

The Mezzo Cammin Women Poets Timeline - Adnan

Etel Adnan: Poetry of Suffering **by Joyce Wilson**

tel Adnan writes in poetry and prose, and when she cannot write, she turns to other creative forms, such as painting, sculpting, and weaving. All of her creations are anchored in reality, but often more than one reality, in more than one language, on more than one continent. She has lived in Lebanon, France, and California, written in English and French, and seen her work translated into many languages. The poet and anthologist Nathalie Handel explains: "Etel Adnan remains the poet with the most numerous identities —she stands at a crossroad between East and West, Arab and European, Muslim and Christian, Lebanese, French and American" (Handal 48). Although born in Lebanon and widely traveled, Adnan currently (2016) lives in Paris for health reasons. She recently turned ninety.

Adnan is most well known for her work about war and its aftermath. Born in Beirut in 1925, five years after the State of Greater Lebanon was established by France, she witnessed the country's flourishing as a center of Western culture in the Middle East followed by its disintegration during a long civil war. She wrote to report the horrors of this war, to establish a foothold amidst the events she witnessed. She wrote prose to describe what happened; she wrote poetry to enter into the interior of the mind and reveal its suffering.

Adnan's poetry is difficult, as it is long, often obscure, and fragmented. The short stanzas, if there are recognizable stanzas, do not stand alone but are parts of whole poems, many of them book-length at 50 to 65 pages. The imagery suggests a symbolic relationship with concrete antecedents that are not readily apparent to the attentive reader and might never be

completely understood. While her prose is necessary to her artistic oeuvre and often written in a poetic style, this paper will focus on her poetry, specifically her major poems from the middle period of her life, published from the 1960s to the 1990s, as they fall under headings of exile, apocalypse, and elegy.

Early Life and Work

Her name Etel is from the ancient Greek on her mother's side, her surname Adnan from the Muslim ancestry of her father. Her mother was from Smyrna, growing up when the city was a stronghold for ethnic Greeks before World War I. Her father was Arabic, born in Damascus, and a distinguished officer in the Ottoman military, stationed in Smyrna when they met. Adnan describes how the fact that her father was Muslim and her mother Christian did not divide the family but increased its ability to tolerate differences:

My mother had the Gospels, she was...Greek Orthodox. My father was a Muslim from Damascus in the Ottoman Empire. He had the Koran, he knew it by heart. Amazing, the books existed on a shelf next to each other. So I have no problem with coexistence. I grew up with it.

(Tillman 4)

While she acknowledges the facts of her complex heritage in the quotation above, Adnan will write later about the challenges of choosing between languages, depending on where she was living and the demands of education, profession, and personal expression.

Adnan's early education was in French. From the age of five, she attended the French Lebanese Catholic schools. She received a scholarship toward a university education at the Ecole Supérieure de Lettres de Beyrouth, where she composed her first poems and read the French poets Baudelaire and Rimbaud, who would have a lasting influence on her writing. At this time she worked for the French Information Bureau, after which she expanded

her base to Europe and the United States. From her late twenties into her thirties (1945 to 1955), she studied aesthetics and philosophy at the Sorbonne, the University of California at Berkeley, and Harvard University. In between these concentrations, she spent a year and a half in Mexico. Without completing Ph.D. requirements, she taught philosophy and humanities at Dominican College in San Rafael, California, from 1958 to 1972. She could have taught French as well; she applied to—and was hired to—teach in English (Robertson 6).

Adnan emphasizes how she wrestled over remaining true to the language of her childhood. She remarks that a Catholic education speaking French defined her early years but as an adult living in the United States she could not identify with being French (Robertson 6). While being bi-lingual in the field of letters could be an advantage, she was divided when Algeria became embroiled in its War of Independence (which began in 1954). As a writer, she could not ignore the influence of the political on the personal. The French rule in Algeria, much like the mandate of France in Lebanon that she had grown up with, was a painful subject for her to discuss with Americans. She felt that speaking in French compromised her integrity, so she made the decision to write in English while studying in the United States ("To Write in a Foreign Language," Adnan I.253).

NOTE: In this essay, the source for all quotations from poems and essays is the two volume work *To look at the sea is to become what one is: An Etel Adnan Reader*, cited below. For more information, see Adnan's Web site at eteladnan.com.

Poetry of Exile

When Adnan was studying and teaching in California, she found that writing in English enhanced a freedom of mind that she had not known in the Middle East and Europe. She could communicate with students who were asking the questions she was asking through a flexible medium that crossed cultural and national boundaries and introduced her to

communities of other Arabs studying abroad, and poets and writers interested in engaging with topics of the times. She observed how English was a tool that could be used to criticize the United States, to speak out against the oppression of native American Indians displaced from their land and U.S. military efforts in Southeast Asia that resembled the French domination she despised. While the French language, with its built-in superiority and chauvinism, furthered oppression, she found that the English language did not (Swenson, Adnan II.379).

Yet in California of the 1960s, she was aware of the cultural differences that set her apart from Americans around her. She held back from immediate relationships with others because of her sense of absence, of separation from her homeland (Swenson, Adnan II.380). She felt at a distance. She began to build on this loss in her poetry as she took the perspective of an outsider. She was drawn to the antiwar movement and its criticism of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. In the following poem, she expresses the point of view of a Vietcong soldier caught between the domination of communism and intervention of the United States:

They got me out of my lair
For I was infesting my own land,
And they, the foreigners, came to
Liberate me,
Liberate me of my share.
("The Enemy's Testament," Adnan I.4)

With these few lines, Adnan captures the complexity of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. As victims of Communist aggression, the Vietcong were considered in need of rescue. But as willing Communist citizens, they were the enemy, not much better than animals. A resident on a patch of land during a civil war, this soldier was in the position to lose all that he has. Adnan's use of the word "liberate" is ironic because the subject of the poem would not benefit through U.S. military efforts but would trade

subordination under one power for that of another. He would not be released into a better state of being, a popular myth driving American foreign policy in those years. The narrator's tone shows how he has already come to despise himself as vermin, contaminating all he touches, when he sees his pitiful state through the eyes of the foreign occupier.

The use of rhyme in the first and last line is unusual for Adnan, while the broken fourth to fifth line indicates her preference for open over fixed forms. This fragmenting of lines, and the breaking apart of traditional poetic verse forms, was favored by many poets at that time, among them the Language Poets.

At this time in California, the Language Poets were emerging as a pivotal literary force, experimenting with new ways to write expressive poetry. They challenged assumptions about the reading process, questioned readers' conditioned expectations about the speaker behind the text, and preferred the fluidity of the prose poem, which relied heavily on image, over traditional forms that emphasized line length and sound ("Language Poets"). Lyn Hejinian was among these poets at Berkeley. Adnan has cited Hejinian as an influence on her work (see dedication to the essay "At Both Ends" in Volume II). Hejinian explains her view of narrative as follows: "[T]he big challenge is to remember that the story is not adequate, that it's not the whole story, that these [conventional poetry] books don't feel like what it really was—they don't really show it" ("Hejinian"). This initiative to redefine narrative poetry, which would have ramifications on Adnan's future work, influenced many poets in the 1960s, such as Rae Armantrout, Clark Coolidge, Susan Howe, and those coming out of the Black Mountain College and the New York School.

In another poem from the 1960s, Adnan turns to the astronauts. These lines address the first man in space, the Russian Yuri Gagarin, whose flight in 1961 captured the attention of the world.

| an incoherent light-wave was moving

behind the clouds
 and you went swimming into that distant
 pool you went to be suspended there
 cool as the western side of palm leaves
 under the break of noon
 ("The Funeral March for the First Cosmonaut," Adnan I.9)

With these images, she brings an intimacy to the experience of outer space as if its vast distances can be entered like swimming through water, and to be suspended in space is similar to the pleasure of sitting in the cool shade of a palm tree in the noonday sun. She writes as if she, the narrator, were also in the cosmos, in a self-imposed but necessary exile.

Although shapes of clauses and sentences are evident in these stanzas, the lack of punctuation allows for a feeling of openness in the lines, an exhilaration at the prospect of entering outer space. However, the poem is a funeral march. Gagarin's disappearance and death were never sufficiently explained to the public. With these lines, Adnan brings him a belated recognition that he justly deserves and gives a fellow exile a place in the literary world of poetry where he can be mourned.

The poem is also important in the way she uses natural imagery to describe the cosmos (Sellin 34). After the French poets Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Adnan includes imagery that makes two appeals for the natural world, first as an example of the beautiful (swimming through that distant pool, shaded by palm leaves), second as that harboring the destructive (an incoherent light wave behind the clouds). Although she lived most of her life in urban areas, through her taste for the tradition of romantic poetry, Adnan was well-versed in the details of the natural world.

The Civil War in Lebanon

Adnan was restless in California in the early 1970s. She observes:
 "Prosperity made America relax...created a certain benevolence" (Tillman

3). Chafing under west coast complacency, chronic homesickness, and need of stimulation, Adnan returned to Beirut in 1972 which had become a thriving cultural metropolis. But after two short years, she would see the city explode as a result of festering differences that had not been resolved after the World Wars I and II. The intellectual community that she had sought would be blown apart.

When Adnan began to work as cultural editor for the French daily newspaper, *Al Safa*, the city of Beirut was full of writers and artists who imagined a dynamic future for the Mediterranean community. At first she enjoyed being at the center of Beirut culture where the free play of ideas was encouraged. She was writing in French again, the language of her childhood. She met the sculptor Simone Fattal, who would become her life-long partner. Fattal describes the vibrant energy of the city in the early 1970s and Adnan's full participation in it as a journalist and editor:

Beirut was a city in which 13 Arabic newspapers were published each morning, plus one in English, three in Armenian...Etel [was responsible for] a whole section, producing five cultural pages per week. She hired a team of young people, and asked them to cover the scene on jazz, books, pop music, cinema, theater, shows...The scene was hectic. Galleries, theater and cinema had everyone busy, running from one end of the city to the other. The newspapers played a very important role. (Fattal 1)

Her journalist desk gave her the vantage point to comment on what was happening in the rest of the world. But soon the societal, tribal, governmental, and military tensions that had been percolating under the surface for decades erupted (Traboulsi 183). By the spring of 1975, her boss had disappeared, *Al Safa* had closed its doors, theaters and galleries had gone dark. It was no longer safe to express your opinion in print. When she began receiving death threats, Adnan moved to Paris (Fattal 2).

In Paris, Adnan wrote the novel *Sitt Marie-Rose*, which combines the narrative style of modernist fiction and journalism and is based on true

events. Written in French (later translated), with a strong plot line and clearly defined characters, this novel depicts the story of a teacher who is brutally killed by childhood friends in the military after she befriends a Palestinian physician in one of the refugee camps. In an interview years later, Adnan explained that what attracted her to this story was her personal connection to the people, having grown up with the young men who kidnapped, tortured, and killed the woman she had known. She felt compelled to make use of her knowledge (Tillman 2). She depicts the main character Marie-Rose as a symbolic Christian figure of social justice who acted out of a feminine love and compassion to alleviate the suffering of her fellow humanity. Marie-Rose explains her motivations to help the refugees as follows: "To the Palestinians [in the camps]...we were nothing but strangers at first. But we won them over. Going there was like a trip to a foreign place" ("*Sitt Marie-Rose*," Adnan I.133). Adnan shows how, through her independence of mind and empathy, Marie-Rose became an exile in her own country because of her awakening love for a forbidden people.

Sitt Marie-Rose was an overnight sensation for describing the Middle East conflict from an Arab point of view. It won the France-Pays Arabes award and has been translated into several languages. The financial success of the novel in Europe allowed Adnan to live in California and Paris, but the personal costs of this second state of exile cannot be overestimated. Although she would eventually return to the city of her birth, she would find it much changed, occupied by the Syrian army, struggling economically, leaning toward fundamentalism. While Adnan continues to explore the dynamic of falling in love with the wrong person as a source of alienation, she abandons the heroic character and the narrative structure as its vehicle. The vibrant intellectual and cultural life she needed was in tatters, and she would not stay long in Beirut. The break in her sense of place corresponds with a radicalization of her writing style.

The Arab Apocalypse

After demonstrating her mastery of the fictional narrative form, Adnan might have written a series of novels on the subject of war. Instead she writes poetry, turning away from chronology and character in order to focus on the effects of war on the psyche. This work would become the epic poem "The Arab Apocalypse." Although this work originates from the same time period covered in *Sitt Marie-Rose*, the scope narrows on the neighborhood Tel al-Zaatar ("Hill of Thyme") in 1976, where thousands of Palestinians were surrounded, trapped, besieged, and starved for months, and then slaughtered by Christian Phalangists (Tillman 7). Adnan explains, "I started this book when I lived in Beirut...I could hear the bombs from my balcony. For 59 days they didn't let any food in, water, nothing. I saw a manifestation of pure evil. In metaphysics there is no word for that" (Tillman 7). The 59 poems represent the 59 days of the siege.

While the fictional novel *Sitt Marie-Rose* tells the story from the outside, the new poems in "The Arab Apocalypse" take a deep dive inside the consciousness. With this project, Adnan goes further into the language of the soul to express the injury of a penetrating wound. The repeated killings and destruction in the country of her home cause a profound ache, a disconnection, and sense of meaninglessness at once personal and universal.

"The Arab Apocalypse" is Adnan's *Guernica*. It is her most well-known poem, and it is challenging to read. She has invented the form to carry the message, in which the many numbered individual poems make up one book-length poem, which is an entirety in itself and not a "collection" of separate poems. The 59 parts create confusion typographically: long lines break off, gaps create odd separations in the text, registers change from double to single space, insertions of words in all-caps cause interruptions in lines that are otherwise lower case. The splintered syntax and fragmented phrases convey a mind in the throes of alarm. The letters on the page create a shifting visual surface of their own through which mutilated consciousnesses rise up into view and sink back into obscurity

without being explained. (See pages on [Etel Adnan's website](#)).

Published in 1980, a few years after the novel, the poems of "The Arab Apocalypse" portray a disordered mind. What actually happened in terms of story line, plot development, and delineation of character no longer matters. Borrowing from principles of the Language Poets, Adnan offers no hero to drive the progression forward in a linear fashion and does not rely on chronology or rational thought processes. The surrealist practice of preferring metaphor over simile, of jamming unlike objects together in illogical proximity rather than implied comparison, increases the sense of urgency.

Adnan employs the methods of the French poets Baudelaire and Rimbaud, using images from their dark explorations of nature in highly wrought emotional states. She also draws from her knowledge of the Bible's Revelation to John and verses from the Qur'an. Her attentions focus on a familiar symbol common in each of these influences: the sun.

Adnan's imagination was formed by the close proximity of the sun, having grown up on the Mediterranean. The following passage shows how contradictions fester in what she remembers of her childhood:

In the summer, the sun is very vivid in Beirut. I was fascinated by the shadow my own body made, when going for an afternoon swim...I remember walking into the mountains of my village, never wearing a hat, being very aware it was hot, feeling surrounded by the sun like a thief by the police" (Tillman 7).

The impressions of pleasure swimming with shadows, and of independence of walking into the mountains near her home and not wearing a hat despite the heat of the sun, are countered by feelings of guilt over wrongdoing, helplessness before authorities of the law, and terror of entrapment. The sun's omnipotence presses too close; it might be a source of nurturance, but it also has the power to scrutinize and suffocate. Likewise, with the sun

in "The Arab Apocalypse," contradictions abound. In the lines of poetry, the sun assumes a shifting presence, representing changes in subject and theme, of divinity and destroyer, an object of art in primary colors and a debilitating disease. Personified, it appears as a punishing dictator, then nurturing mother. Objectified, it is also an automatic machine, hurling meteors that explode like missiles.

Imagery of the sun occurs in Baudelaire's long poem "The Voyage," in which he describes the journey of youths through sea by boat, beneath the stars, making port, dropping anchor, enduring storms, in elevated pitch and exclamation as they reach the end, vowing that through exploration of the unknown, they'll find a new knowledge (Baudelaire 185). His narrator begins with youthful expectations that sink as his energies wane: ("Le Soleil moribund s'endormir sous une arche,/ Et, comme un long linceul trainant a l'Orient," ("The moribund sun going to sleep beneath an arch, and, like a long shroud trailing away into the East") (Baudelaire 169). While Baudelaire employs a generous eloquence, Adnan's lines are more vehement. Adnan's sun has transformed, become personified, taken the road to evil, and has gone underground with the prisoners of the camps, where it rots and has no effect (Adnan I.203). Her tone is closer to a primal scream.

Rimbaud, whose "The Drunken Boat" also narrates a journey in search of a new mode of passion, sees the sun in nature that is repellent: "J'ai vu le soleil bas, taché d'horreurs mystiques, Illuminant de longs figements violets,/ Pareils à des acteurs de drames très-antiques/ Les flots roulant au loin leurs frissons de volets!" ("I have seen the low sun, stained with mystic horrors, casting long violet coagulations of light, like actors in most ancient dramas the waves shuddering into the distance like shutters") (Rimbaud 297). With this evidence of the end of the beautiful in nature, Rimbaud relies on elements that are recognizable: the fading sunlight, ocean waves, horizons. Adnan's images depict maimed and purpled states of existence with little resemblance to cycles of day and night. In varying colors and

transformations, her sun festers, divides and multiplies, irritates like a colony of ants, blinds, freezes. The sun can become contorted in pregnancy, in pain, in disease, in malevolence, in one instance a bag of pus, in another raised as a flag (Adnan I.187). It is a throbbing representation of excess.

Adnan has hailed Rimbaud as the one who intensified her reading experience with his example of passionate engagement with desire (Adnan I.203). But when her sun is a lover, it is one whose desire has been destroyed. Overtures to the sun appear in the form of a telegram, with the word STOP instead of punctuation to underscore the divisions that mire the speaker in confusion, and particularly female types of distress.

I hurt at the sun's belly the sun hurts at my belly O my love!
 I love a yellow sun you love a blue sun he loves a red sun
 The sun plays STOP the sun cries STOP the sun falls asleep STOP
 ("The Arab Apocalypse," Adnan I.183)

The multiplicity of imagery in each line creates too many impressions. Line one might describe a pregnancy, violent lovemaking, or rape. Line two gives three differences of opinion that will not be reconciled. Line three lists the activities of an infant, yet each "STOP" comes like an order to cease this childish activity.

Later the imperative STOP in all-caps renders a petition from a rational people for an end to the conflict:

I want people to call God "our brother" our "brother"
 O celestial comrade born of the Night and of Light ! STOP
 O celestial comrade receive your brothers in your eternity
 O celestial comrade give water and bread to the hungry
 ("The Arab Apocalypse," Adnan I.222)

The repeated word "brother" in close position on the poetic line creates two contexts, one for the familiar, another for the alien. The speaker appeals to

a merciful God who will take pity on humanity, the friend and alien. These lines convey despair with little hope of spiritual recovery.

Visions of the destruction of nature in "The Arab Apocalypse" suggest that the end of the world is at hand in the tradition of apocalyptic literature. When she describes distortions in mountain, sea, and sky, Adnan parallels the literature of The Revelation to John and The Qur'an.

In The Revelation to John, the sun appears in many guises. Images of the sun appear, as a woman "clothed with the sun, is in the throes of a difficult birth" (Revelation 12:1-2), and as a celestial being, "An angel stands on the sun and calls to the birds to come skyward and be saved" (Revelation 19:17). Despite its many guises, this sun is clearly in possession of divine power and able to give retribution. It exists in close proximity to the Lamb, who alone can protect the righteous against the outcome of the punishment reserved for the wicked: earthquakes, eclipses, gales, unstable mountains (Revelation 6:12-17). The Qur'an also describes the imminence of the hour of reckoning in terms of destruction of the natural world.

When the heavens are cleft asunder,
 And when the stars are scattered about,
 And when the seas are blown open;
 And when the tombs are strewn around;
 Then each soul shall know what it advanced [was given]
 and what it deferred [held back]."
 ("Surah 82" The Cleaving Asunder)

But in Adnan's poem, no one can be sure that salvation will divide the just from the wicked. She does not predict that self-knowledge will perpetuate a salvation process. Adnan describes the obliteration in battle of the cities and fields as a permanent desolation. Describing a people's thwarted attempt to find refuge in prayer and worship, she observes: "Prayer in a mosque. Black procession tinier than ants. Allahu Akbar" (Adnan I.168). The words attempt connection with intimacy of prayer but the pilgrims

have been reduced to specks of existence.

When words of prayer are summoned, their effect is scrambled by confusion and admission of need that evokes the bestial:

Should we love the poor the left out the rebels and the oppressed?
 I married a river to eat its fish cannibal ! cannibal !
 ("The Arab Apocalypse," Adnan I.218)

One senses that Adnan insists on delineating contradictions in order to tell the truth about the civil war. Thus, she reaches the rock bottom of her being. The poems of "The Arab Apocalypse" wreak despair. The critic Seymour-Jorn emphasizes how the minds in Adnan's verse are stuck in a disastrous state of limited awareness (Seymour-Jorn 46). They are terrorized, disembodied consciousnesses, like maimed bodies that emerge and speak as injured minds. With this work, Adnan goes far beyond the work of her predecessors, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, whose imaginative journeys are bolstered by the resilience of youth, and who resolve their confrontations with despair and terror in eloquence or ecstasy. Adnan voices a greater despair born of experience. Her lines express anguish that goes beyond theirs, for the minds in her poem cannot come to an understanding of what they have endured. The violence they have experienced is more than they can bear, and while they can witness suffering and death, even participate in it, they do not have the means to process this violence (Seymour-Jorn 46). Words are inadequate to help them deal with the result of their violence.

Drawn Symbols

Because Adnan is aware that, in these lines of "The Arab Apocalypse," the words do not suffice to communicate what the speaker has seen, she turns to signs. Between the words and phrases, inked images, referred to by one critic as dingbats (Sellin 28) or letters of the Arabic alphabet abstracted into circular, triangular, and rectangular shapes, underscore emotional

connections. They are unique, invented, resemble hieroglyphs but are not copied from the Egyptian hieroglyphs, and only hint at their influence. Adnan describes how, as a child, she would write out the Arabic script as her father read her passages aloud. She attributes this copying out of letters without knowing what they meant as the basis for her creation of an imagined alphabet ("To Write in a Foreign Language," Adnan I.249). She elaborates in an interview, "The signs are there as an excess of emotion. The signs are the unsaid. More can be said, but you are stopped by your emotion" (Tillman 7). These signs penetrate the resistance of the mind. Like visual replications of utterance, they communicate pain directly from their stark appearance between words on the page to the eye. (Review previous discussion under heading The Arab Apocalypse, and see images on [Etel Adnan's website](#).)

Appeal Across Genres

The poetry of "The Arab Apocalypse" crossed boundaries in its appeal and would mark the beginning of her success at contributing a single project to several artistic genres. Sections were included in the French part of *CIVIL WarS*, a multi-language opera by American stage director Robert Wilson, performed in Lyon and Bobigny and at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., in 1985 ("Wilson"). Later she would reorganize the multi-part poem in the form of unbound booklets of folding pages that opened horizontally. These were exhibited as objects of art in galleries in the United States and abroad (Fattal 100).

Later Elegiac Work

Adnan returned to California in 1979, where she finished "The Arab Apocalypse," and saw it through its publications, presentations in galleries, and incorporations in the theatre. In 1986 she published *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, a book of poetical prose plus sketches and paintings inspired by the mountain near her home in San Rafael. She described Mount Tamalpais as a place of refuge, where she could initiate the healing process

she badly needed, one that combined writing and painting.

During the early 1980s, Adana worked on poetry of a different shape: short lines centered on the page. The positions of these poetic stanzas reflect an emotional centering of the self. Their shape resembles that of an urn where feelings can be contained safely, like a genie nurturing its wisdom in a bottle. In this work published from the 1980s into the 1990s, Adnan emphasizes the elegiac. Focusing on the loss of her parents, she mines images from nature for their mystical qualities that relay truths about the absence and death of her mother and father.

In a long poem of the mid-1980s, "One Linden Tree, then Another Linden Tree," the lines show how her parents dwell in her memories of the city of Beirut, confined to the shimmering past. Like them, Adnan is removed from the place of beauty she once knew as if banished from a benevolent enclave. As the critic Sells has noted, in her exclamations of longing, she draws on the traditions of the Arabic mystic poets who sing about the lover in the garden, crying out to be united with the one he has lost (Sells 52). She describes the spirits of her parents as having disappeared into space, beyond the elements of the atmosphere.

O my parents buried under
 the uproar of bombs
 O my parents disappeared
 into the Great Silence
 which travels faster than galaxies!

they will never hear the rain
 falling outside
 this evening...

("One Linden Tree, then Another Linden Tree," Adnan I.269)

In meditation on their absence, she finds the strength to recall them. Her parents did not live to add their voice to the stories of the war they

experienced. Like neglected history, they exist outside the present where she benefits from the rich life of spontaneous imagination. They have been snatched from her, their point of view smothered.

It is interesting to consider her parents, the loss they represent, and who they were. By the mid-1980s, her father had been dead a long time. Much older than her mother, he died in 1947, by the time Adnan left to study in Paris. Her mother was devastated without him (Tillman 4). A spirited beauty, she had been a very young bride, saved by his advances from a camp in occupied Smyrna, and unaware that he had another wife and family. She told her daughter she had two options at the beginning of World War I: to stomp grapes or work as a prostitute (Tillman 4). Adnan harbored a deep seated attachment to her vulnerable mother, who did not want to let her only daughter go. Cautioned by poverty and risk, her mother did not see the advantage of Adnan's decision to go to Paris to pursue an education (Tillman 4). Clearly the willful daughter had acquired the wanderlust and drive of her father.

Her mother died in 1957, ten years after the death of her father, while Adnan was living in California. Adnan's poetry of the mid-1980s is infused with acute longing for her mother. "Happiness comes from/ Smyrna" ("One Linden Tree, then Another Linden Tree," Adnan I.268), Adnan writes, referring to her mother through her place of birth. Later she writes:

She had eyes which made the sun
shine over my bed
and brought down the rain
I am speaking of my mother...
("One Linden Tree, then Another Linden Tree," Adnan I.270)

One can only wonder at the omission designated by the ellipsis. Many more lines dwell on the absence of the mother in this poem, "One Linden Tree, then Another Linden Tree." In a long section, Adnan evokes the memory of a young girl trembling with the desire to find her mother as she runs

through the interior of the house, through groves and valleys, searching for her.

The linden tree is trembling in front of me
 as I used to
 in entering your rooms
 a mountain range spreads itself
 on the ridge of the Secret
 Valley
 I am running on a celestial trail
 between hedges of clouds
 or on the beach
 hammered with the sun's power
 and I come through green
 branches
 through the rustling which breaks
 the veil
 that separates death from life.

("One Linden Tree, then Another Linden Tree," Adnan I.271)

These lines evoke the qualities of young girlhood with delicacy and grace. The structure of contradiction, prevalent in much of Adnan's writing, is suspended here as images of the landscape seem uniformly heavenly, where a path runs between hedges of clouds and the beach is hammered, "with the sun's power." The rustling of branches whisper of another maternal world that can be experienced by parting a veil, a gossamer division between the states of life and death, as if the dead and living can exist in eternal benevolent unity.

In a poem published in 1990, "The Spring Flowers Own," Adnan meditates on the appearance of flowers in the ruins, sending up shoots through the pavement in streets, sidewalks, vertical walls. As the critic Sells has noted: Adnan finds life in unexpected places (Sells 51). While Baudelaire's flowers

of evil provoke an unfulfilled desire and Rimbaud's ecstasy defies reason (Sells 63), Adnan asserts that endurance in her flowers is beyond desire and logic. These flowers are still part of nature; their integrity is unforced and therefore not completely removed from the Romantic tradition; they have proved that they continue to grow and flourish. She remarks on their vegetable appearance as strange, existing in the fluidity of time, where nothing is fixed.

I know flowers shine stronger
 than the sun
 their eclipse means the end of
 times

but I love flowers for their treachery
 their fragile bodies
 grace my imagination's avenues
 ("The Spring Flowers Own," Adnan I.347)

Against expectations, these flowers survive and persist while living in close proximity to death. Treachery is the flower's defiance of the sun's questionable omnipotence. Their reappearance enables the imagination even as they seem ready to perish; their strength is a kind of grace in which they survive despite predictions that all was lost. Baudelaire's verse-flowers longed for the infinite; Rimbaud's for ecstasy. Adnan's flowers teach an inherent gentleness in survival. Through re-emergence, these spring flowers exhibit their strength in that which they "own," the cycles of nature and time (Sells 57). They have dared to thrive amid destruction and to return when the elements prove that a seasonal weather has come around again and, this time, it favors them.

Adnan at 90

With resourceful determination, Adnan does not despair. The critic Sells attributes her strength to her ability to maintain the perspective of a realist

in an unromantic world (Sells 51). Her career received renewed interest in the 2000s. She was the recipient of several writing awards: *Master of the Eclipse*, a prose collection published in 2009, was the winner of the Arab American Book Award. In 2010 she received the RAWI (Radius of Arab-American Writers) Life-time Achievement Award and also won the Josephine Miles Award from PEN Oakland that same year. In 2011, she received Small Press Traffic's Lifetime Achievement Award. Her painting has also been chosen for several gallery installations. Pages from "The Arab Apocalypse" were on exhibit at *Here and Elsewhere*, a major exhibition of contemporary art from and about the Arab world at New Museum in New York City in 2014. Her paintings appeared at Documenta 13 and in the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

As she approaches the end of her eighth decade, Adnan finds a new emphasis in her work. She explains: "In the last eight or ten years I have sensed that the love of another person is the most important experience in life...It's important in love to keep tension without being a victim of that tension, and also keep some humor, some distance" (Robinson 12, 14). She expresses this delight in a poem from her collection *Sea and Fog* (published in 2012), which renders the envelopment of the California fog as a sustaining metaphor: "Love enters the arteries and speeds up the heart./ Only in fog do I feel complete./...Time is my country, fog is my land" ("Fog," Adnan II.353). Buoyed by nature's watery veil, Adnan evokes a fluid transforming environment.

In 2014, she was awarded *l'Ordre de Chevalier des Arts et Lettres*, one of France's highest cultural honors. Just before she was to receive this award, she met with journalist Lisa Robertson, who writes about meeting her at the Caf  de la Mairie at Saint-Sulpice, Paris. Adnan was talking quickly: "So I was telling you about what happened to me after I was invited to Documenta 13 as a painter. Before that, I had little galleries here and there. I was happy because I exhibited enough to feel like a painter. I could work at my own pace, because I also have to take time to write...." (Robertson 2).

And thus, in the flurry of her accomplishments, 2015 arrived, and Adnan turned ninety.

Works Cited

Adnan, Etel. *To look at the sea is to become what one is: An Etel Adnan Reader*. Volumes I and II. Eds. Thom Donovan & Brandon Shimoda. Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2014.

Alcalay, Ammiel. "A dance of freedom': In the Worlds of Etel Adnan." Essay. *To look at the sea is to become what one is. An Etel Adnan Reader*. Volume I. Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2014. iii-xv.

Baudelaire, Charles. *The Penguin Book of French Poetry 1820-1950*. Ed. Trans. William Rees. London: Penguin Books, 1992.

Fattal, Simone. "A Few Years in Journalism." www.eteladnan.com.

Fattal, Simone. "On Perception: Etel Adnan's Visual Art." www.eteladnan.com.

Handal, Nathalie. *The Poetry of Arab Women, a Contemporary Anthology*. New York: Interlink Books, 2001.

"Hejinian" Lyn Hejinian bio at Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/lyn-hejinian)

The Qur'an. *An Interpretation of the Qur'an*, trans. by Majid Fakhry. Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing Ltd., 2000.

"Revelation" The Revelation to John. *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version Bible, Ecumenical Edition. World Bible Publishers, NY: Wlm. Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1973.

Rimbaud, Arthur. *The Penguin Book of French Poetry 1820-1950*. Ed. Trans. William Rees. London: Penguin Books, 1992.

Robertson, Lisa. "Artists in Conversation: Etel Adnan." Interview. New York: *Bomb Magazine*, 2014.

Sellin, Eric. "Etel Adnan: A Cosmic Poet." *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc., Publishers, 2002. 27-36.

Sells, Michael. "Irremediable Ecstasy: Modes of the Lyric in Etel Adnan's *The Spring Flowers Own & Manifestations of the Voyage*." *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc., Publishers, 2002. 50-66.

Seymour-Jorn, Caroline. "The Arab Apocalypse as a Critique of Colonialism and Imperialism." *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc., Publishers, 2002. 37-49.

Swenson, Cole. "Etel Adnan: The Word By and In Exile." Essay. *To look at the sea is to become what one is. An Etel Adnan Reader*. Volume II. Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2014. 377-383.

Tillman, Lynne. "Interview with Etel Adnan." New York: Bidoun, [date not given]. www.eteladnan.com

Traboulsi, Fawwaz. *A History of Modern Lebanon*. Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007.

"Wilson" Wilson, Robert. *Robert Wilson and the CIVIL warS*. VHS video tape. New York: WNET, 1986. (www.worldcat.org/title/robert-wilson-and-the-civil-wars/oclc/79435638)

For images of paintings and other artwork, see www.eteladnan.com/art/