

Review: "Unless You Change the World:" The Art and Thought of Etel Adnan

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BOOK REVIEWS

“UNLESS YOU CHANGE THE WORLD: ”
THE ART AND THOUGHT OF ETEL ADNAN

Review Essay by **Reja-e Busailah**

Etel Adnan. *The Indian Never Had a Horse and Other Poems*. Sausalito, Cal.: Post-Apollo Press, 1985. 103 pp. Paper \$9.95.

Etel Adnan. *Sitt Marie Rose*. Sausalito, Cal.: Post-Apollo Press, 1982. 105 pp. Paper \$5.00.

Etel Adnan's corpus is relatively small, and this is the more felt as not all of it is easily accessible to the reader.¹ Some of it has been published in English or French, mostly in out-of-the-way journals. Yet due to the circumstances in which she lives, to the courage and intensity with which she writes, and to the various voices in which she speaks, she occupies a special place, and her poetry deserves much more attention than it has hitherto been accorded. Adnan has been writing for some forty years; and though there are remarkable differences between her latest collection of poems, *The Indian Never Had a Horse and Other Poems*, and her poems of the late sixties and early seventies, still it is safe to assert that all her poetry bears the stamp of its author's unique individuality and experiences.

The daughter of a Greek Christian mother from Turkey and a Muslim Arab father from Syria, Etel Adnan is a Lebanese who has lived in the United States for the last thirty years and who has frequently crisscrossed the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. She is a tapestry designer and an abstract painter, and has taught philosophy of art. Hers is the rich and complex sensibility that comes of the fusion of elements such as these, a fusion that also has its difficulties, the more so in her case due to the intense interplay of circumstance and individuality. By any standard she is a rebel. Arab society — especially Lebanese — and Western society — especially American — are not only a disillusionment to her, but also objects of strong, often harsh criticism motivated by frustration and compassion. She focuses on cruelty as it manifests itself in various respects in both societies. Among these are the abuse of nature, the fate of the Indians and the Palestinians, war

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in Vietnam and elsewhere and, especially in Lebanon, male-female relationships, the abuse of children, and the abuse of religion, particularly Christianity. These issues recur frequently, as the subjects of individual poems, as independent themes, and as images.

Her poetry is shot through with manifestations of nature: the seasons, plants, ants, butterflies, birds, horses, mountains, the sea, earthquakes, volcanoes, storms, dark and light, the sky and beyond. Such manifestations permeate her consciousness, and take on as many functions as her fertile imagination bids. "You were the most beautiful/ I ever had," she writes in "One Linden Tree, Then Another Linden Tree," and that includes

the Niagara Falls
the Cordilleras of the Andes
the Surat of Destiny
the dawning of light in the
Rain Forest.

In "Love Poems," eight short ones, she draws for imagery on the deer, the rainbow, the sea, the spring, frost, mountains, fire, and earthquakes. Moreover, one gets the clear impression that nature plays as significant a role in her life as it does in her art.

The abuse or destruction of nature is a common motif. The wind, flowers, and apple orchards are supplanted by asphalt, water pollution, and the drying up of wells and rivers. Only the Indian is sympathetic and at one with nature: "Indian Nations," she writes in "Spreading Clouds," a poem dedicated to the defense of nature, "we need the wisdom/ which descends into your daily vision/ look what we did to our common mother Earth!" Or, as she writes in "The Indian Never Had a Horse,"

On the top of Yosemite Falls
the Indian is shouting: "I am
the waters of the Valley!"
All the way from the Andes
the wind is answering his call
and so are the stars.

In a number of poems she displays special concern for birds, which often symbolize freedom and the flight into the infinite. She deplores the ruthlessness with which they are hunted. This ruthlessness takes on another dimension in her short novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, which opens with a hunting scene. Here the destruction of the birds of Lebanon and Syria by Lebanese hunters represents not only a perversion of nature, but also a perversion of human nature in general, by threatening human freedom, and of the Lebanese male in particular, pointing to what is to

be taken up at length later in the novel, i.e., his perverted sexuality.

The Indian and his fate constitute a major theme in Adnan's writing, especially her poetry. In human civilization as she see it, he embodies the forces of harmony and brotherhood. Moreover, at one with nature, he is at peace with it, and is a symbol of creation and regeneration. He is made the equal of earth and sea when he washes the dead with snow and carries Neruda's coffin to the sea, or

. . . the body
of Guevara
through jungles which faded
like roses because of
his death.

Despite what has overtaken him physically at the hands of the Europeans, what he represents remains an inspiration to her, signifying her resilience and undying optimism: "It is of Indian America that we spoke," she writes in "Spreading Clouds," "five hundred years of Spanish Inquisition/ did not crush the language/ of the wind." Indian ideals, as she apocalyptically concludes her poem, shall yet rebound and rid us of the darkness we live in:

the Indians are coming . . .

They have machetes for the tall
grass that covers the face
of the sun.

Man's salvation will be achieved by a return to the basic principles of life as the Indian embodies them, and not by the coming of Christ:

do not be fooled: Jesus
is not coming
we are one people distributed into many
branches
the family tree crosses the
Great Ocean.

Adnan, however, is not naive. She remarks that nothing short of the death of the modern way of life can bring us salvation, since only with death may there be resurrection:

To reach Mexico one must die
this side of the border
and resurrect on the
other
in the midst of the Jungle;

or, to vary the paradox, "The moment I lost my sanity/ the Indian entered the door." Unlike Eliot's, hers is a secular or natural religion. But "The Indian never had a horse"; we never gave him and his ideals a chance. We are bent on his total elimination with wantonness and cruelty:

We forgot to brush the
Indians' teeth before the
final slaughter.
O how perfect the afternoon!

Or, to illustrate cruelty in both its literal and figurative senses:

The Indian came with a mask.
He had dust on his bones.
His fingers were missing.
He could not count the dead
of the tribe.

She cites the Indians' tragic fate over and over to illustrate the fate America and the Israelis are plotting to force on the Palestinians in particular and on the Arabs in general. In "A Revolutionary Grave for the Sake of Amman," a poem dealing with Black September of 1970, America (similar to what it did to the Indians) is plotting genocide against the Arabs and against other races as well.* Indeed, it intends the destruction of the stars. When Yasser Arafat visited New York, "His gestures were those of an Indian Chief. . . . Angels covered with blood were flying in the American sky," she writes in her prose poem "In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country." "I had mounted a horse," she writes in "An Alley of Linden Trees, and Lightning,"

to liberate
the Arabian continent
the horse was Trojan:
the enemy had hidden between my
shoulders.

My childhood dress got entangled
with thorns
my hands got bloodied on nettles

*Here is an instance of the poet making it impossible for the reader to distinguish between the real and the figurative. The "Indian savages" (as they are called in the Declaration of Independence) have been nigh exterminated; while the Israeli conquest of Palestine has killed scores of thousands of Palestinians whom (the parallel can hardly be accidental) the conqueror has repeatedly called "two-legged animals."

Carrying within them their sadness
 the big clouds have deserted the sky
 lead was served for bread.

—a beautiful if very painful analogy. The Arabs have an innate problem and its elements are the contents of the horse, many of which appear frequently in her writings. She shows great courage in her relentless exposure and condemnation of these elements.

Though Lebanon is the scene, and some of her criticism is primarily of Lebanese conditions, most of what she says is applicable to Arab society at large. Apathy, corruption, and cruelty are shown to dominate Arab politics, religion, and morality. Such poems as “The Beirut-Hell Express,” “Jebu,” “In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country,” and the novel *Sitt Marie Rose* are permeated with the motifs of poverty, greed, the effect of petroleum, child abuse and exploitation, rape, prostitution, male sexual inadequacy and the backward status of Arab women—all of which she paints with revulsion and agony. Arab society (she borrows Elliot’s image) is a patient drugged on the operating table.

In “In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country,” an exquisite prose poem devoted chiefly to the indictment of Beirut and Lebanese society on various counts, landlords set their property on fire to eject their tenants—the “rebellion of the rich against the poor.” The hold of greed is so powerful that children become “financiers,” “the moon looks like a coin,” and the Lebanese go sometimes on all fours “to pick up a dime under the table.” Oil, a highly recurrent image in her poetry, flows into the intimate chambers of the human system and usurps the function of water and blood. People breathe it, and because it is cheaper than water, drink it. So much of it is in their bellies that they run like engines to the cemetery. A memorable picture, as outrageous as pathetic, is that of the poor Syrian workers in Beirut eating their food mixed with cement dust and trying to find out when they will die by counting the black seeds in a watermelon.

Adnan’s rage and pity are at their highest when she writes about the various abuses of sexuality. These constitute a business and a social institution that totally disregard morality and all that is humane. She is appalled especially at the abuse of children, at how in Beirut they are assaulted under the eyes of their parents to provide some afternoon or late-night pleasure in Hamra Street; and the parents “thank God” for the money. She is appalled at how men sell women and how women sell one another. Rape is both a fact and a picture from whose violence and horror she finds no relief. Indians are raped by cowboys; girls are raped repeatedly by militiamen in Lebanon; an uncle rapes his daughter regularly; Palestine, in “Jebu,” “is raped in the belly”; the Beirut police would rape anything moving on two feet; even angels, her mother used to tell her, rape girls if they lie uncovered.

She is a devout champion of the cause of woman, and especially relentless in the exposure of the Arab woman’s plight and oppression. Jebu, the embodiment

of all that is dynamic in Arab history, is both man and woman. Woman loves more passionately than Christ, whose "two thousand years of suffering [are] redeemed in [her] two-days' flight from paradise to paradise." Indeed, "God is woman if God is to be creator." Yet in today's Arab world, especially Lebanon, such natural strength and equality are denied her, much to the anger of the author, who is one of "those who kiss the dust not by womanly obedience but because it is part of the earth." Woman there, being only the "other half" of man, does not exist. If she does, men do not look at her as they do at the sunset. At best, when she tries to pull out of her passivity and subjugation, she may form with other fellow women only something like a poorly organized secret society, working in the dark.

An exception is Umm Kulthum, the great Egyptian singer, who is Adnan's heroine and ideal, and who is invoked in many of her poems. She transcends the abject state of her fellow Arab women. She embodies in her singing the strengths and weaknesses of Arab society, its frustrations as well as the essence of its culture, its will to resist the foreigner and the colonizer:

When the Arabs were thinking that they had nothing, they were saying that after all they had Um Kalsum and that, all by herself, she represented their will to be, the religious essence of their culture; she pulled to herself, by the quality of her voice and the tone of each one of her words, the human tide that was coming toward her. This human tide became the tide of history, the tide of all the frustrations transfigured in a kind of bliss.

She sings "on target," like a whip to whatever in each one of us is dormant. And also, we can't forget it, a whip against anything foreign, because, then, the foreigner was the colonizer.

Adnan takes up at length the question of Arab woman in her short novel *Sitt Marie Rose* (more a poetic and analytical essay than a novel), in which are delineated two major conflicts. These are the conflict between male and female in Lebanese society, and between the Christian Phalangists and the Palestinians along with their Lebanese progressive allies.

The setting for *Sitt Marie Rose* is Beirut at the height of the 1975-76 war. The novel is an indictment of this war, with its horrors and atrocities. They are the manifestation of Lebanon's social and political disintegration as well as its moral depravity. And though all participants in this war are to blame for the perpetration of atrocities, Adnan assigns to the Christian Phalangists the lion's share of both cause and execution. The story itself revolves about Marie Rose, a Lebanese Christian teacher who joins the Palestinian cause, which she considers the cause of all Lebanon and of all the Arabs. During a truce she is abducted by some Phalangist acquaintances or friends, then drawn and quartered before her class of deaf-mute children (to teach them a lesson). Her experiences are those of the

actual Marie Rose Boulos, a Syrian Christian teacher of retarded children, who was one of the founders in Lebanon of the Friends of Jerusalem, for which she was abducted and executed by the Phalangists.

In one of the sections assigned to the narrator, Arab male-female relationship is dealt with analytically and at length. Because he loves only his mother, the male can love no other woman normally. Moreover, the woman who looks at herself as the equal of man constitutes a fear and a threat, and must be subjugated. Thus Marie Rose becomes an object of fear and threat, to be destroyed with cruelty by her abductors. Adnan also ascribes the male's cruelty in war to his abnormal attachment to his mother, a highly recurrent motif in her writing.

Like the author, Marie Rose is a rebel in the social, political, and cultural sense. She is strongly attracted to Islam, falls in love with a Palestinian, and even before knowing him staunchly supports the cause of his people and what they represent. They represent "a new beginning" that heralds the toppling of the old order in Arab society and the liberation of the Arab people from their factional and tribal bonds. They pay a great price for great values and objectives: "For once in the History of the Middle East," Marie Rose addresses Munir, her chief abductor and former lover,

the wandering of the Palestinian is no longer that of a nomad carrying his tribe in himself, but that of a man, alone, uprooted, pursued. They're attempting to break down your values, and in the process are breaking their own necks. They're getting their throats cut by you and your sinister allies. To liberate you! There are knots to untie, abscesses to drain. . . . Mixed in the blood of the dead Palestinians is as much Lebanese blood, Lebanese who died for them, and with them. For the first time in Arab History one group has died for another.

And already the revolution is spreading from Rabat to Baghdad and beyond. Marie Rose dies rather than renounce the revolution, denied her last rites by the Church of the Arab East, which is described as having "never gotten the knife in the belly that the great reforms were to the Church in the West," and which consequently is "not concerned with human pain."

Marie Rose is the embodiment of all that is simple, natural, and free from the shackles of reaction, be it religious, political, or social. Her abduction by the Phalangists causes consternation among the Palestinians in their camps. Her execution symbolizes the end of sanity in Lebanon, expressed touchingly through the reaction to it by the deaf-mute children, who represent love, simplicity, and innocence, and who are loved by no one but herself. She is killed before their eyes as the earth trembles under them to the rhythm of falling bombs, so that the children begin to dance. Here Lebanon at her simplest and most natural has gone mad, and her unspeakable madness is best articulated by a primitive rhythm that is more encompassing, more eloquent than speech.

Palestine and the Palestinians have a special function in the author's con-

sciousness: due to her nature perhaps, and to the role they play on the world stage and particularly in the physical and intellectual life of the people of the Middle East, they are a large and dynamic reality to be coped with, as well as an image invoked to illuminate other realities. They enter as the principal element into the making of much modern Arab thought and art. Their tragedy dramatizes the deep malady of Arab civilization, and the disillusionment with it of Arab intellectuals and artists alike. The experiences of the Palestinians often remind her, as we have seen, of those of others of her heroes, especially the American Indians. The death of Pablo Neruda is associated with them: "When flowers are tortured Palestine bleeds in Tokyo." Their tragic fate in 1982 ("Beirut 1982") is prefaced by the departure of her heroine Umm Kulthum:

Um Kalsum had left us first:
she used to sing for angels and horses . . .
Then silent Palestinians followed
her
in procession
like in the frescoes of their
ancestors.

And among the many invoked from all history to note the death of Russia's astronaut, Uri Gagarin, is the Prophet Muhammad, hovering over Jerusalem on his way to heaven—Jerusalem, the city built by the people of Jebu, the Arabs. The Palestinian experience is the primary topic of several of Adnan's major poems: "Jebu," "A Revolutionary Grave for the Sake of Amman," "L'Apocalypse Arabe," whose principal theme is Tall al-Za'tar, and "Beirut 1982." They bristle with rage and revulsion at the indifference and apathy of Arab society, with her agony over the suffering of the Palestinians, and with her admiration of their ideals and revolution.

Her heroine, Marie Rose, notes most acutely the profundity of their tragic fate as they walk in the funeral of Ghassan Kanafani:

She saw how haggard these people were, and understood the nature of their new wandering. These were no longer nomads comforted by their tribe and their herd, but a people perpetually pursued, as if by some cosmic agreement, by both an outer and inner enemy, by their self-proclaimed brothers as well as the adversary, without a single square meter of certainty or security under their feet. . . . They breathed air laced with betrayal.

In "Beirut 1982," the experience of agony and horror prevails, savagely portrayed. It spoils the beauty even of nature in the poet's consciousness, so that when she climbs "the steps of Mount Tamalpais with crutches to look at the sunrise," she falls "into the open sewers of Sabra and Shatila"; and immediately following the beautiful "air between two clouds over Mount Sannine on October

days” is the slaughter, which happens “in the dark.” The juxtaposition of such incompatibles heightens the intended effect. She has already used this device in mourning the death of Neruda when, perhaps taking off from his “smelling of lilies and urine,” she has placed side by side the city smelling “of Jasmine” with “sewers [which] run in its eye.”

Etel Adnan, however, is a revolutionary with stubborn faith. “In the darkest prison cells,” she writes in “Spreading Clouds,” “there is always a light which illuminates the world.” We have already dealt with her heroine Marie Rose. The disasters of 1967, 1970, 1976, and 1982 cause her pain, revulsion, and rage, but never despair. Thus, like one of the numerous volcanoes in her poems before the explosion, she first mutters or rumbles (“The Beirut-Hell Express”):

O how I would like to break the sky
and provoke the lightning
bring down the deluge on this
town!

Then, blunt and disgusted, she thunders to the people of Beirut to “take the first Express/ (take your vertebrae and squeeze out colonialism like pus) . . . take the Beirut-Hell Express.” Jebu, founder of Jerusalem, embodies all the Arab people from the beginnings of time and shall yet arise to purge and restore the land to its people, while during Black September 1970, Jabal Amman becomes the place for “resurrection,” Wahdat Camp the place for spring, and the bones of Abu Sliman the place where “Koranic verses” may be written. The massacre at Sabra and Shatila (“Beirut 1982”) may take “three days and three nights . . . the time Christ spent in the Tomb/ Yes the Romans and the Jews are waiting outside the Great Wall of Sorrow that surrounds the Palestinian shantytowns.” But they shall resurrect, since “No people can go forever behind bars or under the rain.”

Adnan is an artist dedicated first to serving mankind with her art. What she writes stems immediately from what she experiences. She cannot do otherwise: “Traitors the poets,” she cries in “The Beirut-Hell Express,” “they speak of roses/ when the city is an/ asphalt garden;” and more directly still (“Beirut 1982”): “Poets go home/ unless you change the world!” Her affirmations and denunciations, which directly stem from and remain close to the immediate, may not change the world. But they do characterize her primarily as a keen utilitarian artist to whom life always comes first, with art to serve its noble purpose. The change in environment effects only a slight change in her dedication. Thus, while the specificity of such topics as the divisions among the Lebanese and the ordeals of the Palestinians is absent in her latest collection, *The Indian Never Had a Horse and Other Poems*, she is still preoccupied with human tragedy caused, she implies, by “the evil beauty of hell which/ haunts those in power!” The fate of the Indians, as we have already seen, never leaves her consciousness; Syria “has

two rivers: the Euphrates and a River of Blood,” and Lebanon still reminds her of its “terrifying storms” and of the sad status of its women and children. Hiroshima is an element of both life and art, while her poem “From A to Z,” not included in this collection, is inspired by the Three Mile Island accident. Among her tragic heroes are:

Malcolm X
Martin Luther King
Abdel Kader the Sufi soldier
and all of you Indian Chiefs
whose tears are the great storms
of California.

Adnan’s relations with her parents, and their relations one parent to the other, are mentioned frequently in her latest book of poems, as they are in earlier poems, sometimes briefly or obliquely and sometimes at length. They are prominent in the two linden poems, especially as she knew them when still a child: “O my parents buried under/ the uproar of bombs,” she laments their irretrievable loss and the tragedy of Beirut:

O my parents disappeared
into the Great Silence
which travels faster than galaxies!

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

—an exquisite blending of the pathetic and the reflective. In “Five Senses for One Death,” grief because of someone’s death is equally profound, though often not so touching, due perhaps to such insistence on privacy as would hamper the process of identification for the reader. Her earlier poem, “The Book of Death,” which deals with the same subject, is less complex, and more direct. Its vivid images of pain and violence profoundly engage the reader. She addresses the dead one: “Your life a star that has died in the heart of my heart; dead flowers on your scattered bed; crushed horizon in your window; a shadow whose moist death slides in the blood of my eyes.” Then, with more focus on herself, “Mine are the pangs and spasms of labor, the pains of an ocean, and the shrieks of a volcano. I have a blind bird in my breast. Mad, it rends my inside with the beating of its wings.” Regardless of the occasion and of where she might be, her themes and concerns remain the same, the fundamental and tragic human conditions.

In her poetry and prose Adnan is the artist “of the here and now.” Close to whatever she writes always are the political and social necessities, which may account in part for one very important characteristic of her writing, particularly poetry. She has little use for the traditional distinctions between the imaginative

and the real, the fictional and the factual, and so forth. All are employed in her art, blended sometimes so that one cannot tell fact from fiction, or placed side by side as if to accentuate the intended contrast. In her poetry especially, one frequently encounters the phenomenon of the extraordinary metaphor and the raw document in collaboration to convey her meaning. But she is by no means a mere propagandist. Her concern with the immediate is as much to rectify it as to transcend it; and here poetry becomes a liberator from the incarcerations of the local and momentary, a great healer. "The universe is my obsession," she writes, and her poetry will therefore encompass more than the immediately human. It encompasses the entirety of life, and becomes synonymous with her breath. She breathes it into the plants and "on a single occasion" resuscitates a donkey with it, for which act she gets the animal's sickness. The open and limitless become her stage: the mountains, the sea, the winds, the sky, the Milky Way and on to the galaxies beyond. These provide sharp contrast to such urban incarcerations as the prison, the office, and especially the house, which she regards with acute aversion. "A house," she writes, "is a cage, a monument, the mausoleum of all travels . . . the belly of one's mother." The last vehicle in itself constitutes a major theme which has already been discussed. The freedom she seeks is for men and women, from the shackles of religion, political corruption, and social inequality.

The range of subject matter in Adnan's poetry may be limited, but not so the techniques and images she employs to express them. Here, as has been shown, she can be direct, rhetorical, and prosaic, or suggestive, oblique, and lofty. But it is the range and sweep of the images and pictures that are exceptionally memorable in all her poetry, regardless of the subject matter. Who can forget her cat, Mao, when, his hair rising, he is filled with "sacred terror" on hearing the chanting of the Qur'an and the call to prayer at dawn; her cheeks as a girl, catching "fire like strawberries"; or her gypsy lover who "had a navel like a morning star and eyes like the meadows of the sierras," so that "one day the sun shone on her hair and the forest caught fire?" She draws for her images on all aspects of life, domestic and cosmic, simple and elaborate.

Space does not allow for further elaboration. Readers may turn to any of her pages; they shall not be disappointed. Etel Adnan is a revolutionary with a passionate nature. She is preoccupied in most of what she writes with various forms of violence, especially those committed against the poor and the oppressed. The result is an abundance and a wide range of violent images. These are among the most significant characteristics of her writing. She draws on all the manifestations of life to produce them. Memorable among them are knives and rapes in the belly, bullets in the heart, insects in the blood, daggers in the brain, hitting with the fist, earthquakes, storms, tornadoes, deluges, and volcanoes dead or alive, often to represent the hero in various phases. One exceptional image with many variations is that of vomiting and spitting, as if to express revulsion, indignation, as well as the act of hurling such as happens during the eruption of a volcano. Violence is dominant even when she is dealing with grief. Witness especially

her two elegies, "The Book of Death," and "Five Senses for One Death." Indeed, in proportion to length, the latter poem has more violent images than any other of her poems. She relates to the images of violence the images she borrows from biology, physics, and astronomy. "The universe is my obsession," she says, and motion with galactic speed becomes an imperative in order to satisfy her passion for travel on earth, among the stars, between death and life, and through the infinity of time and space. There is little serenity, even in love and tenderness. She is always in motion at breathtaking speed, always running a little ahead of time, "from the persistent Mediterranean/ to the persistent/ Pacific." Her gypsy love is a symbol for passion, restlessness, and range of wandering both inner and external. Yet one should not overlook the fundamental fact that beneath the violence with which she wrestles, there is always her profound compassion for humanity. As has been shown, she is pained at the suffering of women, children, the Indians, the Palestinians, and the Vietnamese. Painful to her, as it is to the goddess Isis, it should be added, is man's propensity for war. And her eyes are "wounded . . . when they/ watch an army spill over the/ Horizon." Mankind is all one family, she cries, in whose hands alone is the human destiny. She does not "want to watch our/ planet go the way" of the civilizations of her mother and father.

Adnan's strength and predicament represent a phenomenon common among artists. It is a complex phenomenon, particularly in her case. She migrates with her culture, which is made complex both by the interplay of external currents and by the special contribution of her parentage, to another culture no less complex, if not more chaotic. Nor does she settle here. Her mind continues to move, dropping nothing, always adding on. Both Arab and Western readers are challenged by the complexity of her experience. To the Arabs especially she writes about the Sierras, Indian chiefs, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Arthur Rimbaud, and the effects of modern technology; while with the persistence of the Mediterranean, she sings to the West, particularly the continent between the Atlantic and the Pacific, about Umm Kulthum, al-Ghazzali, the Qur'an, the beauty of Mount Sannine, the barbarities of Beirut, and the sorrow and heroism of the Palestinians. This reality seems to echo the dream she once confided in "In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country": "of becoming the new Ibn Khaldun of America or the de Tocqueville of the Arabs." In all her work she is as much the social observer and analyst as the champion of human freedom and human equality. And about all these she writes with as many styles as voices: now using the bricks of collage, now the logic of free association and surrealism, now the profuseness of Whitman or the directness of al-Nawwab. One may come across images or lines in her writings reminiscent of Eliot, Neruda, or Yeats,* and she

*Like William Gass (on whose own piece "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country" she models her much more intense poem with a very similar title), Adnan affixes to her poem, from Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium": "So I have sailed the seas." However, she does not consciously make use of either Yeats or his poetry.

never tires of Rimbaud. Yet there is no indication that she is directly influenced by any of these. Hers is a distinctive and curious voice, curious because it is capable of producing various pitches and tones. But she writes in French and English and translates what she writes from each into the other. She does not write in Arabic, due to her upbringing, but insists that she is an Arab poet. That she is an Arab in her feelings and concerns is not an issue. This is attested to by her very spirit as well as by her subject matter. Indeed one senses all the sincerity with which she affirms that she *paints* in Arabic. Still an issue, however, is how to respond to her poetry, especially since it is composed in or translated into languages that are not exactly her own: how to measure justly the correspondence between those deep intimacies that spring only with the language of children, and the alien vehicles with which she conveys them as an adult. But that takes us into the field of aesthetics and the mysterious realm of the creative process.

Etel Adnan is an artist and thinker whose achievement constitutes her response to her unique circumstances. In her consciousness crowd and jostle antithetical forces, cultural, political, social, and religious. These she sometimes contains and imposes upon a synthesizing order; and sometimes she gives them rein so that through their jarring chaos is heard and seen the chaos of the world she moves in. Nevertheless, she remains fully possessed of the optimism of the revolutionary and the compassionate artist who will always shape, even out of chaos, something constructive, to “change the world,” a new order. This she proposes to bring about by harnessing the energy that is in art, especially poetry, and by converting that energy into power to be used as necessity demands. Her readers, be they from East or West, whether they are dealing with her political poetry, or with her latest volume, or with her prose, especially her novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, will always find her subject matter and modes of expression a stimulus and a challenge. Her writings deserve to be made more accessible — indeed, they belong in every library — and her novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, in particular, is of great value to all students of the modern Arab world.

NOTES

1. Many of Adnan’s works are scattered in journals and anthologies not very familiar to one group of readers or another; and some are published in one language or another of English, French, and Arabic. The two volumes reviewed here are available from the Post-Apollo Press, 35 Marie St., Sausalito, Cal. For the convenience of the reader, the following is a list of the poems and prose works along with their publishers or the journals where they may be found. It consists only of the titles that are mentioned in this essay: *The Indian Never Had a Horse and Other Poems* contains: “The Indian Never Had a Horse,” “Five Senses for One Death,” “Love Poems,” “Spreading Clouds,” “One Linden Tree, Then Another Linden Tree,” “An Alley of Linden Trees, and Lightning.”

“Beirut 1982,” in *And Not Surrender*, ed. Kamal Boullata, Washington, D.C.: Arab American Cultural Foundation, 1982. “In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country,” *Mundus Artium* 10, no. 1 (1977). “From A to Z,” The Post-Apollo Press, 1982. “L’Apocalypse Arabe,” Paris 1980. “The Book of Death,” *Mawaqif* 24/25 (Dec.-Jan. 1973) (in Arabic). “A Revolutionary Grave for the Sake of Amman,” *Mawaqif* 11 (Sept.-Oct. 1970) (in Arabic). “The Beirut-Hell Express,” in *Women of the Fertile Crescent*, ed. Kamal Boullata, Washington, D.C.: 1978. “Jebu,” in *Women of the Fertile Crescent*; also abridged in *Mawaqif* 10 (1970), with a brilliant translation by Adonis. “Pablo Neruda is a Banana Tree,” abridged in *For Neruda, For Chile, an International Anthology*, ed. Walter Lowenfels (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975). “The Enemy’s Testament,” in *Where is Vietnam? an Anthology of Contemporary Poems*, ed. Walter Lowenfels, Anchor Books, 1967. “On the Death of the First Astronaut,” in *Shi’r* 39 (Autumn 1968) (in Arabic).

Alain Gresh. *The PLO: The Struggle Within*. London: Zed Books, 1985.
Translated by A.M. Berrett. 267 pp. Hardcover \$29.50.

Reviewed by Rex Brynen

Shaped by individual and collective experiences of occupation and diaspora, penetrated by different and often conflicting political ideologies, and buffeted by the forces of the regional and international system, Palestinian politics has assumed a complex, intricate, and often frustrating character. Decision-making within the leading resistance organizations and relations between them have been fraught with tension and polemic, a reality visible in the routine factionalization of the Palestinian nationalist movement and the proliferation of individual groups. Politically, such pressures and constraints have given the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) a policy process characterized by slow, evolutionary “common denominator” decision-making, and punctuated by periodic bouts of unilateralism, *faits accomplis*, and major intra-Palestinian schisms. Academically, the very complexity of Palestinian politics and policy-making has inhibited their systematic analysis. Virtually all of the notable English-language studies on the PLO to appear in the last decade have focused upon the structure and history of the Palestinian movement, with only brief and passing attention being paid to policy dynamics.

It is for precisely this reason that Alain Gresh’s *The PLO: The Struggle Within* is so welcome. First published in French in 1983 and updated in English transla-

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