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"I PLANTED THE SUN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SKY LIKE A FLAG": IN AND OF ETEL ADNAN'S ARAB APOCALYPSE

HILARY PLUM

The windows are normally independent of one another, although you may pass back and forth from one view to the other. This absurd interdependence is like a lark at break of day. . . .

The person inside a literary creation can be both viewer and insider. The window is open and the bird flies in.
—Barbara Guest, "Shifting Persona"

To describe "the person inside a literary creation," Barbara Guest proposes an inside and an outside, although "you may pass back and forth" from one position to the other; "the window" may open and close. The means through which you pass is the "I" in and of the poem, whom Guest names "the person" or "the witness": "The person is our conduit" (2003, 41). Even as the reader moves through or within the poem's "I," that movement is more powerful than any

singular subject: “I’ becomes the bystander and the poem is propelled by the force of the ‘person’ stripped bare” (40).

Etel Adnan’s book-length poem *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989) provides a trenchant model for the role of the speaker—the “I”; “the person”; “the witness”—in contemporary poetry witnessing war. Critical readings have tended to evaluate *The Arab Apocalypse* more simply as a response to the Lebanese Civil War (Accad 1990; Boulata 1989; Cooke 1988; Mejcher-Atassi 2012) and have neglected the speaker’s role in the poem—a significant omission, given that debates about self-presence and the “lyric subject” were active, even heated, in the era of *The Arab Apocalypse*’s publication, as Marjorie Perloff summarizes in a 1999 essay. In her consideration of Language poetry, Perloff notes that the avant-garde movement’s “critique of voice, self-presence, and authenticity . . . must be understood as part of the larger poststructuralist critique of authorship and the humanist subject, a critique that became prominent in the late sixties and reached its height in the U.S. a decade or so later when the Language movement was coming into its own.”

The Arab Apocalypse is written in 59 sections (others term it a collection of 59 poems) and in distinctively long lines: the book itself is 10.75" in width and 8.5" in height. Small ink sketches, sometimes no more than a swift arrow or darkened circle, appear between, beside, or as eruptions within the lines of poetry. This approach is distinct in Adnan’s oeuvre: other works include both writing and visual art, but not in this deeply integrated style; she has produced over two hundred artists’ books, but only in single editions (Mejcher-Atassi 2012, 122–23), not for a wider readership. This union of poetry and visual art also distinguishes *Apocalypse* within the landscape of contemporary American poetry; current parlance would call such a work “hybrid,” an *au courant* generic category.¹

The central figure of *Apocalypse* would immediately seem to be not a person, but the sun, a noun that is repeated in an almost incantatory mode throughout. “The sun” is described through rapidly varying adjectives (see figure 1) that emphasize the surreal possibilities of description as well as the limits of description—the limits of text and image, signification and representation, in the face of the source of Earth’s life. In the poem the “I” appears scarcely at first, then with increasing force and activity. The speaker’s agency is asserted but decentered: the speaker has no firm identity, no single voice, and represents not a defined self-presence but the possibility of subjectivity realizing itself in language. The reader cannot rely

on familiar signs to define an identity for this speaking presence; it seems other modes of reading are required. In the speaker's first appearances, the subject ("I") of the lyrical syntax seems active but fugitive, emerging out of then dissolving back into the poem: "I did not say that spring was breathing" (III, 11); "I rolled as grass ate the slug my flowers are cut" (IV, 13); "I have a sun on each finger" (V, 15); "I tell the sun's story it answers I decode it sends new messages" (VI, 17); "My life a highway driven by armies General Sun is devastating" (VI, 18); "I led a ship under the sea to the living and the dead" . . . "I saw a hawk eat a child's brain in the dumps of Dekouaneh" . . . "I cut the sky in two" (VII, 19); "I saw Beirut-the-fool write with blood Death to the moon!" . . . "I took the sun by the tail and threw it in the river" . . . "I myself was a morning blessed with bliss" (VII, 20).²

Etel Adnan wrote *L'Apocalypse Arabe* (1980), in its original French, between February 1975 and August 1976, during the crisis that became the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990); the work has been said to have "intuited the war" (Cooke 1988, 10). The poem responded urgently to the 1976 siege of and massacre in the Palestinian refugee camp of Tel al-Za'atar (Cooke 1988, 10; Mejcher-Atassi 2012, 131). The siege of Tel al-Za'atar lasted fifty-nine days, hence the poem's structure (see also Mejcher-Atassi 2012, 132): "the living had slept 59 days with the corpses 59 days 59 days" (XLV, 64).³ The camp at Tel al-Za'atar, which means "Hill of Thyme," was home to approximately 30,000 Palestinian refugees (Hiro 1992, 42). Palestinian fighters held off the prolonged siege by Christian militias—assisted in the burgeoning conflict by the newly arrived Syrian army—until August 12, 1976, when Phalangist and Chamounist forces broke through and killed "some 3,000 Palestinian civilians . . . most of them after the camp had fallen" (Hiro 1992, 42; see also Fisk 2002, 85–86).

Adnan was born in Beirut in 1925, her mother Greek, from Smyrna, Turkey, and Christian; her father from Damascus, an officer in the Ottoman Army during World War I, and Muslim. She left Lebanon in 1949, first for Paris to study at the Sorbonne, then to the United States, for further study at the University of California Berkeley and Harvard. She returned to Beirut in 1972 and stayed there through the first two years of the war, working as a French-language newspaper's cultural editor, and since 1977 has divided her time between Paris and Sausalito, with regular visits to Beirut (Majaj and Amireh 2002, 14, 17–18, 21). Thus her own identity comprises multiple languages, sects, nations, and sites within postcolonial histories and political dynamics and conflicts. In *The Arab Apocalypse*, the "I"

offers a conduit toward multiple subject positions within the world of the poem and toward the possibility of multiplicity itself. Identity was a matter of life and death during the war, as factions emerged along religious, political, and national definitions. Here the speaker remains unmarked by sect or nationality, even by gender, by location. The conduit that is “the person” has no terminus: the speaker names and honors the identities of those who have been killed and displaced, but claims no one identity; the “I” keeps implicating itself, claiming no final role. Incited by the horrors of war, the “I” is a cry that echoes from site after site, without end. The speaker occupies and asks readers to occupy a fluid state of implication and mediation within the war in Lebanon, the larger postcolonial milieu, and the ongoing devastations of human violence—through which even the sky has been colonized into battleground, sun become flag.

In his 2013 *Lessons from Sarajevo: A War Stories Primer*, Jim Hicks describes the sentimentalizing subject positions relied upon in representations of war from the eighteenth century to the present: observer, aggressor, and victim. His primer critiques this representational structure, tracing it through centuries of art, literature, journalism, policy, and warfare—from Rousseau to the Balkans to Kony 2012—and offering a call for war stories that “make it impossible for us to see the positions of victim, aggressor, and observer as immutable, assigned in advance” (2013, 164). *The Arab Apocalypse* enacts this impossibility through the role of the speaker, a role constituted not just by the pronoun “I” but by the poem’s layout and incorporation of visual art, its typography (particularly the appearance of the words HOU! and STOP, as I will discuss), and its disorienting use of proper nouns, a usage that seems to challenge their place in hierarchies of meaning. Together these create the porous syntax through which the subject moves, a testament to mutability. In place of the sentiment and power dynamics reinforced by traditional representations of war, a decentered testimony occurs and demands the reader’s participation.⁴ The window is open.

1.

I asked the sun not to dismantle my body unified for ever (X, 25)

THE MERCENARY SUN SPENT THE SEASON WITH ME (XX, 39)

The Arab Apocalypse is the only book-length work Adnan has both authored and translated herself, a translation of the last major work she published in French before completing an arrival into

English—where she became, in her words, an “American poet.”⁵ Her translation of *L’Apocalypse Arabe* was published in 1989 by the small publisher Post-Apollo Press. (Post-Apollo has published the majority of Adnan’s books in English; the publisher of the press is Adnan’s longtime partner Simone Fattal.⁶) As Adnan said in a 2014 interview with the poet Lisa Robertson, “Two important works, *Sitt Marie Rose* and *The Arab Apocalypse*, I wrote in French, but *The Apocalypse* I translated myself, so it makes it an original. . . . I have a bit of a French accent,” she went on to note, “but my mind is not really French” (Adnan 2014a). The work’s importance is affirmed by its inclusion in full—re-lined and its sketches redrawn—in *To Look at the Sea Is to Become What One Is*, a two-volume selection of Adnan’s work published in 2014 by Nightboat Books, in which *Apocalypse* serves as “arguably a second centerpiece,” after the novel *Sitt Marie Rose* (Turner 2015).

Throughout her long career, Adnan has worked both as a writer and as a visual artist, but she was better known for her writing until roughly the past decade, when international interest in her paintings and leporellos began to flourish.⁷ A 2015 feature in the *Wall Street Journal Magazine* was illustratively titled “Why the Art World Has Fallen for 90-Year-Old Etel Adnan” (Azimi). This interest has seemingly begun to incorporate Adnan’s *Apocalypse*, such as in a 2016–2017 exhibit at the Institut du Monde Arabe that included the “*L’Apocalypse Arabe* Tapuscrit,” and the symposium accompanying a 2018 exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, which was titled “‘The Arab Apocalypse’: Art, Abstraction, and Activism in the Middle East.”⁸

Yet over the past three decades, literary criticism on *The Arab Apocalypse*, one of Adnan’s major works, has been surprisingly minimal. Responses are restricted mainly to a few short reviews upon its publication; brief mentions in Miriam Cooke’s 1988 *War’s Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War*; a short essay by Caroline Seymour-Jorn in a 2001 critical anthology on Adnan; a brief discussion in Sonja Mejcher-Atassi’s 2012 study of modern Arabic literature and art; and an essay by Aditi Machado in the poetics journal *Jacket2* in 2016. Of Adnan’s works, the novel *Sitt Marie Rose* (set during the Lebanese Civil War and published in French in 1977, in English translation in 1982) is by far the most widely read, translated, and studied. This is testament not only to the novel’s worth but to the politics of international literature, in which the Western

preference for the genre of the novel prevails, and perceptions of “difficulty” can condemn exceptional literature to the margins.

Perhaps the fact that Adnan’s writing speaks of and from three homelands has kept her from fitting into established lineages of either Lebanese or American poetry: to put it bluntly, perhaps she has been both too Arab and not Arab enough. The fact that she does not write in Arabic may have kept her from being, in Lindsay Turner’s words, “recognized as a ‘national’ writer within a cultural tradition, in the way of Mahmoud Darwish, for example, roughly a contemporary.”⁹ It’s worth noting that the recent surge of interest in Adnan’s visual art has not yet been met, at least in the United States, by a corresponding new interest in her poetry—though the publication of the 2014 reader argues for her importance as a poet, as does the naming of the Etel Adnan Poetry Prize, a new series at the University of Arkansas Press publishing first and second books by poets of Arab heritage.¹⁰ Adnan’s identities as first a feminist writer from Lebanon, as she has been widely described from the publication of *Sitt Marie Rose* on, and as an Arab American, as she describes herself (see Adnan 2004 and elsewhere), have often dominated critical responses to her work, which regularly seek to read simpler statements about identity and politics into and out of texts whose complexity challenges precisely that mode of reading.

In the case of *The Arab Apocalypse*, the political has tended to dictate the terms of the discussion: in particular the question of Palestine and Adnan’s sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Such readings may reduce the work’s complexity to mere evidence of—rather than insight into—the hopelessness and intractability of the Lebanese political situation. Seymour-Jorn reads the poem as a “critique of colonialism and imperialism,” as her essay is titled, portraying a “cosmic struggle between the sun and the sea” (2001, 41) that she compares to a colonial relationship: the sun as colonizer; sea, colonized. By her reading, the sun’s role embodies Edward Said’s theories of colonial relationships, in which “the dominant force is attracted to, repulsed by, and determined to control its subject” (42). Mejcher-Atassi follows and expands upon Seymour-Jorn’s reading, arguing that *Apocalypse* portrays a “double” oppression: “that by colonial and neo-colonial powers” and that which they “passed on to dictatorial regimes and, in the case of Lebanon, militias” (2012, 135). Neither critic mentions the significant role—nor even the presence—of the speaker in the poem; nor do they account for the indeterminacy of

the speaker's relationship with the sun and within the poem's manifold inquiry into violence.

Miriam Cooke appears to have questioned Adnan specifically about *L'Apocalypse Arabe* in a 1984 interview, though Cooke declines to engage substantively with the poem itself. She frames the poem as an intensely felt response to the war's escalation: "[Adnan's] emotions were so charged at the time . . . that language was not strong enough to convey the intensity." But she then comes close to dismissing the work as unreadable: "[Adnan] had to allow the words to disintegrate and then explode. . . . The symbols [sketches] form a system of signs elucidating an otherwise obscure text" (1988, 42). Seymour-Jorn echoes this characterization: "It is important to point out that Adnan's poetic style in *The Arab Apocalypse* resists analysis to a great extent" (2002, 38).

In notable contrast to these critical trends is the 2016 essay by Aditi Machado, who situates *The Arab Apocalypse* in the context of "poetry of witness," as proposed by Carolyn Forché (poet and editor of the influential 1993 anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*). Machado explores the roles of the sun and speaker in depth, tracing their intersubjectivity; she reads *Apocalypse* as "radicaliz[ing] the genre of witness," and presenting "a provocative challenge to any notion of stability that may . . . attend questions of representation in literatures of witness." Both Turner and Machado are themselves poets and translators of poetry.¹¹ A gap appears in the secondary literature of *Apocalypse* between the poets whose reading enters the poem and the critics who seem to remain at a distance from it, emphasizing its resistance to reading and preferring broader framing, in established political and theoretical terms, to closer engagement.

2.

Speech is made of solar particles (XXIV, 43)
make tomorrow's men speak in signs (LVI, 75)

To engage with *The Arab Apocalypse* one must address its distinctive integration of text and image, which is introduced on the first page (see figure 1).

The changeable qualities of the sun—the series of adjectives that will describe it throughout, which as here often include colors—contrast with the starkness and stability of the black-and-white images. The images in figure 1 seem to have their own syntax, which

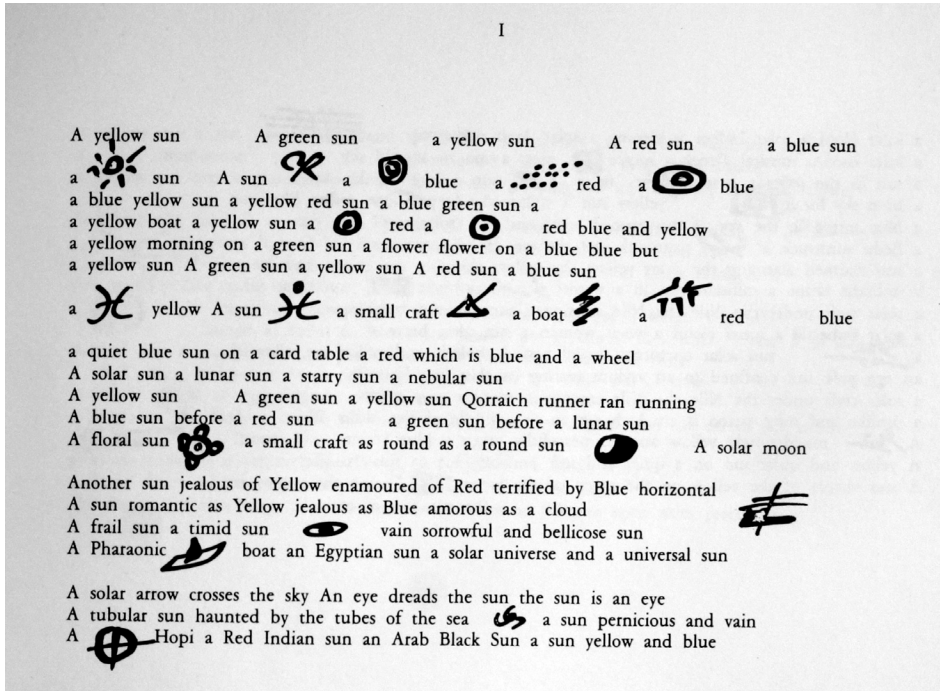


Figure 1. (Adnan 1989, 7)

develops alongside and within but independently of the poem's.¹² The noun, *the sun*, may seem a stable unit of language, but the poem's syntax will keep it in swift enough motion that we cannot envision that which it represents finally or familiarly. The invocation of this series of colors emphasizes both the potential of human agency in portraying the sun—we may represent the sun however we wish, as a color it is not: *green, blue, red*; we may accuse it of human qualities such as frailty or jealousy—and the absolute limits to our perception of it. All colors we see are only within the spectrum of sunlight: any color we see is still and only the sun. The sun is always present, yet we can't meet its gaze. We are always only seeing the sun; the sun itself is what we cannot see.

Adnan, a painter, is attentive to the workings of vision. Here the line "An eye dreads the sun the sun is an eye / A tubular sun haunted by the tubes of the sea" may suggest the process of vision, tubes serving metaphorically as both sun's rays and as eye's cones, the human here as elsewhere associated with the sea (Seymour-Jorn

2001, 38–39), in an interpenetrative opposition to the sun. The conventional image would be of sunlight sparkling on the sea; but here the sun itself is the eye that witnesses the scene, its light haunted both by an eye that witnesses it in turn and by the sea that reflects it, refuses it. The identity of each element is itinerant, its qualities appearing in that which witnesses or opposes it. Through the use of universal—or seemingly universal—symbols like sun, sea, and self (“I”), the poem has reduced its vocabulary to a radical simplicity like that of its images, with their component lines, circles, dots, spirals.

In this early stage of the war, Lebanese society was fracturing—through sectarian/ethnic cleansing—toward self-isolating units of identity where before there had been pluralism and cosmopolitanism. Yet the violence within the nation-state, the violence that defined the war as *civil*, was always also the result of involvement and outright invasion by outside forces: the French and British colonial legacies, British policy in the Palestine Mandate, the Syrian army (which by fall 1976 had occupied Beirut), the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the American and Soviet Cold War, and the pan-Arab movement. Any of these might use the civil war as justification for their interventions, as though they were not already implicated in or even an origin of the tragedy (Fisk 2002, 50–53).

The poem addresses this political situation and its rapidly evolving events through the use and repetition of proper nouns, including Beirut, Tell Zaatar, Che Guevara, Qorraich, Baudelaire, Palestine, Hopi, Witchitah, Sabra, Quarantina, Babylon, Tecumtha, Argentina, Pontiac, Faysal, Osiris, Isis, Ishtar, Armenians, and more.¹³ These nouns possess specific meanings, their act of representation anchored to real places, people, and events in history. Yet the poem’s use of them makes them less legible. Rather than expressing or employing their meaning straightforwardly, the fragmented syntax and poetic context in which they appear often blurs or opens their meaning. While, for example, the name Tell Zaatar appears several times, as well as references to a hill and to thyme, we cannot from the poem itself construct a clear narrative of the events at the camp—though we can feel the horror evoked by the imagery surrounding these references.

If, following Ezra Pound, we name the images within *The Arab Apocalypse* ideograms, this suggests they are characters in a language we cannot speak and which we must decipher. The ideogram does not offer a relationship to sound, speech, and language as they are heard and used daily. As *Merriam-Webster* has it, an ideogram is “a

written character symbolizing the idea of a thing without indicating the sounds used to say it.” Critical readings have tended to frame the sketches as the result of an encounter with the limits of language, an overflowing of experience beyond that which language could express or represent. This experience is both the poet’s and external to her, a heightened state of emotion in response to the atrocities she reads and hears about.¹⁴ Machado terms the sketches “hand-drawn glyphs” and foregrounds the fact that they change across published editions of the poem, thus are unstable as language.¹⁵ By Machado’s reading they alter as a result of “the force of external events and internal responses to them”; “each performance,” she writes of the sketches’ re-composition across editions, “is new.” Machado quotes a 2011 interview in which Adnan says of the sketches in *Apocalypse* “the signs are my excess of emotion. I cannot say more.” Adnan emphasizes the visual as continuous with the linguistic, saying of the “signs” that “they came during the writing, they’re part of it” (Obrist 2014, 81). Machado’s discussion of the glyphs sees them as available to limited interpretation while involved in or manifesting language’s failures and insufficiencies, “its dual capacity and incapacity to signify”; she reads them in light of the poem’s line “the language-circuit has burned STOP.”¹⁶

Curiously, where others read the sketches as signifying a failure of language, marking a border of what language may express, Cooke’s brief summary of *Apocalypse*—“The symbols [sketches] form a system of signs elucidating an otherwise obscure text”—presents the sketches as perhaps more intelligible than the poetic text itself. This possibility hovers in others’ readings, such as Machado’s reflection on how the glyphs direct energy and attention within and across the page. Perhaps the intelligibility of the sketches is limited by the priority readers give to text over image, so that the poem’s two systems of signification compete, even as author and publishers present them as inseparable and interdependent throughout the differing published editions of the poem.

Seymour-Jorn compares the sketches not to ideograms but to “hieroglyphics that might be seen in an ancient Egyptian tomb,” thus “enigmatic symbols that make reference to some hidden meaning”—a metaphor that emphasizes the (removed) possibility of deciphering that meaning (2001, 43). Mejcher-Atassi calls the images “hieroglyphic-like” and points as well to Pound’s “ideogrammatic method” for comparison (2012, 132–33). The word “hieroglyphic” calls up colonial and Orientalist encounters with Arab history—the word itself is of Greek descent, via French—an aspect of the

metaphor that Seymour-Jorn does not pursue; nor does she address the association between “ancient tomb” and death, a language of or for the dead. Like other critics, Seymour-Jorn interprets the sketches as resulting from and meaning the “limitations of language” and notes: “Although [Adnan] places these sketches into the text at places where words seem to have become inadequate, the sketches themselves offer little more than ambiguity” (2001, 43). By such readings, if one deciphers the meaning of this ambiguous language, one learns that it means only the limits of language: the symbols mean the struggle to mean. The critics who suggest this reading do not address its consequences, but it does coincide with their insistence on the overall obscurity and resistance to interpretation of *The Arab Apocalypse*.

This reading tempts, yet we must admit that we can read the poem with these sketches erupting within it, and that we commonly interact with visual images we do not treat as failures of language, or whose qualities of abstraction, ambiguity, and/or illegibility we do not necessarily encounter as an interpretative problem. The images in *The Arab Apocalypse* suggest themselves as language-like through their placement within the poem’s syntax; the visual simplicity of their symbolization, which does evoke ideogrammatic representation; and through their occasional quality of illustration, such as the boat-like sketch appearing between “Pharaonic” and “boat” in figure 1. Adnan not only accompanies but hybridizes her poetic text with a “language” that seemingly cries out for interpretation, yet seemingly refuses it. The sketches mean much more in context—surrounded by language; provided, unusually, a place within syntax—than they could alone. In contrast, the proper nouns mentioned above mean less within syntax than they usually do, or at least they mean differently. The hybridity of image and text in *The Arab Apocalypse* may point toward the limits of language, but the poem enacts this through a distinctive redistribution of language’s power. The poem emphasizes the instability of and porousness between the “inside” and “outside” of its syntactical units, whether word or image. The “I” represents the definitive realization of this aesthetic of porousness and hybridity. The “I” refuses biography and transgresses and reinscribes those boundaries the war has placed at stake, testifying to the sectarian and ethnic divisions recently drawn across Beirut in blood and to the violation of Lebanon’s borders by outside forces, which continue to expose the insufficiency of the term *civil* war.¹⁷

An unexpected illustration of this transgression and reinscription may be found by tracing the resemblance between the images in *The Arab Apocalypse* and traditional tattoos. References to tattoos appear throughout the poem: “a tattoo on the belly a sun” (II, 9); “a tattooed moon” (VII, 19); “a sun tattooed with lies spilling over your legs” (VIII, 21); “a sun tattooed with our sins STOP” (IX, 24); “the soldiers play a game of marbles with extinguished stars O Great Tattoo-maker!” (LI, 70); and elsewhere. Among the images in *Apocalypse*, the simple dark dots, fully or partially filled in, the lines capped with Vs that resemble arrows, the spirals, the radiating suns and arrangements of circles and lines—these echo traditional tattoo designs common, for example, among the Bedouin and the Dom people (see Dinter 2005, 179, 177–82 for illustrations). Such tattoos are associated less with those of the poet’s own backgrounds, that is, but with those she might see and know in the city of Beirut, those living a different experience of the war, especially the Bedouin—whom the poem mentions several times—an ethnic group outside of and marginalized by the nation-state.¹⁸ By “tattooing” the pages of *The Arab Apocalypse* Adnan has represented and honored the experience of others in the civil war, extending her gaze, with a mediated compassion, across the sectarian and ethnic lines straining Lebanon. Tattoo-like images transform the material of the printed page into skin, the skin of another. The insistent eruption of images within the text signifies not just the unspeakability of war, the inadequacy of language in the face of suffering, that other critics have located, but suggests the presence of other bodies, with their unknowable experience, difference marked with complex symbolic systems that the colonial era has endeavored either to efface or to exoticize (thus reducing the multiplicity of meanings to one: that of the savage, the to-be-colonized). In her role as “tattoo-maker,” the poet adapts and employs these symbols in order to indicate experiences of nationality, history, and war beyond her own and which include the differences the war seeks to annihilate. She makes of the page a place where bodies are represented not just within poetic text but through the suggestion of materiality, page becoming skin. In this way she works to lessen the unbridgeable distance between poem and body, between elegy and the dead.

Yet the poet does not simply record these tattoos, does not simply “bear witness” to them through this allusive representation. As “tattoo-maker” the poet has marked the skin of the other as other; she may honor difference through representation (the tattoo on the

page), but she is also in the same moment (re)creating that difference, and in a context that replaces the individual—each tattoo is inseparable from its context, its site of origin on living skin, an individual body—with the symbolic. The body, the person, is absent: we may see only this nameless, faceless, unindividuated record. This requires a double mourning, both for those victims lost to war and for the loss of their very individuality, their lived difference from one another and from the discourses that will now claim them, this second loss inflicted by the collective nouns that war idolizes: the Palestinians, the Christians, the Israelis, the martyrs, the dead. In claiming her role as tattoo-maker, the poet claims responsibility for her role in this second loss, the loss of individual life to politicized memory. The poet has moved from observer (recording others' tattoos), to victim (offering up her page as tattooed skin, the silence of the images a metonym for the silence of the dead), to aggressor (tattoo-maker)—her opened syntax allows and requires her to exist in all three subject positions. The "I" is the site where this implication and responsibility occur and are confessed.

3.

I tell the sun's story it answers I decode it sends new messages (VI, 17)

We first meet the speaker of the poem in section III (11), as quoted above, a section whose subject is absence and which begins "The night of the non-event. War in the vacant sky," then invokes, in short blunt sentences, "Unarmed population." "Plainclothed army." "Palestinians with no Palestine." Then:

The little lights are not lit. No child has died. No rain
I did not say that spring was breathing. The dead did not return.
(III, 11)

Here the speaker announces herself as possessing the power to contradict both reader and larger world. Her *I did not say* arrives as abrupt contravention to the reader's assumptions, an assertion of her own authority. (The speaker's gender is not determined; in reference I will use "she" and "her," the poet's pronouns.¹⁹) Yet of course spring breathes, the nature of spring is life's renewal; and of course the dead do not return. As the speaker affirms and contradicts the obvious she builds a portrait of the profound illogic of this war. If the little lights are not lit, that means they are no lights at all; she must be describing a blackout, or a vision of an abandoned neighborhood. If

Palestinians had a Palestine, they would not be in exile in Lebanon, and neither war nor massacre would have occurred. The sky is vacant of war because war is present even in its absence; even in moments when no violence is occurring, the only experience is to wait for the next event. All prayers are “unheeded,” all roads “useless”; the army is either “dead,” leaving civilians defenseless, or “plainclothed,” which means they are anyone—either a constant threat to civilians, or worse, constituting a reality in which “civilians” may no longer exist.

Throughout, the speaker is sometimes witnessing and describing violence, sometimes participating in it, or desiring to; sometimes seemingly allied with the sun, or incorporating the sun into her body, or she into its; sometimes asserting mastery over the sun; sometimes seeming to claim a side in the conflict, sometimes resisting its terms, attempting forms of transcendence. Observe the shifts in subject positions—perpetrator of violence, victim, and/or witness—among constructions as diverse as: “I gave birth to a dead city” (XXV, 44); “I am the prophet of a useless nation” “I am a sniper with glued hair on my temples” “I am the terrorist hidden in the hold of a cargo from Argentina” (XXII, 41); “I AM THE SOLAR-BELLIED INDIAN WHO PLUNGES BEIRUT IN A BATH OF LIGHT” (X, 26); “I sleep with a radio in my arms STOP I sleep at Tell Zaatar” (XIV, 33); “I think of the absolute freedom of the atoms in the sun’s combustion // I wear the solar crown ### as a crown of sorrow. I’m walking!” (XIX, 38); “Drinking wine I drink blood and lie next to an inanimate body” (XXXVII, 56); “Sitting in the Sun’s center I am guided by continents” (XLII, 61); “I pushed a body into a well and it talked back to me with a Palestinian accent” (XLVI, 65). The speaker’s proclamations are often impossible, futile, yet forcefully made. By repeatedly denying the limits of her own agency within the war she confirms and mourns those limits: “I smothered the sun with an iron bar disfigured its words tore its face” (XXX, 49); “I vanquished the drought and predicted the Deluge” (LIV, 73).

The speaker’s mutability is determined not only through the statements by and appearances of the “I,” but by other forces within the poem’s syntax: the speaker moves through multiple subjectivities and her agency is multiply resisted, multiply compromised. Throughout *Apocalypse* words are capitalized for emphasis, most strikingly and repeatedly the words “STOP” and “HOU”—the latter a French interjection meant to frighten, shame, or ridicule (the “h” silent).²⁰ Seymour-Jorn has argued that the repetition of “STOP” represents an ironic invocation of “the language of the telegram”

long used to deliver news of the casualties of war (2001, 46), and that the placement of “the punctuating word STOP within a line” serves to “[highlight] the inadequacy of the words to convey their intended meaning”; the word’s appearance at a line’s end could be read as a call to end violence (47).²¹ The word “HOU” first appears in the line “O moaning HOU HOU HOU like wind in the belly” (V, 16), and the word’s onomatopoeic likeness to breath is palpable. *Hou* is roughly equivalent to our English “boo,” something one shouts to frighten or shame someone. In some appearances, *bou* may represent the voice of the war announcing itself, trying to shock and terrify. Elsewhere it may be the voice of the poet addressing the war, trying to shame that which is beyond anyone’s control and which cannot be shamed: “The sun a pool of blood. A corpse lying in the sun HOU ! HOU !” (VIII, 21). “HOU” and “STOP” contrast with one another: the one evoking the breath of a suffering body, crying out for a justice that won’t arrive; the other a pitiless, mechanical notification of death. Both words seem to function as commands, commands that claim no clear place of origin and which their context makes futile. This futility reminds the reader that the speaker’s flight among subject positions is desperate. There is no place from which she can intervene finally, no role she can claim that would end the conflict and return Lebanon to a different or new state: “I am the prophet of a useless nation STOP” (XXII, 41). The fact that *bou* is a homonym for *où*, meaning “where,” makes its repetition also a cry for the rupturing nation; at the same time, its resonance with the English *you* calls the reader further into the text.

4.

I want people to call God “our brother” our “brother” (XLVII, 66)

I have not seen war, by being in it (Adnan 2012, 5)

Where does today’s reader find herself upon entering this poem, becoming “both viewer and insider” here? My own reading finds in this work a harbinger of poetics witnessing, mourning, protesting, and confessing the American “global war on terror.” Reading *The Arab Apocalypse* in 2020 may help us better comprehend both the violence occurring under that name and the canon of contemporary poetry witnessing it—poetry that interrogates the role of the “I” in the inchoate era of the United States’ newest wars and that responds diversely to calls, like Jim Hicks’s, for innovations in the literature of war. I think of the multiplying “I”s, the heterogeneous syntax, and

the incorporation of documentary material and forms, in important recent works addressing war and empire such as Khaled Mattawa's *Tocqueville* (2010), Julie Carr's *100 Notes on Violence* (2010), Rosmarie Waldrop's *Driven to Abstraction* (2010), Jena Osman's *Public Figures* (2012), Rob Halpern's *Music for Porn* (2012), Philip Metres's *Sand Opera* (2015), Hayan Charara's *Something Sinister* (2016), Solmaz Sharif's *Look* (2016), and Fady Joudah's *Footnotes in the Order of Disappearance* (2018). Closer readings of Adnan's work may nourish responses to these works and to the world in which they have taken form.

In any poem, the "I" inevitably performs displacement: what seems to be the poet speaking of herself to the reader becomes, through the simple act of reading, the reader speaking to herself, of herself as another. As we read, we occupy each "I" the poet has left as trace, vanishing into the horizon of other selves, another *who* or *you*, another *where am I*. In *Apocalypse*, perhaps the "I" functions like the inverse of the poem's ideograms: here, this most intimate of pronouns resists not pronunciation, but its traditional role in representation. Again and again the poem challenges any subject position and undermines even the place of the "I" in syntax. The poem refuses the self-justifying logic of self-presence. The poet Cole Swenson, in an essay bookending the 2014 collection of Adnan's work, insightfully describes *Apocalypse* as "explor[ing] the relations among a number of displaced populations, creating a nation of the displaced with a singular trans-linguistic force" (381). I would adapt this to say that *Apocalypse* creates a nation of *displacement*, a motion the reader must inhabit, perpetrate, and bear. Through the continually displaced and displacing force of the "I," the poem testifies to the proliferating effects of violence, the failure of the war's ideologies and myths, of the war's multisided, multiplying justifications for itself. That the poem's "I" moves across the boundaries of opposing identities and ideologies exposes their contingency, their claims as territories I may breach, subjects I may call into intersubjectivity, signifiers whose force of meaning may be displaced, ruptured, diffused throughout the smear and echo of the poem's itinerant testimony. As section XXVI (45) calls and responds: "Who is it? It's Christ whose head wears a white bandage for ever / His daughter? WAR WITH NO REVOLUTION." The war's violence can go nowhere, achieve nothing, no transcendence; it is definitively self-defeating.

The circumstances of *Apocalypse*'s translation also attest to an ethos of displacement, one Adnan has lived. In a 2004 short essay, "The Itinerary of an Arab-American Writer," Adnan describes how

English displaced French in her life, and how the development of her identity as an Arab, including her solidarity with the Palestinian cause, occurred not in Lebanon but when she was a graduate student in the United States:

Speaking English was an adventure, but it also resolved my ambiguous relationship to the French language: something deep inside me has always been resentful of the fact that French came to us in Lebanon through a colonial occupation, that it was imposed, that it was not innocently taught me as a second language, but a language meant to replace Arabic. For me, English had no such connotations. . . .

I must say that when I landed in the United States, I had a kind of fluid identity: was I Greek, Ottoman Arab, almost French? . . .

It was in Berkeley that all the threads that made up my mind and soul came together: I became what I was, I became an Arab, at the same time that I was becoming an American. (Adnan 2004, 57)

In other words, it was in her displacement from the Arab world that Adnan realized her own identity as Arab, an identity she then claimed in English. Adnan turned to English in the context of the anti-Vietnam War movement. In a 1984 interview she noted that “as I was active in the anti-Vietnam movement in America, I had to write in English” (Adnan 1987, 118). One of her first poems in English, “The Enemy’s Testament,” was published in an antiwar anthology; she wrote these early poems in direct response to coverage of the Vietnam War (Adnan 2014a). *L’Apocalypse Arabe* was written out of urgently felt compassion for the victims of the Tel al-Za’atar massacre, a massacre perpetrated by Lebanese forces against Palestinian victims. As a poet in and of Lebanon, she wrote in French, the colonial language, while mourning postcolonial acts of violence perpetrated against civilian refugees. Her identity as an American poet, in turn, extended from her compassion for the “enemies”/others of America, in Vietnam.

For Adnan, identifying *as* seems to consistently mean identifying *against*, an ethos her poetry manifests in the fluidity of its subject positions and its testimony to the lived consequences of identity’s paradoxes. As poetic witness, Adnan projects herself into the roles of both victim and of aggressor, with an activated sense of intersubjectivity. On the side of the aggressor (Lebanese, in a war victimizing Palestinians; American, in a war against Vietnam), she offers powerful compassion for victims. On the side of the victims, she forcibly proclaims her desire for power and confesses her guilt for her role

in aggressions. Finding herself in the place of an “us”—beneath the shadow of a proper noun, its entrenching claims to identity—she looks to another. The poem serves as an illumination of this gaze, the “I” a light in which to see and be seen, a near and troubling sun. As Cole Swenson writes, discussing Adnan’s *Sitt Marie Rose*, “Jebu,” and *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*:

The “I” that speaks through all these works acts as witness to the ordeal of displacement, but not as static observer; instead, it is always walking alongside, keeping pace with the lived experience. As [Adnan] states unequivocally, “Other people’s agony belongs to me.” . . . It’s important to note that although the “I” is an empathic companion, it is not itself in exile because it indicates the deep roots of Adnan’s compassion; it’s rooted at the very level of grammar, which elides her own experience with attention to the experience of others. (Swenson 2014, 378)

“There is in every Arab a traitor thirsting for the West” (XXII, 51), Adnan writes in *The Arab Apocalypse*, at once claiming, condemning, and ironizing a position she has reinscribed by translating this poem into English. We might trace this line into its inverse, as described by Jacques Derrida in an interview conducted shortly after the attacks of September 11, 2001—the attacks that served as founding event of the “global war on terror,” the state of endless “war with no revolution” the United States has since sustained. In a dialogue with Giovanna Borradori, Derrida framed the attacks in terms of “autoimmunity”: “an autoimmunitary process is that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity” (2003, 94). In place of the stability of positions—American; terrorist—that the war insists are the basis and stakes of the war, Derrida illustrates how these positions mutually and destructively constitute one another in what we might call, to return to Guest, an “absurd interdependence.” The conflict is not between us and them, self and other, but occurs within a shared body, a “suicidal, autoimmunitary” process that vacates the concept of victory. “I planted the sun in the middle of the sky like a flag,” the poet proclaims in *Apocalypse*, and with this expression of nationalism’s impossible desire for dominance prophesied the telos of the war to come, the “suicidal autoimmunity,” the “WAR WITH NO REVOLUTION” whose end we have yet to envision, whose dead are still silent.

So we might grant credit to Adnan for having “intuited” another war. *The Arab Apocalypse* is literature for the wars of our times, wars

in which it is again and as ever difficult to distinguish between “inside” and “outside.” The territory contested in the conflicts incorporated within the rhetoric of the “global war on terror” includes the nations of Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Palestine, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and Niger; intermittent violence pulses through New York, London, Boston, Paris, San Bernardino, Istanbul, Beirut, Orlando, Mogadishu, and elsewhere. Any such list is incomplete and/or overlapping; it’s hard to say if this violence comes from “here” or “there,” how one might finally distinguish the “domestic” from the “foreign.” Derrida describes the attacks of September 11, for example, in terms of their Americanness:

But here is the first symptom of suicidal autoimmunity: not only is the ground, that is, the literal figure of the founding or foundation of this “force of law,” *seen* to be *exposed* to aggression, but the aggression of which it is the *object*. . . comes, *as from the inside*, from forces that are apparently without any force of their own but that are able to find the means . . . to get a hold of an American weapon in an American city on the ground of an American airport. Immigrated, trained, prepared for their act in the United States by the United States, these *hijackers* incorporate, so to speak, two suicides in one: their own (and one will remain forever defenseless in the face of a suicidal, autoimmune aggression—and that is what terrorizes most) but also the suicide of those who welcomed, armed, and trained them. For let us not forget that the United States had in effect paved the way for and consolidated the forces of the “adversary” by training people like “bin Laden,” . . . and by first of all creating the politico-military circumstances that would favor their emergence and their shifts in allegiance (for example, the alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Arab Muslim countries in its war against the Soviet Union or Russia in Afghanistan—though one could endlessly multiply examples of these suicidal paradoxes). (Derrida 2003, 95)

The fact that the majority of the victims of the conflicts following September 11 have been Arab and/or Muslim is obvious, yet the name “terrorist” has served as a mask that allows for this ongoing apocalypse. In today’s entangled and interdependent wars, the front may occur anywhere: from the sky between Nevada and Yemen, crisscrossed by drones, to the streets of Idlib, to the inbox of an American citizen, mined by their own government. There is no place where war may not be found or from which war may not enact its displacements. Adnan’s poetics model a means to orient oneself—meaning, to orient oneself toward others, claim their agony as your own—within

this diffuse war, its forces distant and decentered, everywhere and remote, there and here. Her work models a means to hear in the ceaseless annunciation of “I” the emergent speech and silence, skin and myth, of others—a nation of displacement, borders open. *The Arab Apocalypse* pulls the reader into the “suicidal paradoxes” of war, where we bear witness to the radiating violence of the work of the “I.” To follow the conduit of the speaker in this poem is to find oneself emerging interdependently within a manifold grammar. The multivalent syntax of *Apocalypse* enacts the ruptures and intersubjectivities given form here, a form that reflects our militarized skies and auto-immunitary geopolitics: a war I can’t see because I am in it.

NOTES

With particular thanks to the editors and reviewers at *College Literature*, and to Susan Wells, Zach Savich, Lindsay Turner, and Brandon Shimoda.

- ¹ For example, Sonja Mejcher-Atassi describes *The Arab Apocalypse* as “provid[ing] a highly innovative approach” and names it a “verbo-visual hybrid” (2012, 131, 135).
- ² Throughout I will cite references in this format, first to the numbered section of the poem—in Roman numerals, as the poem employs—and then to the page on which it appears, since some sections extend over multiple pages. Within a quotation, the symbol #### marks where an image appears that I have not reproduced.
- ³ Other sources give different timelines for the siege of the camp; Dilip Hiro, for example, describes it as lasting 52 days (1992, 42).
- ⁴ My thinking on the poem’s participatory politics is indebted to Lyn Hejinian’s essay “The Rejection of Closure,” first published in 1984.
- ⁵ As Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh discuss (2002, 16–18), Adnan wrote in both English and French in the 1960s and 1970s, and during this period she also translated her own long poem “Jebu” from French (1973) to English (the English version is reprinted in Adnan 2014b, 1:21–37). In 2019, a translation appeared of a later work that Adnan composed in French, an exception to her predominant use of English: the volume *Time*, translated by Sarah Riggs and published by Nightboat Books. Adnan began work on these poems in 2003. At the time of this article’s editing, *Time* was shortlisted for the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize, based in Canada and awarded to international writers.
- ⁶ Post-Apollo has also published one volume of Barbara Guest’s *Quill, Solitary Apparition* (1996).
- ⁷ Examples include appearances in Documenta 13 (2012), the 2014 Whitney Biennial, at the Mass MoCA (2018), on the cover of the spring 2018 *Paris Review*, and elsewhere.

- ⁸ With thanks to an anonymous reviewer at *College Literature* for drawing my attention to these appearances.
- ⁹ I commissioned Lindsay Turner's review of the 2014 Adnan reader *To Look at the Sea is to Become What One Is* for the *Kenyon Review Online*, where I served from 2013 to 2016 as a book-review editor.
- ¹⁰ The series is co-edited by the poets Hayan Charara and Fady Joudah and is hosted both by the University of Arkansas Press and by RAWI, the Radius of Arab American Writers. The first book in the series, a debut collection by Jess Riskallah, appeared in 2017.
- ¹¹ As is Cole Swenson, whose writing on *Apocalypse*, included in the 2014 reader, is referred to below.
- ¹² With thanks to Susan Wells for this insight.
- ¹³ Adnan's spelling is sometimes nonstandard and her transliterations from the Arabic sometimes diverge from those which have since become standard in English, or at least more standard: Qorraich, for example, would today usually be rendered Quraysh or Qureish, etc.
- ¹⁴ In addition to the examples below, see Mejcher-Atassi's argument that the "typographical arrangement of *The Arab Apocalypse*"—emphasizing its sketches—"suggests that verbal language alone had become an inadequate means of self-expression for Adnan" (2012, 131).
- ¹⁵ For example, in the 2014 collection of Adnan's work, the sketches have a looser, more dashed-off style, conveying a greater sense of speed than the more tightly composed 1989 sketches. The leading of the 2014 poem is greater—something like double spaced, rather than single spaced in the 1989 edition—and yet the sketches also exceed the leading of the line more than in the 1989 edition, seeming larger in relation to and less contained by the text. The more traditional trim size of the 2014 volume means that the page is more fully occupied by text and sketches, with less white space and much narrower margins. Here the sketches often approach the edge of the page, which they almost never do (or only with particular drama) in the 1989 edition.
- ¹⁶ A coda to Aditi Machado's essay, "Suggestions for Reading the Poem" (2016), instructs: "It is impossible, but read the glyphs. Or: it is possible and read the glyphs."
- ¹⁷ This discussion of transgressing boundaries is also indebted to Swenson's discussion of Adnan as poetic witness in her essay "Etel Adnan: The Word in and by Exile": "Witness, as such, requires its own brand of restraint, one that demands detachment, a stepping back. . . . stepping back over a boundary, the boundary of the situation, and the boundary of the self. And that amounts to a kind of exile" (2014, 377).
- ¹⁸ If comparing Maarten Hesselt van Dinter's illustrations to the images in *Apocalypse*, one might consider the tattoos traditionally found primarily in women among nomadic peoples (2005, 180), among the Marsh Arabs

(178), and among men in the military, particularly in Jordan, Syria, and Iraq (182).

¹⁹ Indeed, the poem projects sexuality, gender, and fertility fluidly and unpredictably, often in a sinister tone: the sun is “stricken with menopause” (XIX, 38) or a “defeated androgyne androgynous sun” (XX, 39); the speaker proclaims that “I MADE LOVE TO A GUN UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE LAST PALM” (XX, 39) or “I married a river to eat its fish cannibal ! cannibal !” (XLIII, 62); “the sea is a belly dilated to receive the still-born” (XXXII, 51); “bodies cry the absence of their sexual parts / They will not reproduce in the other world will not make love to laurel trees” (LVI, 75); “I hurt at the sun’s belly ### the sun hurts at my belly O my love!” (XI, 27).

²⁰ Many thanks to George MacLeod for his assistance with this discussion of *bou*; any errors are mine.

²¹ According to Mejcher-Atassi, Adnan grew familiar with the telegram when during World War II she worked for the French Information Bureau (2012, 132).

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