflects a feminist commitment on Dib's part, but it also shows the limits not just of an idealization of the feminine but, in general, of the presentation of desired outcomes through the use of imaginative exteriority.

Dib's concern with the condition of women was an important theme in his work from the beginning. In *La grande maison* it is the long-suffering mother, Aïni, and her counterparts who hold together the society, and women, young and old, hold many of the most admirable positions in his depiction of before, during, and after the war. The failure to make a significant improvement in the status and treatment of women was part of Dib's bitter criticism of the post-independence regime, which only became stronger with time. In a fragment from the "Autoportait" in *Laëzza*, Dib bitterly criticizes what he calls "un État ayant, au départ, choisi l'arriération, l'obscurantisme," run by men "aussi complexés qu'infatués de leur masculinité, se laissent vivre sur un capital séculaire de privilèges."[57] His attack on Algerian masculinity is paired with praise for Algerian women, whose oppression is not only condemned in itself but seen as a source of the problems facing the country and a block to possible futures:

> Les Algériennes? Il leur suffit d'être les femmes qu'elles sont, de s'en tenir à ce qu'elles ont à faire: elles se retrouvent révolutionnaires, et le prouvent. Elles

56 Woodhull, *Transformations of the Maghreb*, 61.

57 Dib, *Laëzza*, 140. Dib singles out the 1984 *code de famille* (which formalizes unequal rights for men and women with regards to marriage, divorce, and custody), which he calls "un corpus de lois identique en esprit au code de l'indigénat de triste mémoire," the code that governed the colonized population under French rule. Both were derived from a reading of Islamic law.

> assurent depuis déjà longtemps. Et de nos jours, elles administrent avec une farouche énergie, en dépit des hommes, la preuve qu'elles sont à même de pourvoir à des tâches tant. [...] la mode étant par chance entre leurs mains, de penser au nombre de préjugés à quoi elles refusent de se plier et cette montagne qu'elles réussissent à soulever: elles tiennent le terrorisme barbare *en échec* aussi efficacement que l'armée par ses interventions. Et si, passant leur temps à se contempler le nombril, les hommes se font les complices objectifs de ceux qui s'acharnent à mettre leur «beau» pays à feu et à sang, tfou![58]

Dib's fictional treatments of the civil war give attention to women. In some cases, they are the innocent victims of conflicts they become caught up in. But in two stories, Dib uses techniques of exteriorization to let the conflict appear in terms of a gendered opposition. In one, "Rosées de sang" from *Comme une bruit d'abeilles*, Dib imagines this direct confrontation between a self-satisfied and violent man, a terrorist "emir," and his female victim. The other, "Mouna," from *Simorgh*, presents a young girl confronting a man who has just killed her family. Both are carefully staged in ways that highlight their artificiality. "Rosées de sang" begins with indistinctness, space stripped down to a bare sketch: two figures, identity and gender unidentified, making their way up a mountain.[59] The narrative voice stresses their isolation – they are separated from "les autres," separated from an unspecified previous conflict involving tanks and helicopters, wrapped in a cold that smothers sounds and odours. The narration makes out that the two are a man and a woman, but only on the fourth page do their identities become clear: he is a self-styled "emir," leader of an armed group, and she is a young woman forcibly taken as his "wife" and made to gather valuables from corpses after the group carries out attacks. As soon as the characters are introduced, they undergo a reversal: the man, going to relieve himself, leaves his gun with the woman, who turns it on him. The rest of the story switches between brief flashbacks in her mind and the conversation between the two as she progressively disables him with gunfire. She curses him, attacks his claims to religious justification, and reminds him of his most hideous actions, before leaving him immobile but still living as it starts to snow. The graphic and detailed depiction of violence and the prolonged verbal abuse have no parallel elsewhere in Dib's writing.[60] If "Une partie de dès" used separation and role reversal to show the mutual imbrication

58 ibid, 141-142
59 Dib, *Comme une bruit d'abeilles*, 147-159.
60 The closest parallel for the verbal attacks might be Arfia's monologue attacking social corruption in *La danse du roi*; although the language and the context are quite different, both are unsparing tirades spoken by a female (ex)-combatant. See Dib, *La danse du roi*, 171-173.

of its two characters, "Rosées de sang" plays out a fantasy of pure confrontation between two utterly opposed sides. The isolated confrontation of victim and aggressor lets a fantasy scenario of justice as justified violence play out. The ending of the story offers little closure, or sense of how it might fit into the larger story – the one with helicopters, tanks, and massacres – that it is isolated from. But the isolated frame of the story allows Dib to establish one point of conflict, surrounding sexual violence, as a relatively stable point of interpretation within the broader conflict.

"Mouna" repeats the confrontation between an innocent female figure and a guilty male, and, like "Rosées du sang" has a cinematic, single-shot framing, although here the strange tone of the story is cartoonish, almost comic. Standing beside the bodies of her murdered family, Mouna insists to their killer with a child's stubbornness that she wants to go with him rather than be left behind. It is hard to insert the story's end – the killer, after leaving the frame, comes back at a run to take Mouna's hand and bring her with him – into any "real-world" larger scenario without disturbing results. But the unlikely pairing, isolated by the story's unwillingness to address its surroundings, allows for an indirect discussion of responsibility and generosity within the space of the civil war.

Both these two stories pit a woman against a physically stronger and violent man. And both offer the satisfaction of seeing masculine posturing undermined. But they do so at the cost of a flattening, an artificiality that turns the scenes into fables and their characters into symbols. The heightened figures of women as victims or moral standards in these late works, like the dreamlike female figures in *Qui se souvient de la mer* or *Cours sur la rive sauvage*, and even to an extent the use of Zhor's body in *L'Incendie* as a figure of future possibilities, run the risk that putting exemplary weight on female characters can also flatten them. Marnia Lazreg, surveying depictions of women in novels by male Algerian writers, has warned that "a distinction must be made between supporting women's quest for a more egalitarian society that protects their rights, and writing critically from a male-centred perspective about women."[61] While Dib's alliance with the former is unquestionable, his tendency to make female characters into symbols or idealized figures can end up denying them the complexity and ambiguity that makes his ironically distanced protagonists exemplary of the experience of a history lived from the side. Too strong a depiction of marginality, no matter how admirably it is lived, closes off the experience of that marginality.

61 Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 191. Lazreg's only mention of Dib has to do with Aïni's function in the first trilogy as a symbol of the long-suffering nation.

Characters like Arfia in *La danse du roi*, or Lyyl / Lyyli Belle in *Neiges de marbre* and *L'Infante maure* (and the related shorter texts) provide female figures who face ambiguity and uncertainty. Louis Tremaine has suggested that the idealized picture of Nafissa in *Qui se souvient de la mer* is a function of the narrator's "infantile" consciousness – he is reliant on a mother-figure, and so produces an unreal one – a condition he has still not exited at the novel's end.[62] But the more symbolic women who appear in Dib's work point also to a broader problem: if a complete, fully-rounded picture is impossible, but can only be glimpsed in moments and from different perspectives, then how does the writer indicate his allegiance without robbing the subject of that allegiance of her own complexity or opacity?

The literary structuring that creates relations of exteriority or seclusion, that cuts controlled scenes off from surrounding larger stories, is itself a distancing tool that sets the literary works off from the world of experience. Structured narrative, heightened silences, characters pushed to extremes or into extreme situations, all draw attention to representation as technique, a thick layer that modifies and rearranges, distinguishing meaning and ambiguity. Where two forms of exteriority – the marginality of those who have been pushed to the sides of history, and the ironic distance taken by those detached from it – come to merge, the reader may come to be more directly interpolated, driven to take a stand on the material presented. But the writing also runs the risk of making the enforced marginality it presents seem unreal, aestheticizing it and simplifying it rather than conveying its weight to the reader. Poetic exteriority as a clarification of or a resource for the lives of the marginalize does not provide a resolution of that state of marginalization, and, when suffused with what Cheikhi calls the "fantastic," it may obscure it.

This problem leads us from situation of historical experience to historical life as practice. If history is inescapable as a determining force, but never shows itself in a self-contained narrative but only in glimpses, then it appears for the subject who experiences as a choice, something to be responded to, rather than an object of knowledge. To face this choice without trying to eliminate it, either by imposing a fully-formed picture on it or by dismissing its constraining force, is a challenge many of Dib's characters face. Whatever figures surface at the edges of experience, they can be taken either as dreamed-of escape routes, substitutes for reality, or as guides back to experience. The next chapter explores this dynamic.

62 Tremaine, "Psychic Deformity in Mohammed Dib's *Qui se souvient de la mer.*"

## 2.3: Community, Decision

Dib's first novels are heavily invested in the idea of "the people," and although this interest mutates and gives way to other concerns later on it remains an important thematic. As we saw in the last chapter, he shows ways in which imaginative creation can allow a collective figure to appear where it is denied. But he also explores how difficult it is to pin down or solidify this figure. Defined as the people, the poor, or the oppressed, this figure escapes not only definition but even direct address; where one wants the response of the people, silence is encountered instead. Rather than this silence leading to the rejection of any idea of collectivity, it instead raises the question of how to, in the absence of that response, still live in the presence and relation of a collectivity. It is always possible to try to evade the decision posed by historical experience, either by substituting, for the difficult choices of the present, an image of how history should unfold and how the collectivity should be understood, or by dreaming of a completely new start, the destruction of all present difficulties and the commencement of a fully new history. Between these two is the space of living history, as invisible, within the decisions posed by the visible world of quotidian experience.

Such a lived history is necessarily collective, but the community it implies is not necessarily available to the individuals who live it as an object of knowledge; instead it may be the object of a decision, even of faith – an ethical or practical issue more than an empirical or theoretical one. History connects lives – it is, in Glissant's terms, the network of relation that is inescapable. If it could be said to have a subject this subject would be fully collective but never figurable. But on the other hand, the experience of living through history is that of an individual point needing to live within and adapt itself to its situation and surroundings. This leads to a tension in the idea of history: being immersed in history means that every individual is part of a larger community, open to and determined by influences that stretch from the most local and immediate to global and long-term scales. But every attempt to pin down and describe this community ignores, first, its historicity – the fact that it is always changing and made up of overlapping factors – and second, that everyone is engaged, situated, and interpolated differently even by the "same" history. To deny any collective identity, to pretend to solipsism, is to deny being historically situated; but to claim full identity with the collective, with some figure of the people or of

humanity, is to ignore or try to reduce the complexity of relation to one set image. The entirety of the historical community remains invisible, but it asserts itself at all times in history, corroding the claims of historical subjects and opening every subject, individual or group, to relation that lies outside of this. In this passage from *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy works through some of these difficulties:

> There is no communion of singularities in a totality superior to them and immanent to their common being. In place of such a communion, there is communication. Which is to say, in very precise terms, that finitude itself *is* nothing; it is neither a ground, nor an essence, nor a substance. But it appears, it presents itself, it exposes itself, and thus it *exists* as communication. In order to designate this singular mode of appearing, this specific phenomenality, which is no doubt more originary than any other (for it could be that the world appears to the community, not to the individual), we would need to be able to say that finitude *co-appears* or *compears* (*com-paraît*) and can only *compear*: in this formulation we would need to hear at once that finite being always presents itself "together," hence severally; that finitude always presents itself in being-in-common and as this being itself; and that in this way it always presents itself at a *hearing* and before the judgment of the law of community, or, more originarily, before the judgment of community as law.[1]

This "com-pearance" means that every individual stands before a judgment not as an isolated individual or as a representative of a group sharing the same identity and common being, but as a member of a group united simply by the fact that they appear together. And because the judgment refers to a law that in turn refers to the community, the authority that calls this collective experience to judgment is itself subject to judgment. Historical existence – in which people come and go, subjecting every community to change – implies a communal existence, but one that exceeds any claim to what it is we have in common; it also implies a judgment or a decision, but one that is subject to being remade at every moment. "In understanding ourselves, we understand that there is nothing to understand," Nancy writes elsewhere, specifying that this can't be interpreted as meaning either that we can understand everything (since there's nothing to be understood), that we can understand nothing, or that understanding only understands itself, but rather that "it is all these replayed together in another way: as *ethos* and *praxis*."[2] The authority of judgment is exposed to a silence that undermines it – but rather than this cancelling both out, or establishing a timeless struggle between the two poles, this exposure is the ethic and practice of

1 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 28. [Translation slightly modified].
2 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000): 98-99.

an inescapably historical experience. Nancy at times refers to this as decision: not a decision between given options, but every moment as the experience of deciding. "We are offered to ourselves," he says, and "with respect to the offer, we have something to do which is: to accept it or not."[3]

These are not abstract concerns. First, this is because the relation between the acting individual and the collective figure of the community or people can be and is called on in the services of different politics. Claims for democracy, in liberal or communist forms, and the claims of anticolonialism have all posited "the people" not only as the source of historical development but as the image of a future society mobilized against a present inequality, where control of development is given to a few. But in turn, the figure of the people can be claimed as the justification for actions carried out by the few in their name, which can include silencing, oppressing, and killing those deemed to fall outside of the community or disciplining those seen as in the community. The dream of existing simply as an individual is often wiped away by the actual power of communal identities, a situation that authoritarian rule, war, and poverty all tend to enhance. Ultimately what defines the form of community is not a negotiation between whose claim is most believable or even desirable, but the course of history itself, in all its unpredictability. Collectivity functions invisibly through the identities that claim it; mobilization on the basis of particular versions of identity both influence and operate on the basis of the unpredictable effects of relation.

This chapter draws mainly on two of Dib's novels: *Le métier à tisser*, the last volume of Dib's first trilogy, and *Le maître de chasse*, one of Dib's post-independence Algerian novels. In both cases, the difficulty of seeing a course for history beyond the blocks and challenges it faces leads to debate and confusion over how to define the community. The challenge of history appears as the imposition, on each individual, of a decision as to how to relate to a community that does not coalesce into an ideal or coherent form. Here the political and the individual meet up. Choosing in favour of a divided and uncertain present existence becomes an ethical task, one that puts Dib in conversation with religious thought. After presenting readings of these two novels, the chapter briefly considers how this dynamic continues in Dib's work even in places where it is less obviously concerned with questions of history and community.

3 Nancy, "Finite History," in *The Birth to Presence*, 165.

*Le métier à tisser : articulating "the people"*

As discussed in the last chapter, Dib gestured, in *La grande maison* and *L'Incendie*, towards a collectivity, a kind of emerging and united people, behind or against the main events of the narrative. In *Le métier à tisser*, the question of the people is an important theme again, but here the emphasis is on its misery and powerlessness. The workers in the basement weaving studio the novel revolves around discuss inequality, misery, and how collective identity relates to these. Although many of the conversations in the novel are overshadowed by a sense of something – some event or catastrophe – pending, the overwhelming task facing these characters is simply living through the present.

The basement carpet-weaving studio in *Le métier à tisser* is the product of a particular historical situation: a sudden boom in a long-established but declining industry in Tlemcen to service the war effort of Vichy France:

> Une subite prolifération de manufactures et d'ateliers se déclarait, pendant que sans arrêt, des tapis, des couvertures partaient pour la France. [...] Les Allemands recevaient en fin de compte tous ces tissages. Ils achetaient au poids et ne se souciaient guère de la qualité. On racontait qu'assitôt arrivée chez eux, indifféremment, chaque pièce était déchirée, triturée et retransformée en matière brute.[4]

The war effort revived the industry even as it was doomed to coming obsolescence by mechanization, but reduced the art of carpetmaking to a stage in transmitting raw material, and transformed this segment of Algerian society around an external and temporary demand. The wartime situation heightened what Jacques Berque called the tendency of colonialism in this period, "not intended for [...] the welfare of the country itself," "to disintegrate the body that it professed to serve."[5] Dib runs through the historical setting quickly, but it sets the stage for the novel's conversations as much as does the cramped, dark and smelly physical setting of the overcrowded workshop. The weaving boom, set against the collapse of agriculture during the war, is directly a result of subservience to the colonial (and fascist) order, and because of this reliance it offers few future prospects. Unlike the poor agricultural workers in *L'Incendie*, the weavers have little sense of a collective identity or of what they might have to gain from it. The community of the workplace is a community of necessity, a juxtaposition of characters with little to bind them other than physical proximity and occasional laughter. They experience alienation

4 Dib, *Le métier à tisser*, 17
5 Berque, *French North Africa*, 93.

as isolation, a split between the individual and a larger term that would embrace it in generality. Abbas Sebagh, one of the weavers, expresses this in a typically emotional but defeated tone:

> Tenez, pouvez-vous m'expliquer ceci: j'aime la vie en général, comment se fait-il que je méprise et déteste la mienne de toutes me forces? Hein! […]
> Il y a des moments où le coeur n'est pas à l'ouvrage, les mains savent quoi faire, mais l'esprit est ailleurs: alors l'inquiétude monte en nous. La patience ne nous satisfait plus. «L'homme, disent certains, est ceci et cela.» L'homme, l'homme! Ils en ont plein la bouche. Amis, de quel homme s'agit-il, je voudrais bien le savoir! S'agit-il de Pétain? De Rothschild? Ou s'agit-il de moi?[6]

As Abbas continues, he contradicts himself, swinging between asserting his difference and claiming that he is a man like any other; Dib comments, "quand il disait une chose, c'était autre chose, toujours, qu'il fallait entendre." This confusion is typical of the conversations in *Le métier à tisser*. Lack of clarity in their own thoughts, division in the social world of the workplace, and above all the awareness of the absence of a collective that would give a solid meaning to their statements push Dib's characters up against the contradictions of their historical lives. Dib's first trilogy was, he said, a dutiful effort to serve the nationalist cause by making the collective voice audible, but in *Le métier à tisser* he also shows how precarious that effort is. For these workers, historical time is primarily a time of waiting, and through the different characters that make up this divided community, Dib shows a range of responses to this condition.

Some of these characters serve largely to show the exploitation and cruelty that shape the *atelier* as a social site. There is the "master-weaver" and owner of the studio who shows up only occasionally, usually drunk, to say a few words and leave; the toothless foreman who is an apologist for colonialism and has disdain for anyone poorer than him; the old and senile weaver who endlessly laments earlier days, when bosses respected their workers; and the crippled boy Zbèche, the head apprentice, who is worked hard and mocked and who dies suddenly mid-way through the novel. For each of these the world extends little beyond the confines of the studio. But the adult weavers are aware of and centrally concerned with what is outside. Omar notices that they seldom talk about their work, and never outside of the studio; they are preoccupied with something else – "ils voyaient *autre chose*, espéraient *autre chose*" – without knowing what this something else is.[7] This obsession with something ungraspable, a desire to be part of a larger world or simply to escape their conditions, drives their conversation. Questions of faith, politics,

6 Dib, *Le métier à tisser*, 63-64.
7 ibid., 123.

and action overlap for this range of characters navigate between fatalistic resignation and despair, options that would abandon the tensions of the present in favour of an imagined image or a fantasy of replacing it entirely. The weavers represent a range of currents within colonized society, but in the novel we see them mainly alone; each approach to the situation poses an individual dilemma.

Ghouti Lamine is a man of faith, and can be read as representative of the Islamic revival movement that was a significant factor in the emergence of Algerian nationalist identity, and which was generally opposed to political engagement during the period the novel treats. Lamine largely stays out of the raucous debates in the workshop, reciting and muttering under his breath; we first hear him repeating "vous serez damnés, tous damnés."[8] But Dib treats him sympathetically, introducing him via a description of his scrupulous performance of prayer, performed with "une muette éloquence" that contrasts with the usually tense atmosphere. He is friendly towards Omar, and is the one who tells Omar about his father and grandfather. Omar's father, he says, was a good man, but his political convictions, for Lamine, transgressed divine law and so explain his early death:

> Il tenait des propos qu'une oreille de musulman ne peut pas entendre. Tous les hommes, prétendait-il, sont pareils et égaux… Comment cela peut-il être? Ils sont pareils et égaux devant Celui qui les a créés, oui; mais dans la vie…
> Ton père s'élevait sans le savoir contre la Loi sacrée. Que dire?… Il est mort.[9]

The emphasis on family and genealogy can be read as a characteristic of the reformist movement, the *islāḥ*; knowing one's background and claiming one's faith were the basis for defining the people as understood by the Islamist movement, which held that cultural change through education was fundamental before political change would be possible.[10] But the conservatism in Lamine's political fatalism requires him to repress his own sympathies with those demands:

> Je parle, et tu ne comprends sans doute pas ce que je dis... Seigneur, aie pitié de tes créatures! Ton père n'était pas le seul à penser de cette manière. Moi aussi, des fois…
> Je me prends à réfléchir… et je ne sais plus, mon esprit s'égare.[11]

Lamine's inner peace is bought at the price of repression and a resultant bitterness, captured in

8 ibid., 53.
9 ibid., 56.
10 On the *association des oulémas*, the primary *islāh* group in pre-independence Algeria, see Ali Merad, *Le réformisme musulman en Algérie de 1925 à 1940: Essai d'histoire réligieuse et sociale* (Paris: Mouton & co., 1967). McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism*, offers a brief comparison of political strategies.
11 ibid., p. 56.

the initial image of him simultaneously repeating scripture and cursing his fellow workers. The only equality he is willing to entertain is a universal conditional of personal responsibility, and he attacks the others for abandoning this:

> Pourquoi est-ce que vous vous plaignez toujours si vous-mêmes ne faits rien pour que votre vie soit différente, ne respectez pas l'homme en vous? On peut se plaindre aussi de vous [...]
> «Présente-toi à Dieu dans ta nudité, il te vêtira.» Nous ne portons que des habits d'emprunt, tous autant que nous sommes, et il en est ainsi de l'injuste comme du juste. Nous sommes tous nus de la plus terrible manière, nous sommes tous exposés affreusement. Les vêtements dont nous nous croyons affublés n'existent que dans notre imagination [...]
> Les hommes ne veulent pas d'une existence probe qui coule limpidement sous les regards satisfaits du Tout-Puissant.[12]

But when Lamine tries to elaborate on the conditions of divine justice he contradicts himself, admitting that those who do good suffer as much or more than those who do wrong. Despite his calls for clear-sightedness and abandoning personal illusions, he deals with the present moment by turning away from his surroundings and towards an eternal image of justice. As his name (*al-amīn*) suggests, he is presented as a believer and trustworthy, a figure of the kind of quiet and principled activity that Dib tends to treat with respect, but this does not give him the ability to reconcile his despair with the conditions he lives in.

Ocacha, likely the most admirable figure in the novel, also faces the crisis of a faith that can't find support what he sees around him. Dib, in a 1976 interview, called Ocacha, along with Hamid Saraj from the two earlier novels, as the ones "qui ont fait l'Algérie."[13] Saraj, the communist activist, is an almost-heroic and, in his failure, an almost-tragic figure; Ocacha is more conflicted. Taciturn but largely respected in the studio, he has travelled widely through Algeria and worked a variety of jobs, eager to see and get to know "le peuple"; like Saraj, his travelling gives him a broader perspective than those around him. He is a man of conviction, but this conviction is not sufficient to secure him peace. He confides his discomfort to Omar, with whom he develops a friendship, passing hours together in a *metabkha*, a casual restaurant: "Il ne suffit plus de croire, pour se sentir l'âme en paix. J'aurais voulu, bien sûr, j'aurais aimé croire et me trouver en paix avec moi-même. Mais je crois et je ne me sens pas en paix!"[14] This applies not only to

12 ibid., 155-157.
13 Bouzar, *Lectures maghrébines: essai*, 101.
14 Dib, *Le métier à tisser*, 99.

religious sentiment but to his relation to the people. He has an often-expressed faith in the people as "le royaume de Dieu […] la saine respiration du monde."[15] But the people that he has met are indecisive, unsure of what they are thinking or doing:

> J'ai parcouru le pays j'ai causé avec beaucoup de gens.
> - Alors, à quoi pensent-ils?
> - C'est ce que je leur ai demandé. Que faites-vous? A quoi passez-vous votre temps? Et tout ce qu'ils m'ont accordé ne peut même pas s'appeler une explication, un début d'explication.[16]

Ocacha at times attributes this uncertainty to the condition of of humans, "les seules créatures au monde qui ne sachet pas ce qu'elles sont, ni où elles vont."[17] But it is also particular to the Algerian condition, to a historical situation that has rendered people raw and that promises an outcome always on the verge of erupting but indefinitely detained. Explaining to Omar why he's decided to leave Tlemcen and his work to return to travelling, he explains himself in fragments:

> Notre peuple a été grandment offensé… Il en sortira quelque chose de terrible...
> Notre peuple est devenu singulièrement sensible, dit-il. Sensible à ses malheurs, aux offenses à lui faites dans les jours présents et passés, sensible à un degré difficile à saisir […] Sensible aussi à la bonté, aux paroles amicales. Tout ça existait sans doute dans le passé… Mais aujourd'hui, son coeur bat comme jamais il n'a battu. Qu'est-ce qu'il en sortira? Du bien, j'espère…[18]

Omar understands Ocacha's decision to leave in relation to this sensitivity, a sensitivity to the atmosphere of contempt and shame, of worthlessness, that hangs in the air of the weaving studio. Ocacha, quiet, gentle, conflicted, finds that the only response he can take is to continue moving, to continue displacing the contradiction and searching for the moment or place where the people he is looking for will appear. That this involves leaving his work and his family is a sacrifice that will at least put off the risk of a worse outcome.

Hamza, another weaver, has spent time in colonial prison. He has a barely-suppressed violence to his character that makes him ready to welcome any outcome that could break the current impasse, and is a fierce believer in the people. Their current condition and behaviour, to him, is due to their oppression, and this largely absolves them of responsibility, since they act in impotence and ignorance:

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15 ibid., 147.
16 ibid., 138-139.
17 ibid., 111.
18 ibid., 161-162.

> Aucun d'entre nous pris à part n'est mauvais [...] Et quand il l'est, c'est en aveugle, parce qu'il n'a aucun pouvoir sur son destin. Qui ne peut rien sur les forces qui le bousculent, ne peut rien sur lui-même.[19]

To this absolute reduction, only an absolute reaction will be adequate: "Des gens parvenu au point où ils ne sont rien, où ils sont zéro, des gens comme ça, ne pourraient faire qu'une chose [...] Réclamer tout."[20] In Hamza's mind, the only way forward is to radically undo the present, to destroy the social structures in place and begin anew. His attitudes resemble what Fanon would describe a few years later as how the colonized subject comes to think of opposition to the colonial system only in the extreme terms of colonial "Manichaeanism," the all-or-nothing terms of absolute humiliation or absolute victory. Hamza argues for a radical seizure of humanity against day-to-day humiliation by claiming moral justification for destruction:

> Des hommes comme nous sont la mesure de toute chose: celle qui permet de juger un pays, un peuple, un monde! dit Hamza/ […]
> Nous sommes descendus trop bas. Nous ne pourrions redevinir des hommes par les voies ordinaires; nous nous verrions obligés de bouleverser le monde. Peut-être même de l'épouvanter […]
> Un destin pèse sur nous: pour y échapper, il faut tout briser.
> Sa voix devint rauque.
> - Refondre le monde et l'homme? Oui; mais d'abord tout détruire…[21]

Hamza's opinion is in a sense the opposite of Lamine's: a complete upturning of the colonial system is the only route to changing social malaise, as all other options have been exhausted. This current of thought, growing in power after the suppression of protests demanding autonomy at the end of World War II, would lead to the decision by members of the nationalist movement to take to arms, first in the founding of the Organisation Spéciale (OS) as an armed wing of the nationalist party in 1947, and then in the start of the revolution in 1954. Omar Carlier, in his "history of Algerian radicalisms," describes the OS "la rançon vivante du mensonge colonial," its violence a response "à la violence intrinsèque des situations qui conduisent à y recourir," a violence that first appeared as "indissolublement sociale, culturelle, et psychique, avant que d'être politique."[22] But it carried with it a striking contrast between the ideals that supported it and "la fonction même de l'OS, tuer."[23] This contrast is carried in Hamza's call for destruction before

19 ibid., 64.
20 Dib, *Le métier à tisser*, 64.
21 ibid., 65.
22 Omar Carlier, *Entre nation et jihad: histoire sociale des radicalismes algériens* (Paris: Science Po, 1995): 302.
23 ibid., 299-300.

reconstruction – a justice which condemns the injustices of the present and calls for its complete negation in favour of a new start. Without condemning these positions, Dib makes them secondary to the calmer and more situated activism represented by Ocacha or by Hamid Saraj in the earlier books. Hamza's sharp positions allow for a hope beyond the present, but give little indication of how to proceed; the violence behind his words is unsettling, but ultimately he ends up turning to Ocacha for guidance. The contradiction of the situation lurks explosive behind his words.

In other, less principled, contexts, this negating violence can be directly threatening. Hamedouche, the youngest of the weavers, becomes increasingly attracted by the idea of zero-sum violence. Hamedouche, whose aggressive personality embraces the stereotype of the redhead (Dib is not shy in this novel about using physical description as shorthand for character traits), begins with a passive cynicism that over the course of the novel drifts towards a cynical activism. His character arc is one of the few narrative developments in the novel, whose narrative stasis mirrors the social deadlock it describes. Hamedouche begins as a contrarian and somewhat resentful individualist. In the discussions in the studio, he argues that the weavers should be interested only in their own concerns. The misery of the peasants or the beggars filling the city is none of their business; it means nothing to them and is only an irritation. He responds to all the talk of "the people" with frustration: "Laisse le peuple! Qu'as-tu à parler toujours du peuple? Il faut justement le laisser souffrir... Laisse le peuple, et que chacun vive comme il veut! Selon sa loi."[24] His position is coloured by a deep pessimism, as he shares Hamza or Ocacha's view of a collective degradation but lacks their faith in a collective capacity for renewal:

> Tu parles fréquemment de nous [...] Sais-tu au moins ce que nous valons? Sais-tu de quoi nous sommes capables, et quels méfaits nous pourrions commetre? […]
> Chacun de nous cache un monstre en lui! Nous avons l'air d'être comme tout le monde. Mais nous ne le sommes pas. Et nous refusons, tous, d'en convenir. Nous parlons, vivons, travaillons en baissant la tête, mais nous n'attendons que l'occasion de montrer le mal que nous pouvons faire.[…]
> Nous sommes capable de… Dieu sait quoi!...
> Tous ceux que je vois se mettre en frais, se dépenser en paroles généreuses, ne font que cracher en l'air. Ils se trompent, et nous trompent! Leurs discours ne remueront pas le plus petit caillou du chemin. Et s'ils disent le contraire, ils mentent.[25]

If he attacks purveyors of "generous speech" like Ocacha as self-deluded, displacing their own

24 ibid., 149.
25 ibid., 163-164.

dissatisfaction onto an idealized collective figure, Hamedouche clearly lets his own bitterness pour into his words. He is an orphan, the son of a weaver whose overwork contributed to his death, has moved from workshop to workshop, and has few acquaintances other than Zina, the prostitute he loves. In an unguarded moment, he admits to Omar that "des fois je sens comme si j'étais seul au monde et qu'en dehors de moi, rien de vivant n'existe. Alors, je deviens insupportable [...] C'est probablement une maladie que j'ai."[26] As he becomes radicalized, turning his rage more and more on society as a whole, this sense of isolation transfers into a willingness to see everything else destroyed. He erupts in the workshop, "Il faut tout simplifier, il faut supprimer toutes les différences qui existent entre les homes. Et ceux qui s'y opposent, il faut les écraser!"[27] He lashes out directly at his fellow workers and the idea of community in general:

> Excusez-moi, mais il n'y a pas à avoir ou ne pas avoir pitié du peuple. Je regarde tout le monde et je constate qu'en général, il n'y a pas de peuple. De vrai peuple, il n'y en a pas! Il n'y en a pas quand on réunit des gens en tas et qu'on leur crie: «Vous êtes le peuple, le peuple qui fait tout, qui sait tout!» Ce peuple-là, c'est du vent! [...]
> L'humiliation, l'esclavage, la peur nous ont pervertis jusqu'à la moelle. Nous ne ressemblons plus à des hommes. [...]
> Vous n'attendez que le moment de mordre, mais ne le ferez que quand personne ne sera là pour vous en empêcher [...] Vous vous aplatissez comme des punaises et préférez que d'autres vous défendent. Et le jour de la curée, on vous verra sortir de vos tanières, comme des bêtes qu'attire la charogne. Le jour où vous pourrez vous venger en toute sécurité, alors vous serez féroces.[28]

Hamedouche conflates the idea of the people with that of a "real" people, one that would conform to his own image of a strong identity, active and attacking. In the absence of this, he turns to the idea of taking violence into his own hands. But with Omar refusing to join him in his plans to carry out attacks, and fully isolated from any figure of community or solidarity, Hamedouche's rage erupts instead in a violent attack on Omar in the workshop that leads to Omar's dismissal. The need to act and the absence of a field in which to act turns, for Hamedouche, into a violence directed against himself or in a purely destructive, and ineffective, lashing out. If he manages to break out of the stasis that captures all the other characters, it is only at the expense of the hope that provided the initial impetus for a critique of the situation.

26 ibid., 171.
27 ibid., 169.
28 ibid., 183-184

*The people as imposition*

For each of these characters, the impasse of the present situation is both individual and collective, and for each one the decision or challenge posed to them involves trying to match those two terms, to find their place in the absence of a figure of the people they would want to identify with. But in *Le métier à tisser* the people also appear as a presence, a mute, opaque and overwhelming one. In the novel's first pages, Dib introduces the crowd of beggars who have begun to flood into Tlemcen from the surrounding countryside. When they are first introduced, they appear out of a morning fog lifting off of Tlemcen, as "ces silhouettes qui avaient l'air de fantômes grotesques."[29] Flatness, opacity, and deformity characterize the description of these crowds; they are seen from the outside, pictured as objects or moving like animals:

> De temps à autre, on avait le sentiment qu'ils cherchaient quelque chose. Leurs mouvements étaient ceux d'une reptation imperceptible. Puis ils recouvraient leur immobilté.[30]

Their numbers grow over the novel as whole families fill the squares and doorways, immovable and mostly silent. When they are rounded up by the colonial authorities and trucked away, they return (or are replaced by undifferentiated others) within days. They appear in family groups, physically supporting each other, connected by social bonds even though, fatigued and starving, they are largely immobile. Their misery and their mute but inescapable presence fills space without entering into a relationship with it, imposing their presence on its inhabitants but not engaging them:

> S'entretenir avec eux? On aurait parié mille contre un qu'ils usaient d'un autre langage. De plus, ils ne manifestaient aucun besoin d'entrer en relation avec la ville. Ils semblaient plutôt nourrir d'autres préoccupations, qui les plaçaient hors de ce monde. [...]
> Leur multitude augmentant, ils ne devenaient pas plus hardis, ni davantage sûrs d'eux-mêmes. Ils partaient toujours à la conquête de nouveaux points. Évidemment, ils n'allaient pas revenir sur leurs pas. Mais voilà! Est-ce que la cité pouvait leur servir de lieu de refuge, si ce n'était pour un temps?[31]

The crowd becomes individualized and personalized in moments of suffering, a suffering with no remedy: there is an old starving man teetering on his grandson's shoulder, or most poignantly, at the novel's end, a mother whose nursing infant has just died. One man comes to the studio

29 ibid., 14.
30 ibid., 16.
31 ibid., 88-89.

looking for somewhere to hide but is then dragged away by the police. This man tells them he has come from Bni Boublen, the village where Omar spent the summer of *L'Incendie*; they come from the rural population that has been pushed further into poverty than the city due to drought and the rearrangement of the colony's economy for the European war effort. This situation, for Hamza, makes them emblematic of the Algerian nation: as he says, "le pays fermente [...] Et le pays, c'est eux. Ils se sont mis en marche [...] et c'est le pays qui marche."[32] But to most of the weavers the beggars' misery and powerlessness reflects the workers' own helpless and worthless condition.

Omar, in the novel's last pages, wonders at the difference between this mutely suffering group and the animated men he'd seen speaking with Hamid Saraj, the communist agitator of *La grande maison* and *L'Incendie*. There they had been individuals engaged by passions, but now, in the absence of that animating speech, they are pinned down by "la lassitude qui les clouait au sol."[33] Saraj, seen in *La grande maison* as an orator, and in *L'Incendie* as an organizer who sat with the villagers mostly listening, alters the situation simply by his presence, giving the poor workers a tacit permission to take up speech. Saraj, whose name means "lamp," is a familiar figure of the anti-colonial militant, one that Fanon would describe and call for a few years later: one who answers to the people, who puts himself at their service, who tries as much as possible to become one with their demands and situations. Fanon's ideal militant acts out of a realization that while he is searching for the truth of the situation "the fellah, the unemployed and the starving do not lay claim to truth. They do not say they represent the truth because they are the truth in their very being."[34] Ocacha describes the people in similar terms: "Personne n'a enseigné le peuple, et pourtant il porte la vérité en lui; cette vérité, il la sème à pleines mains, avec prodigalité."[35]

These kinds of statements can be controversial; Fanon's has been seen as containing a dangerous populist rhetoric that laid the grounds for a post-independence discourse in many African states where the unity and veracity of the people would be used to justify an unquestionable party line and to eliminate competitors. But in its context, Fanon's statement can be read as primarily concerned with kinds of knowledge: the issue for the militant is to realize that the truth of the situation is not a problem to be solved or a message to be brought and imposed.

32 ibid., 93.
33 ibid., 197.
34 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 13.
35 Dib, *Le métier à tisser*, 147.

Instead it is something lived, in the crippling reality of suffering and exclusion and in the tenacity of a communal life that continues despite its reduction. The militant on the model of Saraj, the one who listens, awakens, and empowers, is one who gives himself to the community. But in Dib's trilogy, this leads him not to a position of leadership but to a colonial prison camp: his inspiration, too, has to function in its own absence.

In Dib's writing on the war, the figures involved in armed violence who Dib treats with respect or even idealizes – the old peasant at the end of *Un été africain*, Nafissa and El Hadj in *Qui se souvient de la mer* – act quietly, surreptitiously, out of a sense of duty; their speech is gentle. They contrast both the characters who sink completely into despair, figured viscerally in one grieving mother in *Qui se souvient* who melts into a pool of blood that then runs endlessly across the courtyard, and the ones who give in to the fantasy of total violence. In "Naëma disparue," a short story from *Le Talisman* whose narrative is a kind of nucleus of *Qui se souvient de la mer*, the narrator asks his seven-year-old son what he thinks should be done and receives the answer: "les tuer tous. Faire éclater des bombes sans arrêt."[36] The despair that leads to incapacity or embracing violence for its own sake involves a psychological flight, pushed by the everyday terror of the war and in the invisibility of figures who would help resolve it – the story begins with the news that Naëma, the narrator's wife, involved in clandestine activity, has been captured. Although at the end of the story the narrator finds a role, given the keys to a shop run by a now-assassinated figure in clandestine networks, for the bulk of the text he is simply engaged in waiting, continuing to live. The question of response to historical situation, and participation in a movement bringing change, becomes intensely personal, an issue of maintaining a connection to life as it is lived, in all the details of its difficulty and horror. As Omar realizes while Hamedouche is beating him, "Chez nous, arriver à vivre, survivre, constitue une victoire."[37] The first, necessary step to any further transformation is simply to be able to support history as it is lived, to be with and listen to surroundings beyond dreams of fleeing or suppressing them.

The imposing presence of the beggars in *Le métier à tisser* pose baldly the question of what Nancy would call "deciding for us," choosing to engage the world and the collective as it is, despite the difficulties, fissures, and miseries it presents. In their almost inhuman misery, this collective figure forces the inhabitants of Tlemcen in the novel to decide whether to turn away or

36 Dib, *Le talisman*, 60.
37 Dib, *Le métier à tisser*, 194.

not. With the option of action or transformation occluded or absent, this becomes simply an issue of identifying or not with this collective. For many, the initial response is rejection:

> Beaucoup voyaient ce peuple en face pour la première fois, et ils ne discernaient rien d'engageant en lui; il leur paraissait repoussant, dans son âpreté. Effrayés, d'honnêtes gens se détournaient en disant: «Je ne me reconnais pas en ceux-là.»[38]

The European population, far better off than the indigenous one, simply stays absent; "de leur nature," Dib writes, the Europeans "ne pratiquaient pas la charité, aussi les mendiants ne se présentaient-ils pas chez eux." It is "le petit peuple" of Tlemcen who come to provide, even those who have almost nothing to give. Aïni, Omar's mother, presents the rationale for this:

> Ce sont nos frères de sang et des hôtes que Dieu nous envoie. Qu'ils soient les bienvenus! N'aurions-nous que de l'eau à leur offrir, nous les recevrons. Ils comprendront que nous sommes des déshérités, presque autant qu'eux. Mais la miséricorde est encore de ce monde. Il ne sera pas dit que nous aurons repoussé nos semblables parce que nous possédons un gîte et eux non.[39]

Aïni's response affords at least two readings. On the most explicit level, she asserts an ethnic belonging; the links of blood and religion obligate Algerians to each other. Soumya Ammar Khodja has pointed out that the crowd of the poor interrupt Dib's narrative "chaque fois que le texte voudra signifier la réalité insoutenable de la colonisation: déracinement, solitude, faim, maladie, errance, abandon, mort."[40] In asserting disinheritance as a shared condition, Aïni combines the urban and rural populations into a single national community opposed to the colonizers. But additionally, and especially in comparison to the agony many of the other characters take in placing themselves in relation to these poor masses despite links of blood or faith, Aïni's response asserts a minimal social bond that appears in activity more than identity. Even if there is nothing (or almost nothing) to actually give, the gesture of giving announces a co-belonging, allows the two sides to see each other, in this case to recognize a shared misery. This bare form of generosity responds to the truth of suffering, and chooses not to look away, even if it can do nothing but recognize the troubles around it. A collective consciousness that doesn't demand to be shown its form, a collective identity that asserts itself even in the absence of the people as a coherent or recognizable block, this provides the basis on which the novel's other

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38 ibid., 88

39 ibid., 89-90.

40 Khodja, "«Le peuple est le royaume de Dieu»: expressions de la religion dans *Le méier à tisser." Itineraires et contactes de cultures* 21-22 (1995): 47.

responses might be read as something more than despair. “Miséricorde” and “charité,” *raḥma* and *ṣadaqa*, are key religious terms, the first the most-cited attribute of God and the second one of the “pillars” of religion. In *Qui se souvient de la mer*, the central heroic figures, Nafissa and El Hadj, take on saintly attributes. They are, as the devout weaver Ghouti Lamine would have liked, practitioners of self-control. But they do this not in the name of a fatalism, a negation of history, but of an engagement, one that passes unseen by most. *Le métier à tisser* lays the foundation for a vision that Dib, despite changes in style and approach, would continue to examine and to struggle with. The insistence on a connection to the lived reality of suffering, navigating between an explosive despair and a flight into pre-given fantasies of what social life is really like, would be developed in conversation with religion and myth, in a search for what could be called an ethics of political life, a project that is always threatened with its own extinction by the powers it opposes.

*Le maître de chasse: violence and control*

In Dib's post-independence work this question, how to assert bonds of belonging when what is shared is above all misery, more explicitly takes on mythical resonance. While dealing with the historical challenges facing the newly independent country, a freer use of literary abstraction and a complicated engagement with religious themes paint national concerns in terms of cosmic struggle. Especially in *Le maître de chasse*, choosing to assert minimal bonds of community becomes a challenge both to a politics that tries to use the exercise of power to simplify the difficulties of a development in the service of the whole community and to the tendency to abstract present realities into a timeless spiritual struggle and the actions of fate. While political history and fate remain as undeniable and inescapable presences, Dib also presents at least the opportunity of turning away from them towards the details of life, a community simply in its existence. But the weakness of this project in the face of a historical trajectory alternately read as a politics of brute power or an inescapable destiny means that this affirmation of an ethical response to history competes with an overall tragic tone.

Although still set in Tlemcen, the world of Dib's 1973 novel *Le maître de chasse*, and the earlier novel with which it forms a dyptych, *Dieu en barbarie*, is quite different from the first trilogy. While the trilogy was characterized by immobility and claustrophobia, Dib's novels of post-independence Algeria are full of movement, whether Arfia's nocturnal rambling in *La danse du roi*,

the shuttling between urban locales in *Dieu en barbarie*, or the repeated movement between the city and the steppe in *Le maître de chasse*. And while in the first trilogy much of what was at stake was finding a way to pose the social or national problem, to give shape to what tended to be lived as meaningless, in these later books the problem is out in the open: how to create a society that includes all its members, while negotiating the limitations imposed on a poor and peripheral country. The novel is set three years after independence, the year that a military coup installed colonel Houari Boumedienne as president in place of Ahmed Ben Bella, who had initially secured the presidency with the support of Boumedienne and the army after significant and bloody infighting within the national party, the FLN.[41] Over the course of the war, the FLN leadership had asserted their ownership over the national movement, eliminating rivals; the historian Mohammed Harbi wrote that the combination of the great achievement of independence with the rise of an authoritarian structure that had roots both in colonial power and traditional authority meant that "les militants qui savent ne pas tomber dans le désappointement et le cynisme vivent la révolution nationale à la fois comme une période exaltante et comme une tragédie personnelle."[42] Boumedienne consolidated power around a national identity defined as Arab, Muslim, and socialist, and launched campaigns of language education and economic restructuring to shape the population to this identity. Official government discourse painted the Algerian people, "le seul héros" of the war of liberation, as the source of legitimacy and the subject of the national state. But the reality of a highly bureaucratized administration that valued loyalty above all else meant that this people was expected to conform to the image presented by the government, and that decisions would be made on their behalf. Harbi states that "les masses pauvres et les classes de la petite production paient les frais de la restructuration de la société, après avoir payé ceux de la guerre de libération."[43]

None of these events figure directly into Dib's novels, which stick to Tlemcen and the surrounding countryside and to a limited set of local characters. But setting *Le maître de chasse* in 1965 helps highlight that Dib is depicting a world at a tipping point, a point of deciding what path will be taken. The effects of the horrific violence and social disorganization of the last

41 Mohammed Harbi, *Le FLN: mirage et réalité* (Paris: Éditions J.A., 1980) gives a detailed account of this history. An alternate view, from an advisor of Ben Bella's, is in Mahfoud Bennoune, *The making of contemporary Algeria, 1830-1987 : colonial upheavals and post-independence development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

42 Harbi, op. cit., 306.

43 ibid., p. 383.

decade, the poverty of the rural population, and the bureaucratic desire to simplify affairs and impose solutions set the dynamics of the historical situation. While some other Algerian authors wrote in response to particular state policies and tried to give a portrait of the society in terms of classes or competing groups – an interesting and literarily strong example is the 1974 novel *al-Zilzal*, by one of the most significant Arabophone Algerian writers, al-Ṭahir Wattar, an attack on religious conservative landowners and defence of the state-led (and only partially executed) collectivization project called the "agrarian revolution" – Dib writes in terms of interpersonal dynamics and focuses on a local, and as far as I can tell wholly fictional, social movement.[44] The "mendiants de dieu," the group led by Hakim Madjar, are carrying out trips into the countryside around Tlemcen to meet with landless and destitute peasants; among their number now is Jean-Marie Aymard, a Frenchman and Kamal Waëd's old friend from school. Waëd, who, like most characters in this novel, first appeared in *Dieu en barbarie,* is now secretary to the *préfet*, an ex-maquisard awaiting retirement who sits in his office and leaves Kamal effectively as the acting authority. He considers Madjar's group to be meddling in affairs that should be left to the state. The hunting master of the title is a voice that haunts Labâne, a young man who is wholly dedicated to Madjar; it announces destruction and makes Labâne increasingly convinced of a coming apocalyptic refashioning of society. This young generation enters a situation defined by an exhaustion in the wake of the war. Kamal describes his boss, the *préfet*, as "un homme sorti du maquis [...] [qui] se croit peut-être encore là-bas," nothing but "un survivant qui prolonge indûment son existence."[45] This sense of exhaustion extends to the poor *fellahin* who appear later in the book, and all the central characters are aware that their actions constitute a response to this situation.

The plot plays out dramatically. Despite receiving advice to the contrary, Kamal decides to confront the *mendiants* openly, and at the novel's peak a military contingent is sent to the village where a group of poor and isolated peasants have gone, through Madjar's arrangements, to discuss relocating their community into this more accessible location. In the confrontation Madjar is shot and killed, and his body is taken in secret by the peasants to bury under their land. In the aftermath, Waëd arranges for Aymard to be deported to France, ending their friendship, and comes to the realization that Madjar is as dangerous to him dead as alive. Kamal's dream is of a

44 Tahar Wattar, *The Earthquake*, trans. William Granara (London: Saqi, 2000).

45 Dib, *Le maître de chasse*, 12-13.

world that would be complete, a perfect and unmarked facade, and against this project the opposing authority of Madjar as a popular figure is a challenge:

> Il y a plus à redouter d'un défunt inoffensif en fuite que d'un vivant, si dangereux et criminel qu'il puisse jamais l'être. Dans notre monde, un tel défunt est une fêlure, une voie par où on doit craindre que toute la faiblesse et toute la trahison ne se glissent. Il serait capable d'attendre longtemps son heure, et ce qu'il n'a pas fait vivant, il le ferait mort. [...]
> Il faut toujours éviter qu'une fissure ne se déclare. *Je me dis*: et pour ça, il faut surveiller ce mort plus qu'aucun homme vivant dans ce pays. [...] Contre un individu aussi dangereux, il faut se montrer soi-même dangereux, se faire invulnérable.[46]

To counter the cracks in his image of the world, Waëd opts for an authority as strong and complete as that image. To guard not only against visible threats but from those that exist only as ideas, no dissent can be tolerated. Labâne, for his part, is convinced that Madjar is not dead but has gone over to join the invisible *mendiants de dieu* who accompany and watch over the visible ones. But he is also haunted by the *maître de chasse*, "moi en qui chacun peut se changer," who calls for sacrifice and presents Labâne with the image of himself abandoned in the desert and turning to sand, "implorant que n'arrive pas ce qui est déjà arrivé."[47] Kamal struggles to seal his world shut; Labâne's has been blown open.

Both characters' opinions can be read through their own individual psychologies. Throughout *Dieu en barbarie* Kamal was obsessed with discovering who had provided the funds for his education; his indebtedness filled him with shame and undermined his desire to be self-supporting. His obsession with authority in *Le maître de chasse* continues this wild desire for autonomy; and Si-Azallah, an old family friend of Kamal's who has taken it on himself to supervise and advise him, finally identifies the reason for Kamal's hatred of Madjar in an attempt to take revenge on Dr. Berchig, Kamal's benefactor, who had also taken interest in Hakim (who, unknown to Kamal, refused the offer of help). Kamal, who spent the war years in school in France, hates the poverty and dependency of his own home and wants to distinguish himself from them. Kamal's need to separate himself rigidly from the rural poor betrays a kind of "inferiority complex" familiar from the writings of Memmi or Fanon; his desire for a firm and self-contained authority aims to assuage his own feeling of inferiority, and he begins by attacking a counterpart who, closer to his own roots due to not having received the French education Kamal did, reminds

46 ibid., 186.
47 ibid., 184.

him of the aspects of himself he wants to disavow. This expands, in Si-Azallah's accusation, into a desire to obliterate the past and to save only a present, to “anéantir ce passé, l'enterrer vivant sous un présent mort, et tous ceux qui en font partie.”[48] In his final speech to Kamal, he tears apart Kamal's commitments to progress and order as a thin mask over fury and madness, a collective front for a personal ill:

> Tu ne brûles, si tu ne le sais déjà, que d'une soif de destruction, tu n'aspires qu'au bonheur impie du couteau. Tu veux seulement faire souffrir les autres au moyen de ce qui te fait souffrir: ton humiliation, ton ressentiment, ton ingratitude, tes doutes sur toi-même. Et le plus répugnant, ce n'est pas le mal que tu gardes sur le coeur, ni celui que tu fais, mais ta folie. Une folie qui n'est, détrompe-toi, ni celle de la vérité, de la loyauté, de la justice, de la responsabilité ou du pouvoir mais uniquement et misérablement celle de la folie![49]

Destruction and madness take on a more dramatic and explicit face for Labâne. As Si-Azallah warns Marthe, Hakim Madjar's partner, Labâne has been deeply marked by coming of age during a period of extreme violence. This violence still haunts him in the voices that fill his mind. The *maître de chasse* announces a fire coming that will destroy everything. Labâne feels his presence as a gaze: “Ces autres yeux qui me suivent [...] Ils vont tout changer [...] Ils vont tout déranger. Ils vont tout retourner, tout chambouler. Ils vont tout remettre autrement, dans un ordre différent.”[50] Those eyes, he thinks, have been planted in him like eggs waiting to hatch, and as he goes with the *mendiants de dieu* into the steppe he finds himself, on seeing the tenacity of those who can live even in these bare conditions, welcoming destruction: “et *je dis*: vienne le mal qui purifiera le monde! Qu'il envahisse tout!”[51] The *maître de chasse* is on the one hand the haunted imaginary of someone raised around violence, a way of seeing the world stretched to extremes. But on the other the *maître* seems to be the one who wins out in the novel, as initially insignificant premises are pushed to violent conclusions. At once delusion, inspiration, and a viable interpretation of the course of history, Labâne in his shadow lives the same tensions of the moment differently from Kamal: as a situation where dependable reference points are missing, where hope and madness are hard to tell apart, where the forces that would bring change can easily turn and show a demonic face as a force of pure destruction.

The hunting master appears again in Dib's work. He is in the first story from *La nuit sauvage*,

48 ibid., 105.
49 ibid., 180.
50 ibid., 25
51 ibid., 75.

"L'oeil du chasseur," as "celui qui n'a pas besoin d'espace pour exister et circuler,"[52] and Dib's author's note tells us that he is present throughout these stories of violence set around the world. In a scene, a flashback or an alternate past, from *Le sommeil d'Ève*, "le chasseur inconnu" takes over a young man whose seen his village massacred, leading him on in revenge killings that sicken even his own fellow fighters and lead them to drive him away. A force of violence that surfaces when everything else is stripped away, it is terrifying to embrace but dangerous to ignore. It marks a place where the force of history takes over the individual, but this is a history dedicated to ruin and destruction. While the rage the hunter represents may be turned against injustice, without being tied to and controlled by a project rooted in this world, in the lives of an existing community, it can be a limitless source of destruction. This madness leads away from the world, but unlike the detached fantasies examined in the last chapter, its effects go well beyond the individual. The question becomes whether the hunter can be acknowledged but avoided, not simply confronted with an imaginary alternate picture of history, but without following it along the course that would destroy all images and with them the world.

*Minimal community*

A sense of community, social links that make demands in the present, gives history a substance and subsistence that keeps it from being merely a dream inside a universal slide towards destruction. It forces the individual imaginary to measure itself against other images, and to test its own image of community through interactions with other people. Again, in *Le maître de chasse*, Dib poses the question of community with regards to the most destitute members of society, here the poorest peasants in the countryside around Tlemcen. The relation between a present misery that resists explanation or justification and another image of collective being establishes a historical link; and the way this is drawn is also a question of authority, of what authorizes and legitimizes the passage between present experience and an unseen other condition.

The division between a bureaucratic government with contempt for the uneducated people and a poor populace clinging to archaic beliefs has been a familiar trope in social analysis of Algeria. Although rural misery following the war was serious and heightened, the opposition of the city to a devastated and backwards countryside is also a trope with political consequences. As Fanny Colonna has noted, reformist, revolutionary, and sociological approaches preceding and

52 Dib, *La nuit sauvage*, 15.

following the war all agreed in their presentation of the peasantry as devastated and uprooted, "des gens sans culture et sans passé," and so material to be shaped into something new and modern.[53] *Le maître de chasse* takes up this trope, but also tries to suggests how it could be, and be seen, differently. An unspoken play on words in the novel is between two senses of the word *wāli*, which never appears as such but is implied in the confrontation of Waëd and Madjar. *Wāli* is the name for a saint, a "friend of god" (the singular of *awliya*); and *wāli* is also the term used in Algerian (and Moroccan) Arabic for the *préfet*, Kamal's boss, whose role he takes on. Both positions are stand-ins between the mass of the people and a higher authority. The gap between the two figures is a gap in the idea of authority. Vincent Cornell, studying the development of Sufism in Morocco (in a cultural and political orbit that also includes much of what is now western Algeria), points to a negotiation in the figure of the pre-modern saint, discussed in literature over centuries, between two ways of defining what it is the *wāli* possesses: "sainthood as a metaphysical "closeness" to God (*walāya*) and sainthood as the exercise of power and authority on earth (*wilāya*)."[54] In an ideal or paradigmatic form, the two would overlap; the saint would possess the ability to command because he or she is wholly given up to serving as a conduit of *baraka* or blessing. But, as Cornell shows, in the history and development of Sufi orders, the two are in tension: unworldly authority comes up against and makes claims on political machinations, and the attribution of *baraka* made religious leaders into political figures, sometimes against their will. Madjar himself aims at neither; his stated aim is to bring the community to itself, but he is made into a political rival by Kamal, and into a source of spiritual protection by Tijani.

Kamal Waëd sees his political role as defined by the need to balance present demands with the project of a developmental state that offers future benefits. Waëd places himself firmly on the side of the latter, endorsing the rapid development of a modern and industrialized nation at all costs. From this point of view, insisting on the demands of the miserable ends up being a nuisance at best, and at worst a brake on the needed development. Against the *préfet*'s discourse about the peasants being "la pâte originelle de ce pays," Kamal warns, echoing some of the uncharitable statements made in *Le métier à tisser*, that the poor threaten to undermine the needed steady advances with their unthinking consumption:

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53 Fanny Colonna, *Les versets d'invinicbilité: permanence et changements religieux dans l'Algérie contemporaine* (Paris: Science Po, 1995): 28.

54 Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998): xxxv.

> Prenez garde que le fellah ne submerge tout, ne détruise le peu de choses valables que nous ayons sauvées. Il s'est réveillé, si on peut dire. Il arrive. Il envahit tout. Il marchera sans même le savoir, sur tout ce qui vaut quelque chose, il l'effacera sous ses semelles.[55]

The fellah, he says, is "l'homme d'avant et d'après le déluge," outside of the time of development and trapped in an eternity of misery. What is needed instead is a steady and controlled advance towards a future that can be imaged and designed. As he lectures to Aymard, such a plan can only unfold if the people remain passive and calm:

> Nous seuls sommes capables de leur préparer cet avenir, la Révolution qui créera des industries. [...] Il y a encore un long chemin à parcourir, mais nous le parcourrons aussi vite que possible. Nous avons déjà commencé; nous élevons déjà des usines, des écoles, des barrages. Nous mettrons de l'ordre dans nos affaires. [...]
> Alors, toi et tes compagnons, ayez la décence d'arrêter cette farce. [...] anarchie, violences, aveuglement, c'est tout ce qui en sortirait, si tant est qu'il en sorte quelque chose. Laissez en paix ces fellahs chez qui vous vous introduisez et dont vous troublez l'esprit. Nous avons besoin de calme et d'ordre.[56]

The future-oriented time of development calls for a similarly futural people. In Kamal's imagination, the future people will not be a transformation of the current impoverished one, but a new development; he says to Aymard, "Ils seront notre oeuvre, ces gens qui vivront comme de vrais hommes et de vraies femmes. Notre oeuvre."[57] Waëd chooses simply to ignore the undesirable figure of the people, to support his ignorance by force when necessary, and to maintain the distance between his project and them by sticking rigorously to its markers in his speech and setting. Dib stages this separation clearly: we see Kamal in formal offices decorated in European-colonial style, or in his personal car with chauffeur. Aymard tries to argue that Kamal's project and Madjar's are not in conflict, that the effort to involve the poor in their own improvement complements the national development agenda. But to Kamal, fixed on his image of an intact and self-sufficient nation, there is only room for one truth, and a truth is measured by its ability to suppress all other contenders. Justifying his sending troops against Madjar's group, he says to Aymard: "Nous avons notre vérité. Et puisque nous l'avons trouvée, il nous faut lui inventer une puissance, la rendre assez forte pour soutenir les attaques dirigées contre elle."[58] But the walls set up to protect the germ of a future from the effects of the present can easily become

55 Dib, *Le maître de chasse*, 12.
56 ibid., 113.
57 ibid., 61.
58 ibid., 170.

walls set up to keep Kamal blocked off from the world around him, encased with his own fantasies.

The *fellahin* themselves are brutally exposed and without protection. The imaginary of their leader, Tijani (whose name references a major Sufi *ṭariqah* of North and West Africa), is rooted in both the physical landscape where they live and an apocalyptic worldview similar to Labâne's. Tijani describes their existence, denuded and waiting for a beginning or an end:

> Nous, nous sommes assis au milieu du désert sans autre richesse que notre peau. A quoi faut-il donc s'attendre? Que le monde reparte du premier sable. Sinon quoi? Que pourrait-on espérer d'autre? Et s'il ne le fait pas, qui le sauvera? Il finit ici, recru de lassitude et de savoir, de douleur et de mensonge. Dans le sable...[59]

This is an existence that has been stripped down, both in its conditions of life and in respect to a history of development or progress. Madjar and his group come across others even more isolated, whose condition is presented as almost inhuman: a man armed with a gun, and accompanied by an angry dog, who roars wordlessly at the group until they leave; an itinerant man crouched in the sun meditating and oblivious, his sun-worn face and bleached clothes almost indistinguishable from the rock he leans against. Tijani's group maintain a social life, but one lived according to a time that is slipping away, wearing down to nothing before it can be restarted. Labâne sees them as evidence of a persistence of life despite its reduction close to death:

> Je les vois, ces hommes, aussi raides que du bois mort, que de la glaise durcie. On serait tenté de croire qu'on a scellé en eux la source de la vie. Que s'ils ne tombent pas en poussière -- privation d'eau de pain, d'amour -- c'est parce qu'Allah est grand.[60]

Tijani himself explains their misery in terms of a lack of protection: other villages have a saint, a *wāli*, buried close by who watch over the group, but theirs is abandoned, exposed. His recovery of Madjar's body at the end of the novel rectifies this, and Tijani relates their improved condition at the novel's end to this, rather than to their newly-formed links with the neighbouring village.

But despite this mythical framing, in the time of the beginning and end of the world, the fellah's miserable condition results from recent events, and they are aware of this. They see themselves not only as suffering the effects of colonial rule and of the war, but of the unequal distribution of post-independence benefits. One *fellah* laments that “si j'avais été malin, du moins

59 Dib, *Le maître de chasse*, 72.
60 ibid., 75.

assez, je me serais loué chez un colon tant qu'il y avait encore des colons dans le pays. J'aurais le gouvernement pour patron à l'heure qu'il est, je serais un fonctionnaire aujourd'hui."[61] As in the colonial period, the blocks that keep them from an improved condition are maintained by human force. But they, or at least Tijani, live the gap between themselves and the elements of society benefitting from independence as a gap between worlds. Their sustenance comes from a fatalistic resignation to their lives as repetition; when Madjar and the others propose digging wells, one of the women responds that while, yes, it would be nice not to have to walk down and then uphill to get their daily water, they can just as well go on doing as they have done. Their strength comes, too, from an identification with the world of the unseen: one peasant asserts that he knows the *awliya*, the saints, are on the mountain, watching, and "dès qu'eux y voyent une injustice y volent pour la réparer."[62] Connection to this invisible community provides strength to keep living, and the distance this mythical world takes from political realities provides a psychological defence.

For Labâne, who is already thrown into both sides, these divisions are not tenable. When the *fellah* talks of the *awliyah* on the mountain, Labâne challenges him repeatedly, pressing him to say how he can know that these are truly saints waging a holy war to right wrongs and not "*autres gens*" carrying out "une autre guerre [...] et que nous ignorions quelle sorte de guerre, et pourquoi ils la font". Labâne's own conviction is less comforting, though it promises certainty: "je sais que quelqu'un est parti comme une colonne de feu pour purifier le monde, le nettoyer du doute."[63] Here, again like with Kamal, certainty can be bought only at the price of violence. But the inability to know from where or for what reason that violence acts means that the stance of waiting until history restarts itself may be nothing more than accepting self-destruction.

Either from the side of a self-grounding construction of the future, or from the side of a fatalism that waits for the start of a new history, the only solution comes by turning away from the lived antagonism, either to another history or to the effacement of all history in a radically new beginning. The project of the *mendiants de dieu* is an attempt to move between the two sides, the city trying to build its new future and the periphery clinging to the bare sources of life. Madjar's own understanding of the situation in independent Algeria is that it refuses any one explanation, or image. "Notre étrangeté nous demeure à nous-mêmes étrangère," he says, and this is both because of the radical difference between his urban life and the life in the countryside, and

61 ibid., 129.
62 ibid., 84.
63 ibid.

because the ruptures the society has gone through have undermined the foundations of authority without creating a new legitimacy. They cannot, he says, "tenir pour sérieuse une justification juridique, politique ou même historique. Nous restons coincés dans une non-justification générale."[64] And in light of this, the project of the *mendiants de dieu* is not to demand an explanation or assistance from those who have a surplus, but to go begging before those who have nothing:

> Tant qu'à mendier, il vaut mieux aller tendre la main à la porte de notre pauvreté, devant l'homme aussi démuni que sa terre, l'homme qui conserve ce pays par devers soi comme une parole muette, même si cette parole est un cri, une insulte, une accusation. Ce serait plus digne. Ou moins decevant.[65]

The links of community that would be formed this way would not be around an image of the collective, but around the absence of an image, around a silence. The *mendiants de dieu*, following the model of Sufi groups that historically would travel through North Africa, picking up participants in different villages, dress identically and don't divulge their names in their trips to the villages. The repeated phrase, "je suis un mendiant de dieu," in one section narrated by one of these "sans nom," recalls *dhikr* practices, the repetition of names of god or Qur'anic phrases used to rid the aspirant or self and aid in union with god. The divesting of self leads to an image of the collective stripped of individual attributes. "Nous les sommes tous, plus ou moins, abandonés," Madjar tells Tijani.[66] And Labâne narrates:

> Hakim a commencé à expliquer qu'il ne se trouve pas ici avec nous [...] pour demander ou donner quoi que ce soit. Nous sommes venus dans le seul espoir de partager vos peines, dit-il, si vous qui vivez dans cet endroit le voulez bien.
>
> Il réitère selon son habitude:
>
> – Partager votre peine. Faire des noeuds d'existence avec vous.[67]

The response from the fellah is a trembling silence, as if "les mots lui font défaut que parce qu'ils sont trop brûlants ou trop lourds sur sa langue." The project of linking worlds involves moving between an assumed but groundless power and a deeply grounded powerlessness, between speech and silence. It involves, for Madjar as for the activists in Dib's earlier books, a great deal of listening, to the peasants or to the members of his own group, a great deal of travelling, and a dedication to small gestures. It also involves, in the novel, losing his life. The most hopeful reading

64 ibid., 103.
65 ibid.
66 ibid., 92.
67 ibid., 67.

of Madjar's fate would be to see him transformed into a kind of popular inspiring figure, a motivation for those who knew him to work towards improvements, towards living together. This would connect his mythic body to his everyday body, a connection the very last scene of the novel performs. But the novel's tragic structure suggests something else, that the invisible forces of historical conflict have brought Madjar into their endless struggle. The reader's interpretation depends on their assessment of sanity, of political morality, of the merits of popular mobilization, none of which the book provides an answer to.

The novel's ending leaves the possibility that Madjar, as martyr, has become a kind of authority fully merged into the people, an idea that Dib would continue to play with in abstract terms even thought his work would never again come so close to describing practical politics. But the ending also permits the reading that he has simply become incorporated into a myth as a friend of God, a source of consolation perhaps but without any real effectivity before the lumbering forces of history and catastrophe. What the novel's open ending maintains, at least, are the cracks in Kamal's edifice. If it paints a decision made by the authorities in the conditions of independence, it also shows that decision as still open, to be made or unmade, and so still allowing for hope, on the one hand, and a terrible responsibility, on the other.

*Çadaqa in the metropolis*

Over the next two decades Dib's fiction would move away from the Algerian setting and towards stories more concerned with individuals than with social drama. Living in France and dedicating much of his creative output to poetry, Dib seemed to be distancing himself from an identity as a political writer. But in several of these works Dib develops the idea of a life lived in contact with its surroundings, social and physical, set against a retreat into an ideal city or political community than can ground itself only in violent exclusion. Against the rigidity of an exclusive power Dib develops the image of a nomadic individual tied to the existence of his surroundings rather than the roots of a given identity.

Some of the shift from the social figuring of this problem to an individual one can be sen in Dib's 1982 story "L'homme qui chantait," published in a special edition of the French review *Les temps modernes* commemorating twenty years of Algerian independence.[68] Set in an unspecified bureaucratic and authoritarian state, it presents a couple living in a high-rise building. She is a

68 Dib, "L'homme qui chantait," *Les Temps modernes*, 432 (July-August 1982): 321-340.

government informer, who has been gradually turning in the neighbours, and at the end of the story she turns in her husband as well. Her justification for her actions is a need to "sabrer le bois mort," to remove those who are blocks to progress and to clear the way for a new, good, people. The authoritarian desire to replace the people with one more to its taste coincides with the desire for a blank slate. The husband sees a dangerous trajectory in this – first, the world to be created for the common good is predicated on the exclusion of people like him; and second, what is to prevent this new people from turning on those who preceded them, continuing the cycle of exclusion? But all he has to oppose to this is his insistence on maintaining an everyday life – taking walks through the neighbourhood, singing the snatches of songs that give the story its title. Although this offers little opposition to his ultimate exclusion, it opposes to the dream of solidifying and perfecting the form of society a movement and enjoyment that escapes structure but without which the structures could become empty and lifeless, identical with the destructuring processes of total destruction.

The two novels that followed *Le maître de chasse*, *Habel* in 1977 and *Les terrasses d'Orsol* in 1985, which are often considered to inaugurate a phase of Dib's writing concerned with the theme of exile, each stick closely to one individual's experience, and each strains, in different ways, at the framework of realistic depiction. But the central character's trajectory in both novels involves a major reconfiguration of their relationship to those around them, in terms that explicitly recall earlier work and that include a criticism of exclusivist understandings of political community that separate themselves from the rest of humanity. The questioning of individual identity becomes an encounter with others, the realization that individual identity is inescapably social and complicit in what it might like to hold itself apart from.

Habel is a 19-year old immigrant in Paris; excluded from the social community of his birthplace, he ends up wandering through a strange city. Habel's name and situation reference the biblical rivalry between Cain and Abel; here Habel has not been murdered by his brother but driven out of the city, sent into exile in France by an older brother jealous of his own position of authority and of his young wife (sexual rivalry, though not in the Qur'an, figures in many Muslim versions of the story). Habel also uses the name Ismaël, which, as Khadda notes, again aligns him with a nomad, driven out of the ancestral home by his father Abraham. As an uneducated kid working in a supermarket, without direction and not particularly good to the women in his life, Habel is also *habīl*, a fool. The brother, who Habel addresses directly in occasional first-person

sequences of the novel, stands fairly clearly for an identitarian and authoritarian power that has driven its unwanted or superfluous population into exile. By the novel's end, Habel's address to his brother becomes a sharp criticism, as he comes to see their opposition not just as between two people but between two different ways of understanding truth.

He reaches this point through experiences that undermine his own understanding of identity. Some of this comes via the writer Éric Marrain, a writer and drag queen who introduces Habel to the idea of a person whose identity is split or doubled. The fragility of identity is linked to death: Habel has a vision of the Angel of Death, hovering over Paris, and when he asks it why it's appeared to him, the Angel says that it, too, had asked such a question:

> Moi aussi je demandais au Seigneur au temps où il me falut recevoir ma mission: Seigneur, pourquoi te manifestes-tu à moi? [...] La mort aussi, quand le Seigneur me donna la force et que je la pris dans ma main, demanda: "Qu'est-ce que je suis?" Elle aussi appela dans les cieux: "Seigneur, pourquoi dois-je avoir un gardien?"[69]

Not even death knows who it is; and when the angel disappears, leaving a body behind that Habel recognizes as a drunk he'd seen being beaten in a café washroom, Habel can't distinguish between himself and this body: "Il se voit - dans un fulgurant accès de lucidité - lui-même, il se découvre lui-même étendu à la place du type. A sa place? Il n'y a jamais eu personne d'autre, que lui Habel, à cette place!"[70] This passage through death seems to serve Habel well later, when he finds himself put in the position of the dispenser of death: after Merrain performs oral sex on Habel and then offers him money, Habel realizes that he can, and by the standards of lost honour that his brother would hold to, should kill him. But Habel, distanced from himself through his earlier encounter with death, is able to turn away, and steals a manuscript from Merrain's studio instead. Merrain's death still arrives – he commits suicide shortly after, which Habel learns from the newspapers.[71] But this experience leads Habel to his verbal attack on his brother, one that revives Kamel Waëd's language concerning a truth that needs power to protect it from its outside:

> La vérité comme il n'en est qu'une, et qui s'appelle l'homme. Mais tout l'homme, Frère, tout l'homme; c'est la différence [...]
> Vous avez votre vérité et n'en avez jamais douté, l'ayant découverte dès le premier

69 Dib, *Habel*, 133.
70 ibid., 134.
71 Dib's narration in *Habel* is extremely ambiguous, and the text can also be made to support a reading in which Habel commits the murder (the newspaper report would then be fictionalizing the account). But I think my reading is much more likely, in part because of the thematics I'm tracing here and in part based on details in the text. It also corresponds to the reading of perceptive scholars of Dib including Bonn and Khadda. At the very least, the usually passive Habel lives this moment as one of decision.

> jour, dès vos premiers pas, et même avant, l'ayant sûrement sucée avec le lait dont vous aviez été nourri. Seulement moi aussi j'en ai une à présent, et je l'ai trouvé malgré vous [...] Une vérité qui a déjà sur la vôtre l'avantage de la comprendre, une vérité qui voit comme si elle y était la citadelle où la vôtre s'est installée, et barricadée. Une vérité, la mienne, qui continuera encore longtemps à vous échapper, un homme, l'homme que je suis devenu, qui sera pour vous toujours une énigme. Une homme que vous vous obstinerez à méconnaître, mais dépouillé de son histoire, de ses racines, sans attaches, tout destin, un homme sans nom prêt à vous réduire au même sort. Un homme: peut-être le dernier d'une ère, ou peut-être au contraire l'annonciateur de temps nouveaux, je l'ignore.[72]

The power of authority and identity needs to wall in its truth to protect it from a broader one that can destroy it; it survives only on a denial of the commonality between the man inside its confines and the others outside. The passage from one to the other happens by way of the same advice Ghouti Lamine had given in *Le métier à tisser*: "Présentez-vous nu à votre Créateur, il vous vêtira." Habel accuses his brother of loving to quote this passage without understanding its meaning: "Une parole comme toutes vos paroles, que vous n'adressez, n'appliquez qu'aux autres, oubliant votre personne [...] Saviez, ou imaginiez tout au moins, ce que c'est pour un homme d'être nu, et de se présenter ainsi à… qui l'on veut!"[73] Habel learns from Merrain, alias "Le Vieux," alias "La Dame de la Merci," what it is to be naked, exiled, "nu et non pas couvert des belles paroles." This passage through the death of identity is also a passage into a community linked by a bare commonality; Habel warns his brother that he will see Habel in every beggar and pariah he tries to look away from. This bare community, which offers a chance to the individual to live in the world rather than behind the walls of a fortified and isolated truth, is also presented as what will wear away at the walls authority sets for itself, an outside of the city that will eat at it from within, as it does from the bars and gutters of a nocturnal Paris.

In *Les terrasses d'Orsol*, the loss of self is even more central, as the narrator ends the novel in a state of almost complete amnesia. After experiencing a kind of mid-life crisis in Orsol, the southern city he comes from, the narrator finds himself in a vague diplomatic post in the Nordic city of Jarbher, which strikes him as a place of affluence and beauty. He becomes obsessed with a chasm in the city, populated by strange and miserable creatures. This crowd's description pushes to an extreme the dehumanizing images of the crowds in *Le métier à tisser* or in *Le maître de chasse*, where Aymard initially sees the peasants like insects. Identifying them initially as tortoises,

72 ibid., 174-176.
73 ibid., 174-175.

pachyderms, crabs, or spiders, even after he realizes they are human he finds that realization hard to keep in mind: "La ressemblance avec les hommes qu'ils avaient présentée durant un très bref laps de temps s'est évanouie et ils ont retrouvé leur état qui était non un état de bêtes, mais pire d'un certain point de vue."[74] He tries to ask Jarbherians about the chasm, but they all evade the question. Finally, in a night of drinking on an island near the city (but in a natural setting that forms a counterpoint to the urban setting), one of them gives something of a justification of this radical separation of two worlds:

> Entendons-nous bien: il ne s'agit pas, tant s'en faut, de la fameuse théorie de l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme! La contrepartie, parce qu'il y a tout de même une contrepartie, la voici: il incombe aux plus favorisés la tâche de faire du bonheur le but de notre société. Il devrait, c'est indispensable, y avoir en ce bas monde un endroit où règnent la paix, la justice, la liberté, et qui serve à son tout d'exemple.[75]

This justification of extreme inequality as offering, on its fortunate side, an image of a possible future is deeply undermined by its speaker's attempt at suicide a few pages later. Back in Jarbher, the narrator encounters someone he recognizes as a compatriot, a fellow immigrant, even though he at first avoids this recognition. This man laments that in Jarbher he "ne trouve personne à qui faire l'aumône," commenting that "ils ont fait disparaître tous leurs pauvres."[76] He whispers the word *çadaqa* to the narrator, and then tells him that "rien que par amitié pour ces Jarbherois, je me ferais mendiant."[77] The range of meaning of *şadaqa* – which often simply means "friendship" – shows what is lacking in the gleaming metropolis, something that becomes represented by the very thing the city prides itself on having pushed out of its borders: need and poverty. The cost of an extreme separation between rich and poor, those who live already in a gleaming future and those confined to an immobile present, weighs on both sides: for this "stranger," charity is not primarily a mode of redistribution but a way a defining the community.

After this scene the narrator plunges into a fragmentary sequence of dreams and wandering in Jarbher, a city suddenly changed from its earlier gleaming peacefulness into a teeming place full of sadness and threats, followed by a voice that keeps speaking of "*l'heure où les tombes vomiront leurs entrailles.*" This anticipated judgement comes to him in the form of a group of teenage punks on motorcycles who crush his body and nearly kill him; the same compatriot suddenly appears

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74 Dib, *Les terrasses d'Orsol*, 53.
75 ibid., 137.
76 ibid, 181.
77 ibid, 183.

and carries his body off, whispering to him a longer version of the phrase that's been haunting him, an abridgement of the Qur'an's 100th ṣurah, before delivering him to Aëlle, the mysterious woman he fell in love with on the island:

> Par les cavales haletantes, par les cavales bondissantes, par les cavales... du matin... et les empreintes de leurs sabots... en vérité l'homme est ingrat envers... et il en porte témoignange... il ne sait pas qu'à l'heure où les tombes vomiront leurs entrailles et les coeurs leurs secrets...[78]

The moment where the heart gives up its secrets, divulges and purges itself of its ingratitude, is also the moment where he receives *çadaqa*, is welcomed into a community, although in the process he loses his identity and becomes a blank slate. In an essay on *çadaqa* in the novel, Aouicha Hilliard writes that "en effet, le partage avec ses semblables, quelle que soit leur origine, crée une communaute, crée le sens et constitue un lien entre ceux qui donnent et ceux qui reçoivent."[79] And, as for Aïni or Madjar in the earlier books, this link is at its strongest or most essential when there is nothing to give but generosity itself. Starting from zero here is not a question of destroying society, but of breaking down identity. *Les terrasses d'Orsol*, in giving a religiously-tinged lesson on individual identity and responsibility (although Dib's Qur'anic citation notably elides the name of God), also aims its criticism at a society that bases its happiness on a maintained ignorance of those excluded from it, or views those excluded only from a dehumanizing distance, and the psychological costs this puts on those who take this view.[80] Individual life in these conditions becomes a choice between accepting self-death or being exposed to the death that, even though hidden behind the image of a future triumph, hides waiting for its hour in a judgment that here, again, is passed by youth on the elders whose hypocritical values they reject. Although the lesson is essentially psychological, it still takes its terms from the social dynamics of Dib's earlier works.

Dib reworked and expanded his 1982 story, "L'homme qui chantait," as "Le sourire de l'icône" in the last book he published in his lifetime, the collection *Comme un bruit d'abeilles*. Here Dib's focus both reaches its broadest and becomes most focused on the individual. The setting is

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78 ibid, 220.

79 Aouicha Hilliard, "Le Rôle de la *çadaqa* dans *Les Terrasses d'Orsol* de Mohammed Dib: Pour une éthique de la compassion," *Nouvelles études francophones* 22, no. 1 (2007): 147.

80 A friend who has lived in Helsinki, the city that at times provides a setting or a model for one in Dib's "Nordic" writings, tells me that there is a large coal-burning energy plant inside the city on the coast, which might have inspired some of the descriptions of the chasm in *Les terrasses*. In this case, the book would also welcome reflection on the extent to which modern "clean" life depends on costly filth usually kept out of sight and mind.

made explicit as Moscow, and the story alternates between scenes before and after what its section titles call "the end of time," between the night when the woman in the couple, Nina, turns her husband Rassek in to the security services and one later, after the collapse of the USSR and Rassek's return from a prison camp. These historically broad themes go together with an extreme isolation: Nina has retreated into a mostly incommunicative state, and the lack of relation between the couple combines with the eerie emptiness of the Moscow streets. Dib paints this as a picture of a world filled to its limit, unable to accept any more, and yet still able to empty out its contents, as the apartment buildings had lost their inhabitants, without becoming any less full. The dream of clearing space for a new world instead gives way to an emptying world where even time has stopped. Rassek retreats into his imagination, seeing himself as an aging Oedipus coming back to Thebes, ready to repeat his personal epic, to restart history. But this imagined Thebes, an architectural wonder that could stand for all the dreams of a perfect and ordered city, is emptier than the Moscow streets, and Rassek is no hero but only a daydreaming old man. His desire to go outside, his songs, his internal monologues no longer appear as resistance, as they seemed to in the first version of the story, and the history between him and Nina undermine even his attempts at tenderness and his promises of a new start where the past could be left behind. After the end of time, the collapse of liberation movements into new systems of exclusion, the triumph of a city based on separation and suspicion rather than compassion, the decision for or against existence seems like a hollow choice. The pessimism that runs through many of the stories in *Comme un bruit d'abeilles* is that of an isolation projected onto a global scale, a world going beyond the opposition of the city and its outside since as the city becomes omnipresent it becomes harder and harder to distinguish from the desert.

But even in Rassek's imagined Thebes, an empty palace of order, a civilization maintaining itself even in its ruin, something persists of the presence of the excluded. The community that inhabits this place inhabits it invisibly, haunting. The last lines Dib published in his lifetime have Rassek looking over the city and hearing a noise: "j'écoute les âmes des morts virevolter comme un essaim d'abeilles." Even a history reduced to stasis, cleared of its competitors, exhausting its own aspirations, doesn't escape the collective presence that reminds it of its own historicity: the dead on whom its awe- and dread-inspiring constructions have been founded.

The pessimism always present in Dib's writing is probably the strongest sense at play in these final stories. But there is also another Oedipus, not the old Oedipus trying to revisit the

initial moment of his career, but the one who goes at the end of his life to Colonus and disappears alive into the ground to become a protection to the people of nearby Athens. Dib writes in *Simorgh* Dib writes about Oedipus at Colonus, a saintly figure that he sees as closer to conceptions in Africa, including the saint cults that figured into his earlier work, than to any heritage of Oedipus in Western Europe. This sacrificial figure, one improved and polished by age and experience, stems from an ancient Greece that was "l'Orient dans tout ce qu'il a de plus oriental."[81] By disappearing into the ground of the sacred grove, Oedipus brings his own tragic story to a fulfilled conclusion, and in doing so inserts it into a longer history. The idea of a protagonist disappearing fully into the surrounding world, an idea already suggested by the examinations of self-loss in earlier work, appears in several of Dib's late works. This fits into another way of approaching history: as a thread of continuity absorbing present individuals into a longer story. The crises and decisions of the individual in this light are the product of ruptures in this continuity. Oedipus' sacrifice suggests something that could heal these breaks through a giving up of self-image, and connect the lines between individual and collectivity, between the poetics of myth and identity and the temporal flow of life. Such an idea is comforting and powerful, but also in danger of turning back into a re-assertion of identity, sacrifice not as a gift but as a demand that re-starts a cycle of violence. The next chapter explores these questions.

81 Dib, *Simorgh*, 228.

## 2.4 : Tradition, Inheritance, Sacrifice

The story "Le ciel sur la tête," from Dib's 2001 collection *Comme un bruit d'abeilles*, set in Tlemcen like so much of Dib's work, takes place against the backdrop of the civil war of the 1990s. The story presents a few days in the life of two friends: Bab'Ammar, an old shopkeeper, and his younger friend Fodeïl, who is about thirty and so born just after independence. Although the story includes a rather dramatic event – three young men come to the store and one threatens Bab'Ammar with a knife; Fodeïl pushes him away, but is wounded in the process – it is mostly made up of laconic conversations between the two friends, and Fodeïl's accompanying thoughts. The story opens with a question from Fodeïl that recalls the first page of *Dieu en barbarie*, although here the initial proposition, rather than concerned with Algeria's identity and action in the face of other more powerful nations, is about the place of Algerian identity in a history marked by changes in identity and domination:

> Finalement, Bab'Ammar, nous ne sommes algériens que depuis peu. Jusqu'à hier, nous étions encore français. Et demain, que serons-nous? Est-ce notre destin de n'en pas finir d'être chair après avoir été poisson? Qu'en pensez-vous?[1]

Bab'Ammar's response dismisses the question: "Je pense que jamais rien n'a changé pour nous." The question of "who we are," of what name to give our present state, is nothing but "vain smoke," and misses the point: "On est soi sans avoir à s'en inquiéter, à se dilacérer le coeur, en se contentant d'être [...] on est soi en se fichant de ce qu'on est."[2] Identity trouble and self-questioning lead away from the central question, which is that of adapting to circumstances, living one's life rather than trying to name it. As the story unfolds, it explores an issue of importance to Dib, which gained urgency towards the end of his career: that the inheritance of the past, which forms the basis for identity and possibilities of action, can become a block to action, a source of violent conflict rather than creative adaptation.

The task of taking on a history that is fragmented and wounded without demanding an unshakeable foundation for it, substituting an arbitrary authority for the lack of an evident one, is the central concern of this chapter. Tradition, as a set of inherited conditions and practices, provides a support for a continuous remaking of life in the world; it can provide unity to the

1 Dib, *Comme un bruit d'abeilles*, 125.
2 ibid., 127.

practices that allow for cultural continuity, development and change. But where the connection between inherited tradition and present demands is broken, tradition can change its face and appear as the repetition of past violence, or an impossible goal that can condemn the present but offer no solutions apart from violent rupture. An ambiguous relation to the inheritance of the past colours Dib's work throughout, as an awareness that "being oneself" does not mean extricating oneself from history combines with the knowledge that history can weigh down and destroy the present. Standing in tradition without being overcome by it requires, often in Dib, a kind of exorcism, an imaginative work that equals and opposes the phantasmic return of the archaic.

The double valence of tradition has been particularly discussed in societies most affected by the legacies of colonization, where autocratic rule founded in armed force went together with a devaluation of earlier tradition. The Cameroonian philosopher Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, in his 1977 *La crise du Muntu*, tried to theorize both an empowering relation to tradition and the recourse to reconstructed tradition as a foundation for political violence and dysfunction. Borrowing Heideggerean language, Eboussi Boulaga insists that tradition should be understood as something lived, a collective activity that rooted in "a given being-together and a factual having-in-common that calls for a common destiny."[3] Rather than being embodied in a fixed set of practices found in pre-colonial society, tradition embodies an ideal, and so offers "the model of a counter-society, inspired by the one developed by traditional societies, by the ideal their organizations referred to."[4] It functions as a "negative utopia," Eboussi Boulaga says, able to show the failures of the present world and to demand something better by showing the failure of the colonial and postcolonial state to provide what local tradition puts forth as its goal.

When the present condition is lamentable, Eboussi Boulaga argues, the time of tradition tends to be broken up into the near past and future and their distant counterparts. Identifying with the distant past while "leaping over" recent history is a way of marking the community off from the miseries and behaviours that make up its condition in the wake of political and coercive domination and the repression of cultural life, and the prospects of the distant future are more appealing than the effects produced in the near future. But through this splitting up of time living tradition is replaced by idealized forms, projections without a link to lived conditions. Once a break occurs between the forms and the goals that the forms were intended to produce, the two

3 Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis: Authenticity and African Philosophy*, trans. not indicated (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014): 149.
4 ibid., 158. [Translation modified]

poles can be reversed, making the form seem more important or authoritative than the effect. Repurposing a word that had travelled from colonial anthropology to Marxist and psychoanalytic discourses, Eboussi Boulaga calls this reversal "fetishism," and sees it at the root of what he would later call the "fetishistic state," whose institutions and procedures are valued for their association with power rather than for their effects. This results in a "statolatry," where authority, rather than solidifying the ties of the community, becomes divorced from them. Here the state

> scinde l'état de la communauté historique dont il est l'organisation, la constitution de l'opération ou de l'action collective qui la produit comme résultat. [...] Il va donc se définir sans son peuple, bien plus contre celui-ci, qui devient son opposé, voire son ennemi, le moindre mal étant la transformation de ce qui devait être le moyen, l'expression, en fin.[5]

The reversal of means and ends that divorces authority from the community it claims to serve is connected to the decay of tradition from a living ideal to fetishized projection. An approach that would connect tradition to the conditions of life would need to be able to view it as both critique and resource, and as something that, as Bab'Ammar puts it, is lived more than it is named. Eboussi Boulaga's language, which borrows eclectically from philosophy, ethnology, and religion, invites connections among the philosophical, the political, and the mythic; these are connections that are often drawn more elaborately in literature. Dib's work, particularly from the period of the Algerian civil war onwards, becomes concerned with the transformation of historical inheritance into a phantasmic projection, a haunting that seems unable to help the present but bears down on it.

In "le ciel sur la tête," the young man, Fodeïl, feels haunted by "spectres," "des échos du passé assourdissant le présent." These ghosts follow him, attack him, remind him of his own death and act one him even in their death:

> Nous vivants, ils nous filent le train, mettent leurs pas dans nos pas, un chemin tout tracé. Moi vivant, mon géniteur, je le porte sur mes épaules. Il est loin d'être dit qu'il ait, dans son état sursitaire, fragile, irrésolu de mort, proféré son dernier mot.[6]

This makes him a stranger to himself, plunging him into morbidity and also into uncertainty as to who he is; the spectral ancestor clinging to him seems to trouble the project of being himself. This

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5 Eboussi Boulaga, *Les conférences nationales en afrique noire: une affaire à suivre* (Paris: Kathala, 1993): 102.
6 ibid., 129.

need to find an identity seems, to Fodeïl, to be fuelling the violence that is tearing apart the country, the vast majority of it carried out by young men:

> Chez nous, une jeunesse, bien montée en graine d'ailleurs, croit pouvoir trouver une réponse à la question, *qui sommes-nous?* en égorgeant à tour de bras hommes, femmes, enfants, sans oublier les nourrissons. Diriez-vous, ami, que le résultat est à la hauteur de leurs desseins, qu'ils on obtenus, ou qu'ils obtiendront cette réponse?[7]

To this statement, Bab'Ammar, after a typical long pause, expresses his doubt. There is no answer to the question being asked, and even if there were it would be of little use, since even saying "we are" already takes its distance from simply being oneself. The roles in this story are reversed from what might be expected: here it is the old man who dismisses the search for roots and recommends adapting to changing times, while the younger generation is haunted by tradition and identity. Bab'Ammar even links the violence to the killers' youth. Unable to keep up with a changing society, they've turned their eyes to as distant a past as they can imagine:

> N'est-ce pas que ces tueurs sont un peu jeunes? [...]Tout se passe comme si on est allé trop loin pour eux. [...]
> Le pays, les événements. Nous! Loin en avant, en tout. [...] Plus loin qu'ils ne sont jamais parvenus, eux, malgré leur aptitude à la course, les chiens, les fous qu'ils sont. Et les voilà maintenant à vouloir, dans leur petite tête, ramener tout le monde en arrière, le plus loin possible en arrière, au temps de la Prédication. [...]
> Notre temps les ignore. Et à leur tour, ils ignorent notre temps et tous les temps. La société les oublie; alors ils font fi de la société. [...] Et la voix de l'origine est la seule dont ils veuillent entendre l'appel. Si fort les somme-t-elle qu'ils en perdent le jugement, et deviennent sourds au reste, à tout le reste.[8]

This quest for the origin is impossible, since it would mean erasing all of history; but the process of chasing it piles up death and destruction. The killers' appeal to tradition is incapable of generating productive action, and since their objective can only be reached through destruction, each round of violence can be justified only by further violence. Following the pattern seen in the last chapter, the pull of the origin leads to attacking everything that is.

But Bab'Ammar, at the same time, is a representative of tradition, and this is clear to the young people in the story. His store sells old products, the artisanal work of the region: wool, pottery, carved wood, and the alfa-fibre mats whose smell pervades the story. When the young man attacks the storekeeper, he targets him explicitly as a representative of his generation, a

7 ibid., 130-131.
8 ibid., 138-139.

veteran of the War of Independence:

> Vieux bâtard de fellagha, que n'as-tu laissé tes os dans les montagnes? Tu as eu tort. Soi-disant vous êtes allés, armes à la main, chercher la justice pour tout. Où est-elle, cette justice? Qu'est-ce que tu en as fait, hein? On l'attend.[9]

Simply being who one is, which Bab'Ammar recommends and which he seems to embody in his patience and his general attitude of waiting and of watching over his surroundings, does not mean escaping from history. It requires taking on an inheritance, individual, familial, or generational, what Fodeïl sees as the line of dead behind him. Bab'Ammar's own relation to his generational inheritance is complicated; although he belongs to the generation that fought for independence, he is wary of a trajectory towards a repetition of violence that wears away at the possibility of leading of a peaceful life:

> S'il a fait jadis ce que l'Histoire lui avait dicté de faire: brandir une arme, il est pour l'heure le dernier homme à le refaire alors que tout vous y invite. Il a dû comprendre qu'à user d'armes, on use son pécule d'humanité comme à dévider le quotidien chapelet de meurtres la langue s'use et, à l'entendre, les oreilles s'usent, et la colère aussi en fin de compte. Ne se renouvellent pas les larmes au contraire de l'inépuisable, l'inépongeable marée noire qui poisse mouettes et hauts voiliers du coeur.[10]

Bab'Ammar's discovery of non-violence is somewhat undermined by the fact that Fodeïl saves his life by taking a hook from the wall to use as a weapon against his assailant (although this action is presented not as calculated but as unthinking, a spontaneous response to the situation). But the danger of violence multiplying itself in new violence runs through Dib's work from his own experience of the war onwards, and along with it the sense of a need for another kind of action, if not to oppose violence then to fill the space that it opens. As closing this passage with the image of an oil slick suggests, for Dib this is not an exclusively or even specifically Algerian problem, and although this chapter will give the most time to Dib's treatment of the civil war and the years surrounding it, these works, like Dib's first novels, were clearly intended to display more general concerns through the particularities of the historical moment that produced them.

This chapter looks at the intertwining of themes of inheritance and of violence, charting a struggle to acknowledge the effects of a troubling past without becoming dominated by it. The chapter begins by looking at Dib's treatment of inheritance in terms of familial relations and of

9 ibid., 141.
10 ibid., 137.

debt, and then looks at religious ritual as a form of historical continuity or the rupture of that continuity. The danger throughout is the conversion of enabling inheritance into monstrous encumbrance, the erasure of historical continuity in favour of a phantasmic archaism where a demand for sacrifice eclipses what sacrifice is meant to guarantee. The final section of the chapter looks at Dib's grappling in his late work with how these phantom ancestors might be put to rest. Although his answers remain on the level of the imagination, these can be opposed to an alternate imaginary that is able only to see violence and a struggle for full authority – patriarchal, political or religious – as a solution to the problems of a troubled and violent inheritance.

*Fathers and sons*

In a text called "Le rétour d'Abraham," which closes and gives its title to the first section of Dib's 1998 set of reflections on exile, identity and language, *L'arbre à dires*, Dib narrates the transition from Bab'Ammar's generation to Fodeïl's, and from anticolonialism to the civil war, as the transformation of a father into a spectral and violent ancestor figure. He tells this as a story of fathers and sons, specifically as the search by sons for an image of their father. Dib flirts here with the language of psychoanalysis, of the family complex and also of Freud's attempts to apply psychoanalysis to history. Dib, especially late in his career, seems to have had an interest in Freud's methods and in the idea of historically reproduced complexes, but a suspicion of some of Freud's explanations, which he saw as providing naturalizing alibis for aggression, racism and European cultural superiority. Elsewhere he, like Freud, analyzed the figure of Oedipus; here he revisits the figure of the controlling and bloodthirsty patriarch Freud posited in *Moses and Monotheism*. But Dib's narrative here also corresponds to the development of his depictions of family relations in his novels. An archetypal narrative also serves to trace the relations of fathers, sons, and mothers, as Dib had treated them in the first half of his writing career, from *La grande maison*t o *Habel*. This long passage gives both a psychological explanation and a shorthand summary of a national history as Dib had observed it:

> On peut affirmer sans crainte de se tromper que la quête d'identité n'a jamais été le souci majeur des Algériens. Une identité se vit, elle ne se définit pas et les Algériens ont toujours vécu pleinement la leur. Bien plutôt, bien plus fort la quête du père nourrit aujourd'hui leur inquiétude et leurs fantasmes - ce père qu'ils n'ont pas eu à tuer, les diverses colonisation d'une Histoire proche et lointaine s'étant chargées de le faire et de réduire ainsi les fils à un orphelinage généralisé, ou à une forme de bâtardise par confiscation de l'image paternelle. Leurs colonisateurs ont changé les

> Algériens en fils de personne, rejetons mithridatisés, eunuques névrotiques.
> Mais le réveil a fini par avoir lieu, ils se sont ressaisis, ils ont conquis leur indépendance de haute lutte. Passé le traumatisme de la colonisation, affranchis du joug, ils n'ont rien eu alors de plus pressé que d'aller à la recherche du père, soutien et garant. Ils n'ont trouvé que la mère, seule puissance tutélaire ayant survécu à la débâcle semée dans le âmes par une dévastation morale sans précédent. Puissance tutélaire certes, mais qui ne l'est pas encore assez pour les aider à déjouer les embûches de la vie nouvelle. Manquait celle du père pour l'étayer. Restait introuvable son autorité comme caution des actes dont ils inauguraient la nouvelle ère. Il leur fallait juste récupérer cela.
> Cela, qu'ils n'ont à mon sens réussi ni à retrouver ni à récupérer et qui, par défaut, n'a fait que les encourager à s'instituer eux-mêmes en pères et, par ce sacrement, leur faire réintégrer la figure primitive du géniteur, après passation d'eux-mêmes à eux-mêmes des pouvoirs reconnus à la paternité, y compris le pouvoir de disposer de la vie des siens. Or dans l'enfer de démesure et d'aliénation où, évincée, elle s'était jusqu'alors réfugiée, cette image emblématique n'avait pu que perdre de son humanité. De représenation bénie qu'elle était, elle a viré à sa propre caricature et la voilà, parodie maléfique, qui n'est plus forte que de la barbarie des origines.[11]

Dib here presents the course of national history in terms of the mutations and failed transformations of a patriarchal society. Dib novels had shown the humiliation of the fathers under colonization, the strength and resilience of the mothers, and a post-independence search, in the absence of fathers, for justification. The parodic, violent and hypocritical father appeared in basic outline in the brother of *Habel*. In general, we can make a distinction, in Dib's work, between an older generation of humiliated or absent fathers and a subsequent generation of tyrannical ones. Dib, who lost his father when he was young, made the protagonists of most of his early work orphans as well, and the partial memories of their fathers figure into these stories. In Dib's novels fathers are usually absent, but what their sons inherit from them – in memory or in the effects of their absence – has powerful effects on them, on their behaviour and on the possibilities available to them.

Up until today a remarkable number of the classics of Algerian literature have involved fathers who are missing, humiliated or weak. As well as providing the basis of national-allegorical interpretations, this reflects effects the colonial system had on the familial structures of Algerian society: not only were the figures of authority, political and religious, displaced or defeated to make room for colonial society, but imposed military service, imprisonment, and the mass movement of men to France as immigrant workers removed men from family units and put the

11 Dib, *L'arbre à dires*, 72-73.

burden of maintaining social stability and continuity onto women, as Dib depicted in his first novel, *La grande maison*. Leïla Sebbar, the French-Algerian novelist born in 1941, described her father as belonging to a generation of "ces fils de pauvres qui un jour avaient déclaré la guerre à ceux qui opprimaient les pères, avilis, impuissants et auxquels, un jour, ils rendrai l'honneur perdu."[12] The symbolic significance of this humiliation is bitterly expressed by Babanag in *La danse du roi*, a social outcast and one of several characters who cling to Arfia, the former *moudjahida*, as a kind of mother figure or protector:

> Du jour où le Français est entré dans ce pays, plus aucun de nous n'a eu un vrai père. C'était lui qui avait pris sa place, c'était lui le maître. Et les pères n'ont plus été chez nous que des reproducteurs. Ils n'ont plus été que les violateurs et les engrosseurs de nos mères, et ce pays n'a plus été qu'un pays de bâtards.[13]

Hakim Madjar, in *Le maître de chasse*, laments the disruption in intergenerational transmission cause by forced migration and poverty: "J'ai à peine connu mon père, et naturellement, pas du tout mes grands-parents. Après, c'est l'obscurité totale. [...] Personne ici ne sait de qui il descend. Au-delà de la troisième génération, les gens perdent le fil."[14] This leads, he says, to a crisis of justification: the uncertainty as to where to turn for authorization in the needed effort of rebuilding the society after independence. This is the space that excessive and arbitrary parodies of authority would come to fill, built on the basis of an instrumentalized and constructed memory. As the sociologist Lahouari Addi puts it, "la culture patriarcale s'est réincarnée dans des mémoires forcément sélectives d'individus atomisés mais rêvant et mythifiant l'ordre tribal qu'ils n'ont jamais connu."[15]

This reconstructed father figure, cobbled out of selective memories, does not correspond to the realities of the society Algerians inherited with independence. The process of colonization and then independence involved not a simple struggle over a power position but a social mutation, the decay and transformation of a cultural inheritance. Some of Dib's characters are orphans, but also heirs, beneficiaries of a family fortune gone into ruin but still able to support them materially. The father of the narrator in *Qui se souvient de la mer* was a landowner, employing seasonal workers who he prevented from organizing, but while his son benefitted financially from

12 Sebbar, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, 30.
13 Dib, *La danse du roi*, 76.
14 Dib, *Le maître de chasse*, 102.
15 Lahouari Addi, *Les mutation de la société algérienne: famille et lien social dans l'algérie contemporaine* (Paris: la Découverte, 1999): 17.

this, he inherited not authority or a social place but the old family mansion in ruins and the sense that this social world was irrevocably disappearing. The narrator has no need to "kill" his father, to revolt against him, because he and the world he represents are dying on their own. Part of the inheritance this leaves is a bitterness, a sense of defeat and despair. In *La danse du roi*, Rodwan's father, also from a formerly noble family, dies in his early thirties having given up on life. On his deathbed, Rodwan's father gives a long tirade in front of his assembled family, which fills ten pages of the novel, where he goes through the futility of business, education, and revolt, and before dying refuses to pronounce the profession of faith. He condemns the society as fallen utterly into ruin and misery, and prides himself only on having not pretended that this wasn't the case:

> Nos villes, toutes nos villes, ne sont que marais, eaux mortes, sur lesquels les démons de la foi et de la soumission veillent. Voici un pays qui dans sa totalité n'est qu'un cauchemar à fabriquer la plus grande misère pour le plus grand nombre possible, et vous n'y trouverez que des individus paisibles, contents de leur lot, modestes et sages. Au milieu d'eux, il y en avait au moins un qui se savait malheureux et n'emboîtant pas le pas. C'est ma seule consolation.[16]

The problems he sees are not just external but run deep in every person:

> Non, aucun changement n'est à espérer, aucun, tant que le coeur de l'homme continue à vivre dans la crasse. Et celui qui peut se vanter de changer un seul coeur, serait-ce le sien, qu'il se fasse connaître et apprenne qu'il est plus utile que Dieu. En attendant ce jour-là, tenons pour bien assuré que ces bornes sur lesquelles les chiens lèvent la patte en passant valent mieux que nous. Ce qu'il faut d'abord, c'est cracher, et recracher à la figure de l'homme [...] Ça le réveillerait, peut-être...[17]

The despair and total disdain for his relatives that he expresses before dying leave their mark on Rodwan, who spends the novel in somnambulistic confusion. And although the armed revolt against colonialism had shaken up the lethargy that Rodwan's father condemned, it was not by itself capable of uprooting his malaise and skepticism towards all authority and every attempt at change. The mythology of the War of Independence abounds in fathers who gave up their traditional authority to embrace a changing world,[18] and, Addi argues, the generation of fathers born in the 1920s and 1930s generally accepted change in social order and family structure even

16 Dib, *La danse du roi*, 84.
17 ibid., 90.
18 See, for example, Frantz Fanon's chapter on the family in *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove, 1994).

if they grumbled about it.[19] But this acceptance can be another form of despair or powerlessness, and it still leaves the question of what to accept, on what grounds to perform the reconstruction of society. With neither the colonial system nor the existing state of social relations within indigenous society providing a sustainable or popularly legitimate model, the abdication of patriarchal privileges might be an appropriate and laudable response, but leaves open the problem that Madjar, in *Dieu en barbarie*, called a "non-justification génerale."

This treatment of fathers in Algerian writing contrasts with, for example, the picture the Moroccan novelist Driss Chraïbi painted in his first novel *Le passé simple*, published in 1954, the same time Dib was publishing his first trilogy. The book revolves around the narrator's revolt against his father, a hypocritical and authoritarian figure who rules his family with an iron fist and a religious code that he ignores completely outside of the home, and a rich businessman happy to work with or against any power to protect his own interests. Chraïbi's novel is both a condemnation of exploitation and domination within Moroccan society, and a caution as to how easily these structures can reproduce themselves even through revolt. The narrator ultimately realizes that a hypocritical truce with his father is more profitable to him than real revolt, and that by accepting his father's money he can go study in France, maintaining his distance but still able to come back and take over the family affairs. This monstrous figure of the father, and the excessive style Chraïbi uses, would appear in Algerian literature after independence, dramatically in Rachid Boudjedra's 1969 *La répudiation*, which extends Chraïbi's concerns with an obsession with sexual violence and incest. But there the father is both monstrous and absent: having repudiated the narrator's mother, he is physically present only occasionally, although his position of authority, the patriarchal structuring of the family, continues to be in force even as the family falls into chaos.

Fodeïl, in "Le ciel sur la tête," is the son of Rodwan's generation, and his father resembles a softer version of the one in Chraïbi's *Le passé simple*: a man with significant business interests who ruled his family with absolute authority. This discipline, the demand of a "sacred respect" due to the father, turns him into a figure of the law, an incarnation of tradition:

> Une loi en tout cas sur laquelle mon père se fondait et, lui, fort de son bon droit, renchérissait. Sans avoir à entrer dans une de ces colères barbaresques que nous lui connaissions, son inflexibilité hautaine suffisait à nous faire, nous, courber l'échine. [...] Il incarnait la Loi. Moïse tallé dans le marbre. [...] Mis à

19 Addi, *op. cit.*, 20-21.

> part le poids de nos existences, ce père portait sur ses épaules, sans plier, celui de notre passé, de nos traditions.[20]

But this carrying of tradition only appeared to the sons as a demand for respect; this authority was grounded only in its own claim to legitimacy. Fodeïl was able to deal with this by, first, pretending to go along with his father's authority while maintaining his own distance from the "dépouille" he offered up to him and then, second, inheriting the substantial business interests his father developed that allow him to support himself without too much exertion, a double process clearly not available to all of his peers. For him, the weight of tradition becomes the long chain of ghosts he carries with him and that undermine whatever action he might like to take. For others of his generation, it becomes a challenge to out-perform this figure of the father, of the law, with one even more excessive, grounded in further and more open violence. In "Le rétour d'Abraham," Dib pictured this as an attempt to revive a savage patriarch, the prophet Abraham not as the figure who, when God released him from the obligation of killing his son, marked the end of human sacrifice but as the one who, in his willingness to do the deed, continues that tradition. The frequent interfamilial murders of the "black decade" revive, he says, the patricides and sacrifices of Greek tragedy and biblical myth, and are not the survival of a living tradition but a plunge into "la région noire de notre géhenne intérieure, cette région ou part sans parole en nous, qui ne répond jamais, ne dit jamais."[21] What is brought back is not the tradition but the very thing that the tradition presented itself as a means of avoiding. And, as seen in the monstrous brother in *Habel*, who fills in the paternal figure with his own arbitrary decrees and becomes a figure of political authority, the fabricated return of the ancestor might also appear in a patronizing mode of governance, a postcolonial authoritarianism that undermines the stability of the society rather than upholding, guaranteeing, or renewing it.

*Debt and faith: tracking a postcolonial trajectory*

What was described as a crisis of patriarchal authority then mirrors a general crisis in authority, political or religious. Dib's discussions of the civil war, and the larger, global, crises that he saw it as one part of, use language that can move between political, religious, and even economic registers. What appears from an outside view as the continuity of tradition or its

20 Dib, *Comme un bruit d'abeilles*, 132.
21 Dib, *L'arbre à dires*, 76.

hypostasis into a fetish appears, from the inside, as a lack of the credit or faith that can turn arbitrary authority into a part of social life. In a fragment from *Simorgh* where he described the crisis the world was undergoing as "une faillite générale de *créance*. (Littré: *créance*, action de croire, ajouter foi)."[22] It was first noticeable in religion, he said, but had spread to undermine all authority. He described this in terms of a kind of political theology connecting the social faith or credit that allows institutions to function to the long history of belief in divine power:

> Dans la conscience obscure de chaque être est ancré le sentiment que le pouvoir, à quelque degré qu'il s'exerce, participe et procède du divin. C'est cela qui faisait les souverains d'antan, pharaons, empereurs, se vouloir dieux ou, à tout le moins, représentants de Dieu sur terre, ses califes et ses papes. Là prend source le pouvoir auquel il nous faut ajouter foi. Faute de quoi, si pour une raison quelconque ce sentiment est battu en brèche, ou frappé de carence, rien ne va plus. Rien ne tient plus debout ni ensemble, en nous comme au-dehors. [...] Où le salut? Ni la créance perdue ne revient, ni l'autorité ruinée ne se restaure.[23]

Concluding, Dib offers no solution other than a vague hope in a human instinct for self-preservation and the passage of time. The point of his comments is to complicate attempts to read fundamentalist violence in isolation from a larger crisis of political authority, or to read political crisis as separate from what surfaces in religion. The two sides are not opposed by the presence or absence of faith; rather both are united by a lack of it, since, "malgré les apparences, l'intégrisme n'est pas une forme de foi superlative, il est la foi désespérée de ceux qui ont perdu la foi."[24] The emphasis on outwardly visible forms of religiosity and the concern with delineating the elect from the rest betray, in this analysis, a lack of internal conviction. Faced with the failures of present society to live up to the ideals represented in religion, going hand in hand with the fiduciary lack that makes authority a pale imitation of divine power, this despairing faith turns instead to aspects of comportment easier to address, and behaves as if these were the root of the problem. Rather than fostering social cohesion and function, religion becomes nothing more than a set of obligations, and unilaterally imposes a social hierarchy without base in social functions.

Dib's brief analysis, although far from a thorough exploration or explanation of religious fundamentalism, invites, through the use of the word "créance," a connection between religious faith, political authority, and indebtedness. The word "créance," although it has the sense of

22 Dib, *Simorgh*, 95.
23 ibid., 96.
24 ibid.

"giving faith," is most commonly used in discussing financial matters. A crisis of "créance" would be, in its most likely reading at the time, a debt crisis. Eboussi Boulaga, writing in the 1990s, also drew attention to the closeness of language used to discuss debt and that used to discuss faith. Political authority, to be functional, is rooted in a kind of economy of trust, an investment of faith that needs to be grounded in the capacity to act otherwise:

> Le monde humain, politique, est, en sa structure, *fiduciaire* de part en part. Il est bâti sur la croyance. Celle-ci est le fait de la liberté qui adhère à des valeurs non contraignantes. [...] Là où le crédit n'est pas institué de quelque manière, il n'y a que simulacre, imposture et barbarie. Ce que nous nommons crise est en réalité un discrédit institutionnel. Seule une fondation de la liberté pourra y remédier.[25]

Dib's writing on post-independence Algeria moves between this kind of political reading and the religious one seen above. Whether criticizing forms of political authority, economic relations, or religious forms, he returns in each case to the difference between credit extended between sectors of society and obligations that become imitations of what they claim to be, and sources of discord and violence rather than unity and opportunity. Just as familial inheritance could show two faces, a benevolent passing down of opportunity or the imposition of a burden, social coherence viewed as credit may either appear as a unifying mutual responsibility or as an unpayable but unavoidable blood debt. The difference between enabling credit and crippling debt is between a tool used to particular ends and one that is used as an end in itself, with violence – overt or as the threat of further immiseration – used to ensure its functioning. Credit, like intergenerational inheritance, is something passed on from one part of a community to another; while it may involve obligation, this is within the framework of mutual benefit and based on trust. Without this, debt becomes a form of subordination, weighing on its recipient like phantom ancestors or unincorporable inheritance. Without opening up a future, debt turns the present into its servant, exhausting its resources, trading credibility for domination.

The inability to distinguish between credit as a social bond as debt as an objectifying obligation was at the root of Kamal Waëd's frustration in *Dieu en barbarie*. The fact that his studies, which took him to France during the years of the War of Independence and set him up to become a political figure in the newly independent country, were paid for by an anonymous benefactor fills him with shame and rage. He feels that his indebtedness undermines his

25 Eboussi Boulaga, *Les conférences nationales*, 133.

autonomy, and he is unable simply to trust or accept this situation; when his mother suggests he simply be thankful for the comfortable life he's been able to lead, he responds angrily: "comment peut-on se féliciter d'un acte sans connaître les intentions qui l'ont dicté?"[26] To his mother and aunt, the gesture was nothing concerning or out of the ordinary: with Kamal's father dead, the family received charity to help Kamal; such charitable gifts are "la part de dieu," a way that the community maintains itself as community, and held as a fundamental religious obligation. But Kamal, seeing it only as an imposition, a debt that is not payable and so can never be done away with, wants to break with tradition entirely. Finally, talking with Marthe and Hakim Madjar, whose *mendiants to dieu* epitomize to Kamal the attitude of a country condemned to perpetual begging, he finds himself, to his own surprise and partial dismay, muttering "Je hais, je hais la charité" through clenched teeth and insisting that one should never try to do good to anyone who hasn't solicited it, "pas même en lui demandant son pardon. Pas même en s'humiliant, en mendiant son aide pour lui venir en aide."[27] His rejection of forms of social support that require an individual to put faith in the good intentions of others leads, in *Le maître de chasse*, to his embrace of a political fetishism, clinging to procedures and policies simply as a way of projecting power, making support for his project and his project alone the precondition for any progress. On a personal level, it also forces him to withdraw from his friendships and social connections, as he tries to remove himself from every reminder of tradition. This is the attitude to which Dib's reflections on *çadaqa* (which, in everyday speech, refers most often to friendship or trust), discussed in the last chapter, would oppose a model where credit would not be a means of distributing identities and establishing hierarchies but a form of mutual obligation that provides the basis on which to think of a collective being and acting together.

In his portrayal of Waëd, Dib aimed a broader criticism at an inability in the new Algerian ruling class to conceive of authority in terms of mutual responsibility. Eboussi Boulaga had theorized, in reference to sub-saharan African states, the form of a "fetishistic state," where symbolic authority became an end in itself, the struggle over which actual issues of governance became subservient too. Postcolonial Algeria differed in many ways from the ways from the states that he considered, thanks in large part to the country's oil wealth, which helped fund an significant initial burst of infrastructure development, replacing what was damaged in the war

26 Dib, *Dieu en barbarie*, 54.
27 ibid., 206.

and what was taken by departing colons, increasing mobility and bringing electricity as well as education to most of the country, and giving elites a source of income largely separate from a need to exploit the population. But the Algerian state involved its share of "fetishistic" reversals, contradictions and symbolic conflicts in the society evident in the way that names and explanations given to policies ran firmly against their results. Despite its praise of rural life and major promotion of an "agricultural revolution," the government oversaw a massive and rapid urbanization, leading to a perpetual housing crisis.[28] Despite the dedication to gender equality and separation of religion and state in the constitution, conservative religious forces were among the few oppositional groups the government would cater to, which culminated in the acceptance of the 1984 "Family Code" that enshrined unequal privileges for men and women.[29] And despite its constant claims of popular legitimacy and praise of the people, the government repressed assertions of difference, and its bureaucratic structures – inherited from the colonial system or borrowed from the Soviet Bloc – drew a sharp line between those within the system and those without.

After president Boumedienne's death in 1978, the shift from an official promotion of austere socialism to an more "liberal" attitude towards private wealth, despite being touted as a new "openness," did little to address these contradictions, and contributed to heightening divides between those benefitting from the political and economic situation, and those not.[30] This took place in a global climate that had shifted away from the ideals of international cooperation that had marked at least official language in the wake of the anticolonial indepenences. The "Third World" debt crisis could be called a fetishistic reversal on a global scale, as mechanisms of credit to fuel development became, with the revaluation of the U.S. dollar and rocketing interest rates, crippling debts that emptied government coffers just in order to keep debt levels from climbing further. Along with this came a shift away from a discourse of international cooperation to one of suspicion, as the gaps between wealthy and poor countries both increased and became more

28 Akram Belkaïd summarizes this and related social malaise in chapter 10 of *Un régard calme sur l'Algérie* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).

29 For a detailed description of the Family Code, see Souâd Khodja, *Nous les algériennes: la grande solitude* (Algiers: Casbah Éditions, 2002): 29ff.

30 For different accounts of this period, see Hugh Roberts, *The Battlefield: Algeria 1988-2002, Studies in a Broken Polity* (New York: Verso, 2003); Lahouari Addi, *L'algérie et la democratie: pouvoir et crise du politique dans l'algérie contemporaine* (Paris: La Découverte, 1994); Hocine Belalloufi, *La démocratie en Algérie. Réforme ou révolution?* (Algiers: APIC, 2012); or, more conversationally, Rachid Mimouni, *De la barbarie en générale et le l'intégrisme en particulier* (Paris: Le pré aux clercs, 1993).

evident. This same stratifying dynamic also took place inside countries as "liberal" economic doctrines, adopted in the name of breaking with the debt paradigm, increased inequality and encouraged geographically uneven development. The 1980s in Algeria followed this path, as economic liberalization led to the creation of private fortunes while exacerbating corruption and drawing attention to the contradictions and divisions in society.[31]

In the short story "Vivre aujourd'hui," from the 1995 collection *La nuit sauvage*, Dib revisits the themes of debt that figures into *Dieu en barbarie* in this newly changed society. An old man finds himself, as Kamal did, the recipient of anonymous charity. Sitting with his orphaned grandson at the edges of the market, where they often sit, the narrator has a piece of money pressed into his hand. Two things in particular concern him: first, he wonders "si mon allure, ma mine ne semblent pas plus propres à inspirer la pitié qu'autre chose";[32] and second, why his benefactor took pains not to show his face, in a town where most people know each other at least by sight. To the narrator's grandson, the explanation of why they received the money is simple: "C'est parce que nous sommes pauvres."[33] He is eager to go back to the same spot so that the gift can be repeated. But the old man, from a good family, always careful in his appearance, struggles with how to receive the gift. The story ends with the grandfather finally agreeing to go back to their old spot, letting this gift sit alongside the dependencies he already has on family, on his neighbour, and on his compatriots who died in the war. The graciousness with which he manages to swallow his pride evidently contrasts with Kamal Waëd's from the earlier novel.

But "Vivre aujourd'hui" is still, as it announces from its opening lines, the story of how a man becomes a beggar without intending to, and of how almsgiving turns into an anonymous practice, without a personal connection. The story happens against the backdrop of increasingly ostentatious wealth side by side with poverty and high prices in the market. While the narrator claims to have no resentment towards those who've gone from a childhood of real hunger to amassing fortunes, the contrast of his situation to the men struggling to get their luxury cars through the crowded streets shows a society marked by widely differing trajectories. The story's title, "Vivre aujourd'hui," invites reading it as a picture of a historical moment; Dib had used this

31 Akram Belkaïd points out that, despite internal liberalization in the 1980s and a "successful" IMF-led structural adjustment program starting in 1994, after which the country paid back its debts in full, the basic political and economic structure remains unchanged: "l'Algérie est toujours un pays rentier totalement dépendant de l'évolution des cours de l'or noir." Belkaïd, *Un regard calme sur l'algérie*, 134.

32 Dib, *La nuit sauvage*, 161.

33 ibid., 164.

title once before for a poem published in 1950, probably the most explicitly political poem he wrote. This poem, picturing fighters gathering in the hills, ended with a declaration of unity and optimism: "Les hommes éclairent ma vie / Ils m'apprennent à vivre / Ils m'aident à comprendre."[34] This later story ends, before the old man and boy head home together, with a more troubling message:

> Un monde qui ne sait plus réparer ses fautes, on ne sait pas comment l'aider à redevenir juste. Même ceux qui sont allés dans les montagnes pour y laisser leurs os, et qui ont dû rentrer. Vivre aujourd'hui, c'est ça.[35]

A world where the best method on offer to repair fissures in society is the faceless donation of a few coins does not inspire much confidence. This picture could be extended well beyond Algeria, in a world where pasting personal faces onto charitable giving, distracting from the steady reinforcement of barriers between rich and poor, has become a substantial industry.

The Algerian state had come to power, as Laurent Bazin puts it, "by contracting a debt to society," a blood-debt and a religious debt to "the blood of the martyrs and the combat of the *mujahidin.*"[36] The failure to maintain this debt as a living reciprocal link led to a moral and religious critique, which the Islamist movement benefitted from, letting them give a moral justification to a project that in its vision of authority did not differ so greatly from the state. Lahouari Addi has argued that the Algerian state invited religious opposition, both because it maintained symbolic forms of authority long linked to religion (although, as Mohammed Benkheira argues, these were largely simply applied as a facade onto organization structures copied from the French[37]), and because, since public participation in government was blocked, it was most easily criticized on moral grounds.[38] Ahmed Rouadjia's study of the Islamist movement in Algeria details how public policy encouraged the rise of religion as the only social force established enough to oppose the regime, by restricting private investment in most fields apart from religion, and through an arabization of primary education, creating a demand for teachers fluent in Standard Arabic (rather than the Algerian spoken form), filled largely by graduates of religious education programs.[39] The religious currents were subject to much less repression than

34 Dib, *Oeuvres Complètes Tome I: Poésies*, 546.

35 Dib, *La nuit sauvage*, 180.

36 Bazin, "The Indebted State in Algeria," in Bernard Hours & Pepita Ould Ahmed, ed., *An Anthropological Economy of Debt* (London: Routledge, 2015): 124.

37 Benkheira, Mohammed H. "Algérie-France: un lien d'image ", *Lignes* , 30 (1997): 23-32.

38 Addi, *L'algérie et la démocratie: pouvoir et crise du politique dans l'algérie contemporaine*, 50-51.

39 See Ahmed Rouadjia, *Les frères et la mosquée: enquête sur le mouvement islamiste en algérie* (Paris: Karthala,

other oppositional groups, with mosques providing some of the only non-policed public spaces in the country. All this, together with the increased international appeal of political Islam thanks in part to media outlets funded by public and private funds from the Gulf states and to the mobilization of international fighters against the USSR in Afghanistan in the 1980s, in which many Algerians participated,[40] contributed to making religious discourse one of the main and most integrated sites for opposition to the government, without incorporating it into the political system.

In 1988, a wave of demonstrations, popular mobilizations, and riots shook the country, and were violently repressed. Although Islamist groups had only joined the protests after their start – the most visible actors were urban youth, many very young – when the government announced a hasty shift to multiparty democracy, it was the Islamists, in particular the FIS (the Islamic Salvation Front) who were best-organized. Aided in part by an electoral system designed by the ruling party to favour a single-party majority, the FIS dominated local elections and were poised to win the parliamentary elections; the subsequent decision by the army to cancel those elections and decomission the president is generally taken as the action that started the civil war.[41] That a multiparty democratic election came to be seen largely as a contest between two forces, neither of which was interested in sharing power (some Islamist figures spoke of abolishing democracy as the first act of a new government) could be taken as a fine example of a political fetishism.

*The breakdown of tradition*

It is against this failure of the post-independence state to establish relations of trust with the population that the reading of the violence of the 1990s in terms of a return of the repressed or the resurrection of a spectral and bloodthirsty predecessor comes into focus. The theme of repetition is often raised in talking about the civil war. The young men who joined the GIA (Armed Islamic Groups) chose to repeat the retreat to the maquis and liberation of the country by arms that had become part of national mythology. Along with the guerilla warfare, some government practices, including the use of torture and of large-scale prison camps in the Sahara, were reminiscent of the practices used by the French. It also became common to talk about how

1990).

40 Habib Tengour's *Le poisson de Moïse* (Pars: Mediterranée, 2001), published in 2001 but set before the civil war, is an interesting novelistic treatment of the legacies of the Afghan *jihad*.

41 On the elections see, for example, Roberts, *The Battlefield: Algeria 1988-2002*, ch. 4.

the FIS was the son ("fils") of the FLN: a product of how the FLN had controlled politics, but also similar in its organization and insistence on exclusive power. Both sides railed against the continued presence of the French colonizer and the treason of Algerians allying themselves with it, although those who were vilified were mostly francophone critical intellectuals, not the ones involved in making military and economic concessions to French dictates. But if this war repeated the earlier one, it did so without the horizon of democratic and popular freedom – those demands had been denied in 1988 and after, and the struggle here was between two sides that each offered their own total control as the only solution. And the theatricality of the GIA did nothing to change the fact that their actions mostly involved massacring civilians and using the cover of revolt to carry out personal, family, and business vendettas.[42]

But Dib's writings on the civil war are notable for how little they engage specific historical details of the period. Instead, he opts for a mythical presentation. As it was in the rhetoric that GIA leaders used to muster their followers, religious tradition becomes the field where the period's conflicts play out, although what this means for Dib is, needless to say, quite different; Dib tries, in respects, to understand why religious doctrine and practice could become the means of justifying the slaughter of a society rather than its maintenance. Where Dib speaks of inheritance in "Le rétour d'Abraham," his language would better be called mythical or archaic than historical. The hypothesis "d'une confusion du père usuel avec l'imago atavique d'un patriarche volontiers assassin" proposes a partial explanation of the violence as the resurgence of a "mentalité de la horde" that takes interfamilial killing to be sacrificial and so outside the purview of the law.[43] With the collective law no longer commanding authority, a private and arbitrary reckoning comes to take the place of justice. This is a fundamental reversal of the tradition: in the story Dib tells, the commemoration of Abraham's aborted sacrifice, meant as a mark of the end of human sacrifice, keeps alive, and in the position of origin, the patriarch who transgresses that law. With the aid of "un usage abusif, sacrilège, du texte coranique," and a "contrefaçon «mystique»," this figure even convinces its victims of the authority of its position. It jumps from the symbolic, the invisible world of stories and images, directly into the visible world

42 Baya Gacemi's *I Nadia, Wife of a Terrorist*, trans. Paul Cole and Constantina Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), written from interviews with a woman married to a GIA "emir," gives a good sense of the violence and of the importance of theatricality to the GIA, in part to cover the huge discrepancy between the behaviour they permitted to others and what was allowed them as fighters (and as men).

43 Dib, *L'arbre à dires*, 75-76.

of human interactions, transposing the nightmare image of eradicated and impossible practices into real violence. Tradition in practice has always, of course, involved abuses and hypocrisy, but this shift is significant: the abuse becomes fundamental, justified by a split in time that separates the present violence from a justice projected into some further future.

In Dib's presentation, echoing Freud, the “archaic” is always present, ready to surface when the tradition fails or malfunctions. Dib narrates this bluntly in the story “La déviation,” from *La nuit sauvage*, which tells the story of a 25-year old *nouveau riche* (better not to ask where his money came from, the narrator tells us) who ends up stranded at night, after his Mercedes gets stuck in the sand on a remote road he took when a construction roadblock forced him off the highway. In a horror-movie scenario, he and the girl he brought into the city so that she could spend a few hours “hors du trou à cafards de leur petite ville et oublié ses barbus, des hypocrites dans leur genre et des incapables pour être complets”[44] are discovered by a villager from a remote village, a miserable collection of a few houses, and are taken in to spend the night. In the morning they are brought to a village assembly, dressed in white, and then, after a wild-eyed *sheikh* explains that they have been send to him by God, the two providentially arrived strangers are thrown into a tomb and locked in while the villagers pray overtop of them. From patio restaurants and air-conditioned travel they're thrown into remote, primitive obscurantism, a misery and religious fanaticism that revive legends of pre-Islamic virgin sacrifice.

Placed in the context of Dib's other work, the story is revisiting the village from *Le maître de chasse*, playing out the story one of the characters there had told of another village that had seized a saint by force, killing him and building a mausoleum over his body to guarantee their protection. In keeping with the story's title, which refers to the highway detour but also hints at a trajectory taken by the country since the time of the earlier novel (the title of Mimouni's *Le fleuve détourné* has a similar double resonance), “Le détour” shows a deterioration of the situation presented in the earlier work. These villagers, just a short drive away from the asphalt highway and urban luxuries, embody the things that both the state and the Islamists projected as their opponents: backwards, miserable and uneducated, and tied to a tradition religion belonging more to the pre-Islamic *jahiliyya* or “ignorance” than to a “modern” Islam. The story's outcome is a parody of the tragic outcomes of the earlier novel and of the very idea of a guardian saint. The tomb, announcing the belonging of even a remote settlement to a larger community, a place for

44 Dib, *La nuit sauvage*, 22.

social gathering, and the image of a model of saintly behaviour, becomes a symbol of social cleavage and encloses two unremarkable victims, an innocent woman and a representative of petty corruption. The sheikh moans that the villagers have become “les victimes expiatoires d'un sort injuste,” because they lack “médiateurs,” but his actions only create new sacrificial victims.[45] In the failure to replace the system of traditional religion with new mediators, what surfaces is a nightmare version of the tradition, gratuitous sacrifice rather than protection and obligation. In effect, this “sacrifice” transfers the status of victim, turning a sense of abandonment into a murder. The villagers' recourse to their own understanding of tradition amplifies, rather than repairing, the rifts in society; rather than providing historical continuity it sharpens the divide between a modern present and its imagined archaic other.

Dib's novel *Si diable veut*, published in 1998, the same year as *L'arbre à dires*, continues to explore the ideas of sacrifice and of the failure or *détournement* of religious tradition, but in a more complicated, ambiguous and elliptical fashion. The novel's village setting is a part of contemporary Algeria rather than a mythical sketch. Tadart, the village that the teenage Ymran comes to after his mother's death from the Parisian *banlieu* where he's grown up, has electricity and running water, and life is in some respects better than in the immigrant community that “sont restés en cette terre étrangère où ils resteront d'éternels étrangers, guères très aimés, à ce qu'on dit.”[46] The traditions presented in book, as foreign to Ymran as the French culture that surrounded his suburban high-rise complex, are not simple archaisms but a complex syncretism, a combination of Islamic and older Amazigh practices rooted in the rhythms of rural life. These traditions are followed more out of habit or respect than of belief, but through their reversal in the novel they take on a horrific effectivity. The climax of the novel takes place on Eid al-Adha, the “festival of the sheep” that commemorates Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son. On this day, drawn by the scent of blood from the sheep slaughtered simultaneously in every house, a pack of dogs attacks the village. The dogs, or at least a part of them, are the remains of a local tradition: every winter, a dog from the village is driven out, a ritual said to ensure the arrival of spring. For the first time in memory, this year the dog came back to the village, first accompanied by a family and then, on the greatest holiday of the year, with a whole pack. Before the dogs are driven away,

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45 ibid., 49.

46 ibid., 20. Ymran's name is an Arabic word (‘imrān) that refers to architecture and construction; once again, the opposition of built civilization and its outside is at play in the novel. My thanks to Ratiba Hadj-Moussa for this observation.

they kill a victim: Safia, a teenage girl living with her family on the outskirts of the village.

Although the novel is nominally set during the civil war, Tadart has been spared the killing going on elsewhere in the country, and these are mentioned only once in the book, when Ymran's grandfather thinks to himself: "Des gens égorgés, dépecés, à Tadart nous n'en parlons qu'à mots couverts. Pourquoi? De crainte d'attirer ces horreurs chez nous? Parce qu'elles excèdent la raison? Parce que l'inhumain est un défi qui ne connaît pas de réponse?"[47] But Dib leaves not-so-subtle hints to suggest reading the dogs as a metaphor for terrorist groups. The first dog who returns looks as if his eyes have been lined with khol, a popular fashion choice for the GIA; we are told that the dogs are eager to "aller se presser autour de leur émir," as the hierarchically ordered groups did around their own "emirs";[48] and Safia, the girl they kill (and whose name means "pure"), is beheaded, as victims of the violence often were. This parallel allows the dogs' return to be read as the return of social exclusions, youth without a place in society forming their own, profoundly asocial, modes of organization. No explanation for the dogs' return is offered; Dib's intention seems not to have been to provide a fully developed allegory for terrorism but to present violence in a form abstracted partially from the real events.

The dogs in *Si diable veut* also put the novel in contact with a common thematic in Dib's work of the wolf or the beast. Inspired by the homonymy of his name with an Arabic word for wolf, the "bête," "loup" or "louve" becomes, in Dib's fiction and especially his poetry, the image of a speechless or instinctual part of human existence, caught up with violence, hunger, and especially with sexuality. In Faïna's madness in *Le sommeil d'Ève*, she transposes herself and the man she loves into wolves, imagining them together in a wildness that would ignore all the social realities that keep them together. In Dib's work overall, the wolf or beast is not to be driven away but rather to be lived with, "cherished," brought into the equally speechless space of the home and fireside in the poems of *Feu beau feu* – a kind of domestication that acknowledges the continued sleeping presence of wildness. When Hadj Merzoug, Ymran's grandfather, describes the first returning dog, his descriptions fits this thematic:

> Figé à sa place, il arrêtait sur moi, sur nous tous, le regard insondable du monstre qui dort en chaque animal - et parfois en l'homme. [...]
> Et la vérité m'a aveuglé. Au contraire de nos chiens, ceux-là n'avaient rien d'humain: ni le père à présent, qui était de chez nous pourtant, ni moins encore sa smala. Des

47 ibid., 131.
48 ibid., 161.

> animaux qui n'ont rien d'humain? Balivernes! Comment une invention aussi biscornue avait-elle pu germer dans ma cervelle? Des chiens qui tiennent de l'homme: et pourquoi pas des hommes qui tiendraient du chien?[49]

This savageness is not archaic in the sense of an earlier and abandoned form, but of an animal substrate that is a constant possibility. The dogs, Ymran thinks late, "n'avaient au fond jamais cessé d'être ce qu'ils sont redevenus."[50] Ymran runs to the woods after another failed ritual, into a forest that is "moins un aimable ensemble d'arbres qu'une créature hirsute, pétrie d'opacités, le poil crépitant d'étincelles. Qui retient son souffle mais vous suit à la trace et va jusqu'à vous précéder en éclaireuse."[51] His time in the forest is described, with all the resources of Dib's poetic writing, as a temporally disjointed whirl of sensory disorientation and a swirl of thoughts that culminates in an encounter with another of Dib's reoccurring figures, the "chasseur inconnue." Ymran's ability to move between this state and social life, and his ability to move between Algeria and France, where he returns after the novel's tragedy, are key to his ability to master his emotions and to accommodate to the events of his life, an accommodation that the village's seasonal rites fail to produce.

Ymran's mobility contrasts sharply with Safia, his partner in the failed ritual. Like the couple in "Le détour," the two find themselves enclosed in a mausoleum, but here this is part of an annual practice Dib calls "les fiançailles du printemps." The couple in the story were themselves sacrificed, but here the two are supposed to sacrifice a pair of doves, emerging from the tomb to throw the carcasses in a fire in front of the community to guarantee the arrival of the rains. Safia, like the others, sees this as simply an "old but good" tradition, not a necessity, but she is excited and honoured to have been chosen for a role that "ne vous arrive qu'une fois, et pas à toutes les filles."[52] The rite has not been explained to Ymran, and the reader learns about it along with him. His ignorance, and his transgression of social protocol when, after she tells him she is his "fiancée du printemps," he kisses her, puts Safia into a rage that she holds inside herself, showing it in a disdain for Ymran and an unwillingness to accept his requests for forgiveness. When Ymran finally realizes what's being asked of him, he refuses to kill the birds and runs from the mausoleum into the woods. But with Safia left alone, the scene that up til then, although in an

49 ibid., 36-37.
50 ibid., 161.
51 ibid.
52 ibid., 115.

atmosphere heightened by the eeriness of the mausoleum and the singing from outside, has proceeded along the lines of cultural misunderstandings, confused emotions, and sexual tension between two teenagers, shifts suddenly. Safia emerges from the mausoleum hurling curses, to her own surprise, on Ymran and on all of them:

> Maudits, maudits, si vous ne le rattrapez pas! Un étranger! Maudits serez-vous! Il est venu, il est entré chez vous et le mal, en compagnon, est entré avec lui [...]
> Ceux qui vous gardent, qui vous protègent, se sont détournés de nous: ils ne vous regardent plus, ils ne vous protègent plus [...]
> Toutes les terres reverdiront, toutes enfanteront des récoltes, sauf les nôtres. Partout les brebis mettront bas et les oiseaux chanteront, sauf chez nous. La sécheresse fera le vide. Dans nos puits le vide, dans nos sources le vide et dans nos oeuds le vide. La sécheresse videra la vie, la couchera dans la poussière.[53]

As she speaks, Safia is aware how little her words actually apply to the situation, or to Ymran, who she is ostensibly identifying as the source of evil. And she knows that her sudden conviction, taking the ritual in full seriousness, goes against the spirit of the event; her inner voice says: "*un jeu, ces fiançailles du printemps, ils n'ont pensé à les célébrer une fois de plus que pour perpétuer une tradition et voilà; voilà maintenant que cette fille qui semble n'avoir rien compris ou avoir compris autre chose.*"[54] The transformation of her embarrassment and frustration into curses falls back only on her. After her father rescues her before she is about to throw herself, naked and barefoot, onto the fire, Safia becomes turned on herself, observing but silent, and when the dogs return she is forgotten outside.

The particular effect that the tragedy of *Si diable veut* has stems from its following mythic cycles, but at the same time being a horrific playing-out of initially harmless events. The novel presents a mythic narrative, but at the same time undermines it by showing how much this myth depends on small details of social interaction, on limitations to mobility and expression that are the results of particular historical and cultural forms. Safia's death follows the logic of sacrifice but is at the same time obviously unnecessary and preventable, the result of limitations on mobility and expression particular to its setting. The possibility of bifurcating fates is accentuated by the way Safia also contrasted in the novel with another young woman, equally strong-willed and self-composed, a classmate of Ymran's named Cynthia. In a scene that doubles the mausoleum scene, Cynthia invites Ymran to hear her play her cello in a Beethoven trio. Both scenes, for Ymran,

53 ibid., 117-119.
54 ibid., 120.

involve an overwhelming experience of music and a struggle to understand the foreignness of what's going on around him. Cynthia has been given the opportunity for a mobility greater than Ymran's, moving from the highrise *cité* to her teacher's neighbourhood, and moving through the emotional complexity of the music. Dib is careful not to make the contrast between the two girls a simple one of two cultures: Cynthia's opportunity is thanks to a teacher who, unlike the others in their schools, teaches the tradition of the French Enlightenment as a skepticism and an openness to uncertainty, mysteries that go beyond what we know. The contrast is not between two traditions as fixed entities, but between two modes of drawing on tradition: one that is unable to adapt to the demands of life, and one that is open and flexible.

Although Dib presents the return of the archaic or the repressed in a tragic narrative framework, even though it appears as unavoidable or uninterpretable fate, it is in direct relation to the capacity of social structures and traditions to renew their functions, to provide the opportunity for the domestication of the unseen and the unspoken, to prevent the reversal in which they come to create the chaos they claim to guard against. Repetition and return are not inevitable, but fate and responsibility are woven together in a history that does not guarantee that the opportunity to evade fate will be available at the same time that fate appears. The ability to avoid repetition and the inescapability of living it exist together but on different registers. If seemingly innocuous details can explode into tragedy, the prevention of tragedy may equally live in the details of everyday life more than in the actions that directly oppose it.

What drives the dogs away in *Si diable veut* is the decision by Hadj Merzoug and others to take out the guns they had set aside since the 1954-1962 war. While this could be read in connection with the Algerian government's decision, after several years of massacres, to arm "self-defence groups" in rural areas, in the novel it is the villagers' own initiative. Echoing the descriptions we saw in Mbembe and Bensmaïa of the anticolonial tradition as an ongoing process that continues beyond independence, opposing postcolonial realities as it did colonial realities, the legacy of the war is taken up not as a prize to be protected by repressive action or an identity to be commemorated, but as a catalyst to opposing new threats and dangers. A fundamental question still remains, though, as Bab'Ammar's weariness with violence in "Le ciel sur la tête" indicated: is it possible not just to suppress the reappearances of a violence that demands sacrifice, but to put an end to this spectral figure, whose effects are all too tangible, once and for all? Is there an end to a history that opposes one repetition to another?

*Abdication and escape*

In his late collection *Simorgh*, Dib reworked an essay on racism written in the 1960s for a French periodical. The changes he made to the essay reflect his late interests in sacrifice, but here the emphasis is on how to escape the cycle of victimization and sacrifice, re-visioning a history that would not naturalize the conflicts he saw as threatening the world. The most significant change he made to the essay was to provide, at its beginning, a derivation of racism that formally resembles Freud's projected prehistory, but rejects the image of an originary father of the horde: instead he imagines a pantheistic community into which the claim of a single god emerged, "un dieu avec ses élus et, déjà, ses exclus."[55] This act, which he says would have been seen even in these distant times as a "régression vers la barbarie," opened the door that led to the developments of racism, and at the same time established a melancholia, a longing for a lost paradise. At the end his presentation, whose simplifications and generalizations he acknowledges, he warns against the constant temptation to fall again into "le piège du retour aux sources," the attempt to reestablish "le cité des élus."

Projections of prehistory run the risk of being a "return to sources" more imagined than real themselves, using a projected distant history to naturalize present conflicts and avoid the vagaries of a current and changing history. But in projecting a past before the division into exclusivist groups, Dib aims to undo the naturalization of conflict between self and others, opening the possibility of moving beyond this into a mode of identity that would adjust itself to its surroundings rather than to projections of a end to conflict via the victory of one camp. The other major change Dib made to his essay was to present the movement beyond racism as involving not a conquest but a self-sacrifice. The defeat of an oppressor always contains the possibility of taking on the oppressor's identity. Escape from this, Dib says, can only come by way of a "symbolic suicide," the elimination of the image of the master altogether:

> Une voie de salut reste à la portée du sujet: le meurtre de l'incapturable Figure, du Double dont on a usurpé la dépouille, ou cru l'avoir usurpée, mais qui n'a fait que vous dépouiller, lui, de votre imago; et le travail de deuil aidant, pour en finir. Encore, dans ce cas, faut-il posséder la trempe nécessaire pour se prêter à un suicide (symbolique), et c'en sera un, et qui vous concernera, il sera la monnaie d'échange nécessaire à la libre disposition de vous-même, et à votre accueil aux lieux de la renaissance. [...] On peut dès lors songer à poursuivre, une fois cet obstacle vaincu, l'oeuvre de reconquête, de recouvrement de soi, et à bénéficier de son droit normal,

55 ibid., 41.

> et à part entière, de cité. On dispose pour le coup des prérogatives que la maître, à présent évincé, partageait avec son clan.[56]

Rather than a murder of the father, perpetuating the cycle of sacrifice, this would be the patriarch's own suicide, the decision, from a position of strength, to give up the image of mastery in favour of an existence as one self among others. This act is "symbolic," and this, like the imaginary prehistory, moves Dib's analysis far from proposing political solutions. But the fact that Dib's framework operates on the level of the imaginary makes a link between broad social concerns and individual ones. The individual's insertion into history is mediated by imagination, and while this can take place through over-investment in the sacrificial demands of an authoritative identity, Dib also hopes that it might take place through the sacrifice of that identity, putting imagined tradition in the service of life rather than the reverse. We can see this in two examples: the first, via a kind of fable in *Le désert sans détour*, and the second in a consideration of how fables come to inform the young Lyyli Belle's life in *L'Infante maure.*

*Le désert sans détour* is certainly one of Dib's most obscure texts, but it can be read as an imaginative staging of the processes Dib described in his reworkings of his essay on racism. The desert here, as so often in Dib, is a place where the physical world and the imagination meet: it is a place of beginnings and endings, of emptiness and of ruins, a framing of history folded in on itself, characteristics it shares with the page that receives writing. In this sparse tragi-comic book, the desert is the aftermath of a traumatic history, the site of a great battle, with warriors, tanks and airplanes buried under its surface. It is also the bare stage where, in one of the two texts the novel alternates between, an unnamed community of watchers held behind a metal grating see a re-commencement of the world played out for them. This follows the lines of the mythical history we've just seen, with its emergence together of a history of dualistic opposition and a nostalgic-melancholic subject: after an initial struggle of intertwined cosmic forces, a human couple appears, but the man absorbs the woman and declares himself a sole god; this figure then faces an opponent, both as the "Prostitute" and as a mechanical spider; and finally the man is seen alone in the desert, singing to the night and lamenting his loss of Hawa (the Qur'anic first woman), his initial companion. The desert also provides absurdist stage where the novel's two main characters, the magistrate Hagg-Barr and his servant Siklist, a pair reminiscent of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza or of Beckett's antiheros, carry out a vague quest. Hagg-Barr is searching for

56 ibid., 54.

traces in the sand that, once he reads them with the aid of his umbrella, will lead them to "celui qui a été sacrifié, et pour lequel des gens n'en finiraient pas de se sacrifier";[57] his hope is that through this they will be able to put an end to the repeating story of someone killing someone else. But at the end of his search, rather than finding this primal figure, Hagg-Barr himself transforms into a statue, a sphinx in the desert.

As he changes, his voice enters into a conversation with a voice coming from the sphinx. Hagg-Barr decides to tell himself his own story: "Que je suis par exemple arrivé en ce lieux pour devenir immortel, bien que j'aie passé l'age." But the other voice counters with another story: "Ce qui a commencé avant vous et sans vous, s'achèvera après vous et sans vous. Ainsi se présente votre histoire."[58] The two voices have a strange conversation, the sphinx in epic tones, Hagg-Barr chatty, where Hagg-Barr accuses the voice, which claims to the devil and the master of all space, of having the murder of the devil, of death, and of conscience on its conscience. Finally the voice claims only to be "l'enfant abandonné dans la nuit," the lonely singing subject of melancholy, and then goes silent. As Hagg-Barr goes silent too, the position he takes falls between immortality and non-existence, in a perpetual amnesia that is nonetheless a guardian of history, and neither as the vanquisher or the victim of sphinx:

> Quand le visage du monde se sera effondré, effacé. Hagg-Bar sera encore. [...] Il aura oblié ce qui a été et, pris dans cet oubli, c'est alors qu'il se souviendra: dans ce défaut de mémoire, lui tout gris d'oubli, énoncé inécidable, indésignable. [...] Par cette lumière, par le dernier cri du silence, Hagg-Bar n'est pas ma victime. Je ne suis pas; moi, je ne suis pas! Et je n'ai pas d'autre lieu.[59]

In the wake of his disappearance, the desert fills with butterflies, and Siklist returns to find Hagg-Barr gone but the desert suddenly filled with people, a silent crowd painted with chalk. One of them puts a coral necklace around Siklist's neck, which he takes to be a coronation until he sees that all the others wear similar ones. The novel ends with them teaching him the interlocking parts of a polyrhythmic dance and silent song.

Hagg-Barr finds that his role is not to be, as he seems to have planned, that of a mediator or an ambassador, but instead that of a "watcher," a ruin in the desert that marks a history it no longer acts in, its claims of authority silenced. And in the wake of this self-sacrifice, a sacrifice

57 Dib, *Le désert sans détour*, 120.
58 ibid., 108-109.
59 ibid., 113.

with no victim because with no sacrificer, the structure of authority is replaced with a community that shares its privileges, and the emptiness of the desert with community and hints, in the coral wreaths, of the sea. Although only on the level of mythology, or perhaps more accurately a parody of mythology, the master and monstrous ancestor are put to rest.

*Inheritance and Imagination*

Although the setting in the wake of a high-tech desert battle has contemporary resonances, when the novel was published in 1992 and still today, *Le désert sans détour* offers even less to a "political" reading, one looking for concrete paths of action, than the essay on racism does. What it does is to connect, again following but diverging from the model of psychoanalysis, historical concerns to individual and poetic ones. The poetic voice's quest to see its individuality merge into its surroundings or into the flow of history connects to the desire to put the master to rest. A psychological and individual work is then able to point to a communal and historical hope, and a project of rewriting mythology to gesture towards one of rewriting history.

From at least *Habel* onwards, Dib used the Biblical and Qur'anic figure of Ismaël as the model of relation to place and power, very different from his portrayal of the father, Abraham. Ismaël is not the son to whom the paternal lineage is passed on, but the first son who Abraham drove away in favour of his second, banishing him with his mother into the desert. Despite his inheritance of rejection and his condemnation to wandering, Ismaël is also a figure of foundation, the start of a new lineage, though one that, for Dib, remains exilic. After the story of his exile, Ismaël wanders into the desert and disappears from history to be claimed later, in some accounts, as the ancestor of the desert Arabs, a nomadic people who are not rooted to a single place but are nonetheless closely connected to the land they live off of. In *L'infante maure*, the little girl who narrates the book remembers her father, a "man from the South," telling her the story of Ismaël:

> Je veux être, comme papa, l'enfant dont Ismaël a été le premier père. Une paternité avant toutes les autres, une paternité passée dans le même sang de papa jusqu'à moi. Et il a dit: l'enfant Ismaël chassé de la maison paternelle avec Agar sa mère, était sur le point de mourir de soif dans le désert; alors elle l'a mis à l'abri du soleil dans un buisson, mais une source d'eau a jailli sous le talon d'Ismaël.[60]

Lyyli Belle's father is, like his putative ancestor, a wanderer; like so many of the fathers in Dib's

60 Dib, *L'Infante maure*, 172.

writing, he is absent much of the time, but Lylli's thoughts make him present: “Même une fois parti, il n'est pas absent. Je le ressuscite en lui parlant. Il est loin là-bas où il retrourne toujours mais il n'est pas perdu.”[61] The passage about Ismaël appears in a long section at the end of the novel where Lyyli, perched in the trees in the back yard of her house in Finland, visits a desert and meets her grandfather, sitting outside a white tent. After they talk, among other things, about sand, snow, and words, he sends her into the dunes with a lizard in her hand; the animal disappears into the sand leaving traces she's not able to read. Sent back by her grandfather to read these *atlāl*, she finds them gone and then, returning to the tent, sees that her grandfather too has vanished. So she takes his place; and back home in her garden her memory of that grandfather tells her that she should maintain that attitude in her own, different landscape:

> Assis à l'entrée de sa tente, en silence, grand-père a levé sa main tannée, puis montré simplement l'immensité du sable. Et ce que j'ai compris alors: le sourire d'étoile me priait de bien considérer le monde quand il se fait désert et d'en avoir pitié. Malgré sa grandeur de désert, d'en avoir pitié.
> Lui, il gardait ces sables, assis au milieu, ce milieu qui se trouve partout. Comme moi je garde ici les arbres et les fleurs, les prés et les lacs, l'odeur grave des feuilles tombées à l'automne.[62]

Through a little girl's fantasy, Dib gives a clear expression of an attitude he gave many of his characters, in the face of a world increasingly appearing bare or empty: a patient watching, rooted in place, not claiming ownership but taking care. Lyyli Belle's lesson strengthens her back in her life, confronted by her father's absence and her mother's sickness; and when she embellishes her vision to include a reference to the story of Ismaël, with a spring opening, to her grandfather's delight, under her own heel, we see that the lesson is not just for her but for her father as well. Lyyli's dream is of a world where no one would be a stranger, because belonging would only depend on position:

> Désormais grand-père garde la source et le désert. [...]
> Tout en veillant sur le désert et la source, grand-père nous garde. Il garde le monde. Un monde que je garde aussi. Et un jour arrivera peut-être où cessera ce grand va-et-vient d'étrangers. Tous, il faut l'espérer, nous finirons alors par nous retrouver, où que nous nous trouvions. Pas plus que les autres, je n'aurai besoin de savoir si je suis moi-même d'ici ou d'ailleurs. Aucun lieu ne refusera de m'appartenir et plus personne ne vivra dans un pays emprunté. [...] Rappelée à son premier état, la terre sera au premier venu.[63]

61 ibid., 81.
62 ibid., 164.
63 ibid., 174.

There is nothing remotely real or authentic in Lyyli's adventure; it is pieced together in her imagination from a few references her father made – to sand, tents, the spring bursting under Ismaël's heel – scattered elsewhere in the novel. Although the titles of both halves of the novel - “L'heritière dans les arbres” and “L'infante maure” - present her as receiving an inheritance (the “infanta” was the name used for princesses in Christian Spain), this is an inheritance that she creates for herself, out of whatever she draws from stories passed down to her and her own experiences. In contrast to the sons studied earlier, for whom inheritance becomes solidified in the image of a father who must be accepted or combatted, Lylli constructs her inheritance herself. Her adventure through imagined identity returns her to her surroundings, it grounds her in her attachment to her own territory, the yard with its trees and birds and all its hours and seasons. Her inheritance is very particular, it situates her as herself, in her family, in her particular relations to each of the people close to her. But even though that inheritance, with her northern mother and southern father, stretches her across different places, it puts demands on her only where she finds herself; she's able, in a sense, to match Bab'Ammar's desire to be oneself by being oneself.

Critics have read *L'Infante maure* as a response to a discourse on double or split identity. Denise Brahimi writes that the book is, far from being “l'exploration d'un monde double ou d'un monde des doubles,” a direct rejection of the idea of a horrifying in-between space.[64] And Farida Boualit reads it as a response to a “schizoid” Maghrebi writing of the 1970s, using the examples of Khatibi and Farès; she describes it as “en fait le récit d'un parcours au cours duquel le personnage principal, Lyyli Belle, réussit à se «bricoler» une identité pour transcender la dissociation schizophrénique menaçante.”[65] Even if her father might belong to a doubled or dissociated world, Lyyli proposes a model not of an identity that mixes different separate sources, but one which springs up from itself, united, at home wherever it is. Of course, Lyyli Belle can expect her future to shape her in ways beyond her control. But in the figure of a child coming to live, despite what others might see as obstacles, in a full, complex and united world, Dib puts forward at least the possibility of a drawing on tradition that would not hold back but be in the service of the demands of present life. Although the schisms of a divided identity may not be able

64 Denise Brahimi, “Cet horrible entre-monde,” in Naget Khadda, ed. *Mohammed Dib: 50 ans d'écriture* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valery, 2002): 86.

65 Farida Boualit, “L'Infante maure: Le manifeste dibien de la littérature maghrébine solidaire mais solitaire,” in Khadda, ed. *Mohammed Dib: 50 ans d'écriture*: 98.

to be healed, they can be lived – at least by a new generation, in the re-creations of the world through which each of us join history – as all the rest of the world's brokennesses can be. To be oneself, as Bab'Ammar would like, is to take these up and live them without needing to name, defend, or eliminate them. And although no one can demand that another do this, Dib seems to suggest that each of us retains, at least potentially, the possibility of doing so.

Brahimi and Boualit's readings recall Jacques Derrida's own response to Khatibi, his friend, in his book *Le monolingualisme de l'autre*. To Khatibi's description of a life caught between a mother-tongue and an other-tongue, Derrida responds by presenting and then generalizing a paradoxical situation drawn from his own personal situation: "I speak only one language, and it is not mine." This statement describes his biographical situation: though growing up as an indigenous Jew in colonial Algeria, with ties, by genealogy or historical situation, to Hebrew, Arabic, or Berber, the only language he learned was French, the language of the colonizer which he was forcefully reminded was not his when, during the Second World War, the French government rescinded French citizenship from Algerian Jews and barred Derrida from attending school. But he also claims it applies to everyone, even someone who, like Khatibi (or Dib), was divided between a spoken mother tongue and the language used in writing. No language "belongs" to anyone, not even the colonial master, except through a cultural usurpation that denies that language's full history; and at the same time, we are each stuck with our own language, as no statement we make is fully translatable even to those who speak the same language we do. With a language not his own, but no other language to turn to, Derrida's "monolingual"

> is thrown into absolute translation, a translation without a pole of reference, without an originary language, and without a source language [langue de depart]. For him, there are only target languages [*langues d'arrivée*], if you will, the remarkable experience being, however, that these languages can never quite make it to themselves [*n'arrivent pas a s'arriver*][66] because they no longer know where they are coming from, *from* where they are speaking, and what sense their trajectory takes.[67]

These itinerant, wandering languages provoke the nostalgia for a "fore-language," an obscured but originary one that would hold the secret of identity. But this secret language, Derrida says,

66 "S'arriver" is, as Derrida put it in a comment on his use of the word in earlier work, "une manière peu française […] d'écrire" – not an accepted form of the verb "arriver." In those comments, he says that "s'arriver" suggests both a thing arriving and its reaching its own limit. In other words, the word itself, to him, contains the idea of an arrival that would at the same time be the dissolution of the thing that arrives – which in this case would be the idea of an originary language. See Jacques Derrida, *Déplier Ponge: Entretien de Jacques Derrida avec Gérard Farasse* (Villeneuve d'Asq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2005): 34.

67 Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other*, 61 [Translation slightly modified].

would itself need to be a target language, a language of arrival, and so it can only be something projected in the future, a language that would have shaken itself free from the history of domination without setting itself up as a new identity; like Hagg-Barr's end in the desert, it does not exist, but looks to a future:

> Invented for the genealogy of what did not happen and whose event will have been absent, leaving only negative traces of itself in what makes history, such a prior-to-the-first language does not exist. It is not even a preface, a "foreword," or some lost language of origin. It can only be a target or, rather, a future language, a promised sentence, a language of the other, once again, but entirely other than the language of the other as the language of the master or colonist...[68]

Translation, which was a key term for Dib in much of his writing about Lylli, then refers not just to transferring meaning between different subject positions. It refers as well to a process of making and remaking language, identity, and history. History needs to be made, although it can be made only out of fragments handed down. To recreate history is to turn this inheritance into a world that can be lived, a process that involves the imagination but through which the imagination leads back to one's own surroundings. This is to create a world that is one's own in the sense that it is where one lives, what surrounds and determines, but not one's own in that it cannot be claimed, owned, or even defended but only watched, cared for, strengthened. The unity of that world is not guaranteed by a root, by a myth, or by an identity; rather the unity is performed and re-performed, picked up in order to be passed down in an inheritance that gives credit and credibility.

The call to take up history as a task for the imagination may seem like a weak response to the horrors of civil war or to spreading deserts. But from the beginning of his career, from his turn to writing, this is what Dib had done. And his writing tries to show that there are no lives so marginalized that they cannot take on this task, just as there are none so central or important that they can escape the responsibility of doing so. Writing here can provide a model or a metaphor for living history: taking up the fragments of what is available or handed down, putting together or rewriting them in what will be at once a repetition and a new contribution. Writing one's life – which, far from meaning writing autobiography, opens onto all the possibilities of the world – would be a way of living an identity, something quite different from living a role. The first takes up history and searches in it for what responds to the demands of life, while the second takes one

68 ibid., 62 [Translation slightly modified].

frozen image from it as a way of avoiding those demands, confronting them with a ready-made answer. And while the second can lead to conflict, as this "answer" demands more and more of the present without ever being satisfied, the first can open onto the world. As Lylli Belle finds, one can be oneself anywhere, since one is, simply, where and what one is. If this is cause for despair, it is also the only possible remedy for that despair: although from every flight of the imagination the return to the visible world is unavoidable, there is always more in and to that world than meets the eye.

# Conclusion

Here the two halves of this dissertation converge, with the figure of Lylli Belle and the image of a disappearance or a merging into the world around. To the fade of the authorial voice into the landscape corresponds the sacrifice of a separate individuality into the course of history. This is not a passive surrender but an active participation, a contribution to reinforcing the world even though this is done within imposed and restricting limits. Dib's writing serves as an example of how, despite these limitations, a situated existence remains open, through the transformations of the imagination, to a whole of existence, a wealth of meaning and image created and recreated in each life and at each moment. The movement between these are translations in Derrida's sense: movements without clear origin or destination, taking up all the world's strangenesses and translating them into a language that can neither be owned nor taken away, the substance of a world that is distinctly one's own but contain's nothing that is not someone else's. Every reader of Dib walks into and re-translates this space, in a proliferation of worlds and languages that remains nonetheless entirely inside the shared world and inside Dib's French text.

We find here the play of visible and invisible in two senses. First, what remains invisible, as in the note to *Omneros* with which we began, is the whole: the whole of physical existence, of the imagination, or of the course of history. Its presence is not denied, but it is accessed only through the situated details of life that appear to each one. Secondly, the imaginative life that bridges seen and unseen is itself invisible, transmitted through words and stories that must be recreated on the basis of each reader or listener's own points of reference, as Lylli Belle builds a world out of bits of stories and experiences. In both senses, writing is a technique to bridge between the two. Writing inserts each scene, image, or thought into a larger perspective, pointing out lines of relation; and it moves between author and reader, connecting the solipsistic worlds of the imagination. This is one technique among many, certainly; other forms of creative activity do the same, as do forms of social organization as they mobilize the imagination. But creative writing possesses, perhaps, a special status in the way in which it can simultaneously perform and provide commentary on these bridges that arc from the visible to the invisible and back again.

These bridges are built of pieces of tradition, and observations on the world. In Dib they draw on the Andalusian culture of Tlemcen, the text of the Qur'an, the traditions of Sufism; they

draw on reverie and on madness, on fear and on wonder; they are built of bits of landscape, in Algeria, France, Finland, or America, and the shadows, hazes and gleams that fill them. They struggle with the difficulties of constructing and reconstructing history without the assurance of being at its centre; they move from myth to politics and back, confronting every individual as both part of a group and as alone facing a decision; they struggle to connect histories rather than putting them in conflict.

We have explored these trajectories from two separate but converging directions. Writing as an activity engages a world that is in flux and never fully available to the writer; thus even writing that aims to disclose or unveil the state of its world will also be an experience of the limits of this project. The writer's desire or intention to grasp the world drives writing inescapably into a space linked both to the situated and limiting details of the writer's position and the never-reached horizon of a full engagement or merger with the world. The movements through this space challenge and destabilize desires for a fixed picture of what the world would be. In this dissertation's first half we have seen how, in an analysis already prefigured in classical Arabic letters, a cultural tradition is less a static image repeated across time and place than an orientation that is constantly being reinvented, held together not by identical repetition but by a looking-back that creates a drive to produce the object it is looking for. We have seen how Dib, inspired by Sufism, presents a view of interiority, psychology, and narrative that is not unified by an identical content or form, but held together by movement through different states. These movements cannot be represented but only performed, leading to an aesthetic whose fragmentation is not a picture of a world made of irreconcilable pieces but an invitation to recreate the processes whereby the disorienting variety of experience comes together in the movements of a life. And we have seen how an attempt to grasp the world as it appears, in the total experience of a landscape, in the flashes of particular objects, whether observed, sensed or thought, or in the wordless experience of childhood, leads to reconsidering the idea of visibility itself as a process that continuously dissolves the categories, distinctions, and names by which we make sense of it. Ultimately, the only visibility attainable is one mediated by the imagination, an imagination that must be continuously created anew, since both the world as it is and pure overwhelming experience belong to the invisible. Dib's writing, which reaches towards both these poles, invites us to move through a space of imagination, built of the traces of historical inheritance, physical landscape, and the movements of thought, aspiration, and despair.

In the second half we observed how Dib's treatment of history and historical events uncovers similar structures and tensions. While history can be presented as unified and describable by omitting from it those places, periods, and people that are difficult to fit into the chosen interpretation, such an approach is unsatisfactory for someone who, like Dib, wants to place the details of everyday life inside of, and as a part of, history. The experience of the poor – whether under colonial domination, during or in the wake of the disorientation and destruction brought by war, or in the metropoles whose attractive facade is built on the maintenance of exclusions – forces us to consider history as something visible only in glimpses, exceeding the oppressive structure of the present without escaping them. The fact that even a community that defines itself in opposition to oppression is divided and shifting poses the challenge of thinking collective existence without resorting either to excluding those members who don't conform to the desired image or imagining the possibility of a clean break, an apocalyptic clean start. This makes the question of historical existence also one of personal ethics, for those in power – whether in the South or the North – and for those who feel their powerlessness keenly. Lastly, we have seen how Dib explores the challenge of having historical inheritance feed into an adaptive way of life in the present rather than freezing into an identity that can judge the shortcomings of the present but offer no solution beyond tearing them down in the hopes that the past will somehow resuscitate – a process that, to Dib, feeds into escalating cycles of violence. This question, important to Dib's ambivalent treatment of religion, relies like the others on a tension in imagination: while historical experience is lived through the imagination, which translates the lived experience of limitations and possibilities into the realm of the visible, this imagination can lead either back to the world or away from it into fantasies of control or destruction.

Dib's work, from his early semi-documentary fiction to his most fantastic novels, from cryptic poetry to fiction based on the most mundane of actions or spaces, works to translate between the events and locations that marked his life and the differently marked imaginations of his readers. It charts a path through a world of shadows, neither hiding from what stands outside our experience while shaping it nor burning up in the quest to reach blinding invisibility. From the poor sections of colonial Tlemcen to the imagined deserts where legends and religions pile up, from a point overlooking the forests to a crowded metropole that knows another kind of solitude, the route from visible to invisible and back lights up a world that is connected but illuminated precisely at each point, an illumination to which words can only, endlessly, partially respond.

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