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INTRODUCTION

What follows is an excerpt from my PhD Dissertation in process, tentatively titled “The World's Opacity: writing and history in Mohammed Dib”. The dissertation is a study of the work of Dib (1920-2003), an Algerian French-language novelist and poet and one of the “fathers” of North African literature in French. I am working under the supervision of Prof. Ratiba Hadj-Moussa.

I borrow imagery from Dib's poetry to depict him as a writer centrally interested in the power of the invisible in life, but for whom this interest is important in so far as it serves to better understand the “visible” world of lived experience. This shows itself, among other ways, in a concern with the relation of imagination to the world, or of fantasy to the real. The field of the invisible can cover abstract symbolic fields but also aspirations towards a different or freer life; its verity or usefulness is determined by its connection to the events and language of everyday life. I try to trace these concerns across Dib's fifty years of publishing, drawing connections between works often divided into realist or fantastical, political or person, books concerned with Algeria and ones open to not only the other side of the Mediterranean but more broadly – to Scandinavia first and ultimately to the globe. Dib's world, I argue, is a world of afterness: it bears the marks left by colonialism, by exile, by the globalization of consumerism and mechanized warfare, along with deeper histories. But against nostalgia and despair, Dib's writing strives towards inhabiting this world as it presents itself. This dynamic makes him distinctly a modernist writer, but he also weaves in conversation with traditions present in Arab, Muslim, and North African textual and material tradition.

The theoretical framework I have chosen can be expressed in terms related to phenomenology and its deconstructive critique and development; to a politics in favour of the poor that made Dib a critic of the colonial administration, the post-independence government and power elites of Algeria, and the Islamist project of the 1980s and 1990; or to traditions of Sufi Islam, particularly that of the Andalusian Ibn al-'Arabi or of Abu Madyân, patron saint of Dib's hometown of Tlemcen. Although the relation of visible and invisible is a broad framework – it could theoretically be expanded to anything – I spend the bulk of the dissertation closely reading the plots, images, and language of Dib's work.

The following excerpt comes from a longer section that looks at Dib's poetics in relation to French symbolist and automatist poetry, North African oral and sung poetry, modernist concerns with the limits of language and the functions of naming and, here, to classical Arab poetics by way of Andalusia.

Let me also take the chance to thank Prof. Bouraoui and the fund in his name for their contributions to the York library system. Without the significant collection of North African literature in French available here, I would not have been able to develop this project.

Second contextualization – poetics: signs, and imagination

The classical model

The idea that poetry emerges from and is deeply rooted in the spirit of a people was a central characteristic of classical Arabic poetics. In Jamaledine Bencheikh's words, “la poésie arabe s'est toujours voulue le conservatoire d'une culture et d'une histoire, le monument élevé à la gloire d'une communauté, le champ d'exercice d'une conscience collective et non point individuelle”¹. Formal characteristics (metre, rhyme scheme, etc.), thematic material, and imagery remained remarkably consistent over nearly a millennium and a half - “une stabilité d'un exemple assez rare pour qu'on s'y arrête”. Although a poet might address a particular sovereign in a praise-poem, revel in a particular landscape, or address his own beloved, poetic convention tends to depersonalize. Each occasion is tied to a world of symbols and examples that establish the continuity of the community. This often involves a looking-back: the splendours of imperial Baghdad, the purity and unity of the Prophetic community, the archetypal love between Qays (al-Majnun) and Layla, become the model on which the present can be described. This nostalgic tendency goes back to the earliest written Arabic poetry, the pre-Islamic odes or *Mu'allaqat* (said to have been hung in the Ka'aba before the birth of Islam, indicating their central place in the community). In these odes, the first movement, where the poet contemplates the remaining traces of a campsite where his beloved stopped, opens onto recollection – of times spent with the beloved, of the prowess of the poet and his tribe, of the rains that bring awe and refreshment to the desert and leave their own traces. A past is reconstructed out of traces left in a barren present, and this reconstruction is carried out according to rules shared between poets. In his lovely essay on the preeminence of interpersonal form over individual authorship in classical Arabic literature, Abdelfattah Kilito notes, commenting on the *Mu'allaqat* of 'Antara, which begins with an appeal to earlier poets, on this nostalgia at the beginnings of Arabic poetics:

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

¹ Bencheikh, *Poétique arabe: essai sur les voies d'un création*, p.1.

descent into twilight.²

Origin coincides with loss; the poem arises from solitude, evoking fullness by joining the community of absent poets, following the steps of a practice whose origins themselves are obscured, visible only as traces. Since the poem joins the present not only to a past but to the continuity of a community, tracing the origins of the odes back to some inaccessible orality would not resolve the tension. If there is an original model for this poetry, it will be found not in a golden age but an original act of interpretation. Noting that the writers of the *Mu'allaqat* variously compare the campsite traces to women's tattoos, to channels left in the sand by water, or to marks on parchment, Kilito presents the poet's own inscription of words as a further step in the process of leaving traces:

The campsite, the tattoo marks, and the inscription have no sharp or clear-cut design. For this reason the poet is above all else a decipherer of effaced and nearly invisible traces... When remembrance removes the veil that covers the old campsites, it revives a faded tattoo mark or worn inscription. The poet's task is to draw new lines over old and write one text atop another.³

The poet's activity is an example and an extension of the process of interpreting patterns in the world. From physical marks to the projected world of the community, by way of the patterns established by previous poets, the work of interpretation proceeds not by assigning fixed meanings but by way of similarity and of recollection. The *qasida*, the long poem in monorhyme which traces its formal origins to the *Mu'allaqat*, was composed of long lines, each forming a complete statement; the unity of the *qasida* consisted in holding these together, not only by means of continuous meaning, but through allusions, similar sonorities, and syntactic and auditory balance between lines and the internal halves of each line⁴. The emulation of past practice turns these practices into rules; the criteria for poetic quality forms a chain of similarities, symbolic, syntactic, and acoustic, whose extent defines the language and the community. The power of the poem is to hold together elements that on their own might seem disparate, working them into the chain. Even if the poet begins midpoint in the

2 Kilito, *The Author and his Doubles*, p.10. The most readable translation of the *Mu'allaqat* in English is Michael Sells, *Desert Tracings*. Arberry's translations aim for word accuracy and scholarly notation, but in the process become incredibly unwieldy. Arberry, *The Seven Odes*.

3 *ibid*, p.13-14.

4 See Bencheikh's citations from and discussions of the 9th/3rd century poet and theoretician Ibn Qutayba in Bencheikh, pp.116-126.

chain, following an established poetic pattern, rather than from his own experience, a poem that properly follows the rules works itself into a line that extends from the patterns of the natural world to the unity of a transhistorical community. It establishes the primacy of a world of meaning, one capable of bridging over great gaps in space and time.

The remarkable continuity of poetics Bencheikh notes applies more exactly to the Arab east (Mashreq) than to the Maghreb. The literary centre that developed in Arab Andalusia from the 11th to 14th centuries began by closely imitating eastern poetry, but soon developed its own formal models, both in classical arabic (the *muwashshahah*) and, significantly, in Andalusian dialect (the *zajal*). (These forms, closely tied to Andalusian music, would be very influential in North African musical culture⁵). Despite these formal developments – which significantly distanced the music from the language of classical grammarians and the rhythms of oral declamation – imagery and thematic material continued to insert the poetry into the chain of similarities stretching back to the desert. As the editors of a recent bilingual (Arabic-French) anthology of Andalusian poetry state:

La poésie andalouse ne se comprend donc, en son essence, qu'en résonance avec la production classique orientale, et cela, à toute époque... le mouvement intime de la phrase, ce style profond qui porte, de manière indissociable, une vision du monde et une manière de le chanter, prend racine dans le tuf de la tradition...

Dans la poésie arabe, l'imitation n'est pas servile, mais souhaitable, nécessaire, glorieuse. Elle affirme la prééminence d'un style multiséculaire, elle en célèbre l'incontestable supériorité, elle illustre et prolonge, dans le même mouvement, les mille et une splendeurs d'une langue poétique commune. C'est pourquoi les innovations qu'apportent d'autres poètes andalous ne se détachent que sur ce fond stylistique immuable. Elles ne constituent pas des gestes de rébellion, de rejet, mais plutôt travaillent à l'intérieur d'une langue classique en l'enrichissant de nouvelles significations, en assouplissant sa forme métrique ou sa texture sonore ou en la croisant avec des apports dialectaux.⁶

The tradition provides a kind of echo chamber for poetry, a space opening from it that suggests new similarities, enhancing sense and providing the poet with the resources to forge new connections between images and statements. It also doubles the poet's world with another, physically absent, that exists in the language of earlier poets, and whose form itself

5 In addition to “classical” music, much of the Arabic-language popular music of the post-independence period uses these forms, or close variants. Even some French-language poets have picked the forms up directly; see for example Bachir Hadj Ali, whose poetry draws heavily on Andalusian forms and their Algerian developments.

6 Hoa Hoï Vuong and Patrick Mégarbané, *Le Chant d'al-Andalus: une anthologie de la poésie arabe d'Espagne*, pp.18-19.

implies distance – the distance that separates the physical world from the world of poetic meanings. After the fall of Arab Andalusia, the nostalgic distance from a golden past was again increased – reference to the culture of a lost al-Andalus that itself echoed a distant Baghdad that in turn looked back to the desert. But as common images and modes of poetry – depiction of the beloved, praise poetry, and so on – continued to be taken up and passed down in (mostly dialectal) Arabic song and poetry in the Maghreb, the frame of reference was maintained. Working the poem into the chain of similarities connects the poet's present to the invisible world established by poetry.

Algerian poetry

More than four centuries after the final fall of al-Andalus, after the period of Ottoman occupation, and most importantly after colonization by the French – which involved mass dispossession and the disruption of most centres of Arabic learning in Algeria – the integrity of that culturally specific, linguistically mediated world could not be taken for granted. Speaking of the popular (dialectal) arabic poets of the late 19th and early 20th century as having “instauré un univers symbolique d'une rare beauté sur un univers physique d'une rare laideur,” the critic Mohammed Souheil Dib describes the profusion of symbols in this poetry as a “représentation en pointillés”⁷. M.S. Dib indicates multiple relations between this image in fragments, which mobilizes much of the old tradition, and the historical situation it emerges from: a product of historical blockage, a transfiguration of a difficult reality into symbolic richness, at times an allegorical “detour” to present political viewpoints that couldn't be expressed openly. The old poetics of allusion continued, but, in the face of physical and cultural dispersion, the unity of its world of reference was loosened and broken up. The transmission of this popular poetry, written and spread by largely itinerant poets and singers, contributed too to the sense of a culture in fragments⁸.

7 Mohammed Souheil Dib, *Le trésor enfoui du mâlhun*, p.311, 315. Like Mohammed Dib, this author is from Tlemcen, though I'm not aware of a direct relation.

8 My brief account of popular arabic poetry follows critical accounts; my only familiarity with the material comes from M.S. Dib's translated anthology and some later recordings of *châabi* and *melhûn*. Regardless of the historical accuracy of this description, it seems to agree with the sense of the state of literature that modernist or nationalist writers worked from or against.

The rise of nationalism saw varying responses to this state of culture. In the early 20th century, some Algerian writers associated with Abdelhamid Ben Badis' Association of *'ulama*, the cultural-nationalist movement that saw the triad of Algerian nationality, Arabic language, and Islam as the key to cultural and political reform, tried to revive the classical language and poetic forms. These writers, most of whom had received an Arabic-language and religious education outside of Algeria (primarily at the Zaytouna in Tunis), were inspired by the modernist *Nahda* movement in the Arab east, which had involved both work to reform the Arabic language and the birth of “reformist” (*Islah*) Islam. Their poetry was, for the most part, “conservatrice dans sa forme, didactique dans son expression, austère par son inspiration, revendicative et patriotique par son idéologie”⁹. This “poetized prose” holds rigorously to the metre and rhyme of the *qasida* and other forms, and to the grammatical rules of classical Arabic. Its intent is to clearly and memorably get across its messages: praise of the *'ulama*, of successful Muslim political and military leaders of past and present, and of an educated and pious population; criticism of popular forms of religious expression – seen as obscurantist and innovative (in the negative sense of adding external material to the pure form of religion) by the reformers – and its corrupt leadership. Like the general view of the reformists, these writings tried to set up a connection between a glorious past – here seen in a “cultured” use of language and form – and an emerging glorious future; this connection would be mediated by language as a medium of clear speech and proper behaviour. Moving between two projected images, one past and one future, this literary strategy literally attempts to write out or overwrite the fragmentation and confusion of the present, just as a proper education in language and religion would overwrite the ignorance of the colonized mindset. The reference to tradition, the temporality involved, and the view of language differ thoroughly from the chain of allusion described above; here a historical trajectory moves from a set image of the past, overhead of the present, to touch down in a projected future whose image is glimpsed in the language of cultural leaders. This is a response to a historical situation where the identity between beautiful language, proper behaviour, and historical community had been broken; but it is one that (in a conservative mode recognizable from many countries and situations)

⁹ Ahmed Lanasri, *Anthologie de la poésie algérienne de langue arab*, p.13.

tries to suture this back together by reducing the present to an object for condemnation and silencing. The lived world is wiped away in favour of an invisible one; and this invisible one is defined as real, material, and enduring. That this was done in the name of rendering religion more rational and effective is reflected in its attempt to refashion language as an unambiguous tool for political action¹⁰.

Writers who turned instead to oral poetry for inspiration included most of the founding figures of French-language Algerian literature¹¹. Several major writers from Kabylia – Jean Amrouche, Mouloud Ferraoun, then Mouloud Mammeri – published collections of poetry in translation from Tamazight (Berber) to French. This poetry, which shared descriptive and religious material with the Arab and Andalusian heritage, also carried a deep rooting in the local landscape, a sense of pride in person and ancestry, and a frequent theme of the poet's isolation and loneliness. The translated anthologies made this poetry accessible, and available as a model, to writers trained, as Dib was, in the French-language schools. The figure of the itinerant poet, familiar from Kabyle and Arabic popular poetry, became an important image for Algerian writers: someone working to convey news and emotion, connecting people across territory whose earlier routes of commerce and communication had been broken. (This point-to-point network of communication recalls, and is surely responsible in part, for what M.S. Dib characterized as the “pointillist” character of popular Algerian poetry). Kateb Yacine took this as the model for his writing, from his earliest journalistic work to the intricately structured fragments of *Nedjma* and *Le polygone étoilé*, and versions of such a figure appear in many novels¹². Whether authors drew on Berber or Arab sources, popular

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

11 I use this term to refer to Algerian-born writers from the majority (indigenous) community, or at least those who saw themselves belonging to an Algeria made up of this majority community. As such it excludes writers who aligned themselves with a colonial, minority, nationalism - the “Algerianist school” for example.

12 In Dib's first trilogy, the political agitator Hamid Sarradj and the politically educated but inactive Ocatcha both seem to draw on this model; though neither is a poet, both are able to speak powerfully (especially Sarradj, whose speech in *La grande maison* seems to change the atmosphere in the room) and have an authority based on having travelled and seen other places across the country and in France. The short story “Le compagnon”, from *Au café*, features an itinerant

poetry and story provided a link to an oral writing – in the sense of words given structure and designed to outlast their utterance – that, though fragmentary, created a kind of cohesion. Amrouche's famous essay, “The Eternal Jugurtha”, provided a model of transmission and time to correspond: the Numidian king who moved in and out of alliance with Rome, acting in the interest of his own community, figures a national character that slips into alliance with one invader after another, renewing its identity even in disguise:

Je sais bien où m'attend Jugurtha : il est partout présent, partout insaisissable ; il n'affirme jamais mieux qui il est que lorsqu'il se dérobe. Il prend toujours le visage d'autrui, mimant à la perfection son langage et ses mœurs ; mais tout à coup les masques les mieux ajustés tombent, et nous voici affrontés au masque premier : le visage nu de Jugurtha ; inquiet, aigu, désespérant¹³.

This history goes back long before the Arabization and Islamization of the Maghreb, but incorporates these invasions into itself. The origin here is a mode of action, not a static model. This eternal Jugurtha, always hidden or disguised, appears in the words that carry on and retell his legacy¹⁴. This sets out, like the reformists, an activist poetics; but this one aimed not at presenting a model for replacing the present but at making an otherwise concealed aspect of the present visible. This project inspired much of pre-independence writing – by Amrouche, Feraoun, Mammeri, and others – including, as we've seen, Dib's. The words, whether in the poems of *Ombre gardienne* or the early novels and short stories, aim towards a whole that is embodied in Algerian landscape and society; they aim to make visible something embodied in itinerant voices and in fragments of experience that, presented, can be recognized in each other. The social outcasts and street performers in *La danse du roi* receive a similar treatment, and the narrative polyphony of *Le maître de chasse* stages it in another way, as do the poems of *L'aube Ismaël* to Palestinian history. This invokes an approach to writing or representing history, as the next chapter will discuss. It also presents writing as unifying – touching the world at disparate points of landscape and life, making a collective existence – in

storyteller and trickster named Djeha, a stock character who appears in other writers' work as well (in Kateb spelled J'ha). The character played by the director, Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina, in the 1970s film *Chronique des années de braise*, a madman who guides and narrates the film's ambitious historical scope, is another classic representation. The parallel between the itinerant storyteller or poet and the political agitator became part of nationalist mythology.

13 Amrouche, “The Eternal Jugurtha”.

14 Dib creates a similar figure, with Abraham's concubine Hagar in place of Jugurtha, in the first poems of *L'aube Ismaël*, written in response to the first Palestinian Intifada, where the Palestinian mother is transformed into “Hagar toujours rebelle”. It is typical of Dib's commitment to an everyday and “poor” reality - and his mode of sympathy with the Intifada – that it is a peasant woman who takes on the role of historical relay.

its continuity and its interruption – visible.

Real and imagined worlds

The realm of collective or cultural existence, of course, transcends any individual text or oeuvre. To propose a specific code as its authoritative reading would be to try to conjure away its invisibility; even then, to elaborate this code would prove a daunting, if not endless, task. The writer's work will then be necessarily fragmentary, a contribution to a larger and unseizable whole. A directly activist approach to writing, as with the reformist-aligned Arabic poets, or much of the francophone poetry written around the War of Independence, puts forward some particular interpretation in the hopes that it will be recognized, taken up and shared into the larger culture. Such an approach runs against what I have called the second form of intention in Dib's writing. Rather than attempting to act on the realm of cultural meaning, proposing a mode of understanding and hoping to see it replicated, this intention is a desire to dissolve the speaker's particularity into the broader, a-subjective realm of sense. Although this exists in tension with Dib's dedication to lived reality and to the Algerian cause, the two work together; the second moves the writer away from claiming a particular interpretation that would fully explain reality. Although Dib's pre-independence work is almost universally acknowledged as having contributed to the national struggle, it is difficult to take lessons or formulas for action from these books. Much more, we see tensions and struggles, possibilities held back, the blend of disempowerment and hope seen in "Ombre gardienne". This mode of making visible aims to show a broad spectrum of the world, the stuff out of which the future will be made – the people who will make Algeria, rather than the form they will take when "made"¹⁵.

Dib's post-independence poetry moves away from the recognizable forms of Algerian oral poetry (and of French verse poetry) to make its own model. The landscape it works on, too, seems to leave recognizable locales and move into a world made of carefully chosen symbolic elements. On the planes of form and content, his poetic work moves further from

15 In a 1976 interview with Wadi Bouzar, Dib referred to the characters of Madjar and Ocacha saying "c'est lui qui ont fait l'Algérie". Bouzar, *Lecture maghrébines*, p.101.

easy readability and towards condensed forms that require time but seem, read in sequence, to build into coherent if partial worlds. In this work, Dib continues to mine the poetic tradition of the Maghreb and its Arab precedents, although not on the level of simple imitation¹⁶. Dib makes explicit reference, in some of his novels and short stories from the late 1970s on, to Arab and Islamic literary tradition, although always mixed in with other influences: the search for desert traces figures in *L'infante maure* and *Le désert sans detour*, the title story of *Simorgh* reworks the Persian Farid ad-Din al-Attar's *Manatiq al-Tiyar* (the conference of the birds); the doomed love of Majnun and Layla runs, with other stories, underneath *Le sommeil d'Ève*. In the poetry, such references are harder to spot, although some poems have clear affinities to the Andalusian descriptive poetry. The final section of *Feu beau feu*, "Airs à tout fin", takes up a conceit of *rihla* or travel poetry, where the poet summons up a bird's-eye view to present a long distance as a series of discreet scenes:

[...]
l'épervier
jette une ombre
derrière les collines

et l'ombre chasse
et porte le meurtre
loin dans cet ocre

*

oiseaux
faites monter l'arbre

au-delà
de cette nuit
au-delà

et fidèles
allez le travailler

*

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

regarde-t-il au sol

¹⁶ Habib Tengour's insistence in his presentation of Dib's collective poetry on the relevance of Maghrebin and Andalusian poetry encouraged me to look for these connections, which I would not likely have seen on my own – Tengour, as the writer who (to my knowledge) has incorporated Dib's style as a major influence in his own poetry and novels, seemed like an authoritative source.

leurs innombrables graffiti
qui ne nomment rien

*

la branche
au bord du chemin

son désir
de tout donner

sa patience
fouaillée par le vent

*

pourquoi ce cri
fait-il halte

qui a ouvert la plaie

toute l'étendue
et peu d'ombre

*

quelle bête
sous la pluie

quelle bête
crie à mourir

on n'entend plus
cette eau qui coule
[...]¹⁷

The birds'-eye-view technique provides a means to hold together disparate elements – not only locales, but different registers: description of nature mixes with the emotional weight of danger, perseverance, fear, and the detail of the scene opens onto the empty meaning of the birds' scribblings in the snow and the unnamed beast's crying. The relative clarity of this technique and the length of “Airs à tout fin” draws attention to a poetics of juxtaposition, familiar from our discussion of Arab and Andalusian poetry, at work in Dib's poetry particularly in *Omneros* (1975), *Feu beau feu* (1979), and *Ô Vive* (1987). The juxtaposition of short poems, as well as the collection of images within each poem, cohere into a whole that is neither a clear meaning nor a detailed description, but an opening onto a world with recognizable contours that exists in a space related to recognizable locales and times only via

¹⁷ Dib, *Oeuvres I: Poésies*, pp.221-222.

minimal shared elements. Comparing Dib's work to the great Andalusian landscape poet Ibn Khafâdja, we can see a certain shared technique, despite the difference in tone and world of reference. Taking two relatively straightforward examples can help to demonstrate this. Here is a short pastoral poem of Ibn Khafâdja's:

La mimosa, au-dessus de nos têtes
 Avait tendu son dôme de ciel frais,
 Tandis qu'en bas circulaient des comètes
 Emplies de vin. Un cours d'eau entourait
 L'arbre épanoui, comme une Voie lactée;
 Et maintes fleurs y miraient leurs étoiles.
 À voir le fût et l'onde, une beauté
 Naissait, fluette et ceinte d'azur pâle.
 Et les coupes, escortant l'épousée,
 La célébraient par leur ronde nuptiale,
 Tandis que la promise ôtait son voile
 Sous l'arc des fleurs répandues sans compter¹⁸

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

18 Hoi Vuong and Mégarbané, *Le Chant d'al-Andalus*, p.183, translation by the editors.

reputation as the great poet of the Andalusian landscape, Ibn Khafâdja's poem remains a description of a place, a flowering tree by a river. The poem is not unidirectional, moving from an image to its interpretation; rather the layers of imagery coexist, presenting a sensorium by way of a world of images that define a set of recognizable experience. The tree's beauty is established not by detail of description, but by placing it within the poetic world that defines beauty and its associated states.

Here is another poem from Dib's *Feu beau feu*, “Feu à fruits”:

vois comment
procède le feu

planté en terre
il porte le jour

il n'a de soins
que pour la feuille

il sait redescendre
dans ses racines

il te regarde
et brûle encore

été déjà en fleur
sur ses branches¹⁹

This poem is relatively simple and straightforward; it takes its place within the collection more than it stands on its own (this is characteristic of most of Dib's poetry). The initial image is, as with many of the poems in the collection, a fire. The symbolic structure of the collection employs a distinction between the outside world – a space of cold, dampness, the play of hunter and hunted, and the cries of the nameless beast (all seen in “Airs à tout fin”) – and the inside world of fire and erotic intimacy. The second image, a flowering tree, is gradually superimposed onto the fire. The poem captures – and commands – a contemplation of the flames that gives way, through steps of comparison, to another similar image. In the process, the fire takes on new characteristics; it becomes what carries the day and the summer in ahead of themselves – in the winter world of *Feu beau feu* the fire already carries a blooming summer. The transformation of the image becomes a transformation of a whole set of images, linking them beyond themselves to a process of regrowth. The fire that

¹⁹ Dib, *Oeuvres T.1: Poésies*, p.200.

consumes wood turns into what grows it back again, in roots, leaves and branches. At the same time, another layer of meaning enters in the active verbs assigned to the fire: it carries, cares, knows, watches. Flame and tree are also something animate and specifically something nurturing and vigilant. This connects to another level that runs throughout the collection. The two main sections of *Feu beau feu*, “Natyk au beau feu” and “Natyk aux emblèmes” take their name from the arabic *natiq*, which refers to speech or to enunciation, and that serves in classical Arabic philosophy, like the Greek *logos*, to refer to rationality. (*Al-hayawan an-natiq* translates the Aristotelian *zoon logon*, the human as “speaking animal”; *an-nafs an-natiq* is the rational soul). The interior space where the fire is – one poem names “la maison de Natyk” – is also a space of speech; in a reflexive sense the space of the poem, but as figuring a kind of thought. The way the fire proceeds, knowing how to reach down to its roots, dedicating itself to care, watching as it unfolds its fruits, show the movement of a thought that unfolds with the steady timing of staring into a fire but reaches behind and beyond itself. The counterpoint between Natyk and the beast is another structuring opposition in *Feu beau feu*, one caught up in its erotics. The book is dedicated to “louve” - an animal and the author's own feminine alter ego (“Dib” is close to homophonous with the Arabic word for wolf – a play Dib engages in *Le sommeil d'Ève* and *L.A. Trip* as well). Disembodied reason and the embodied animal meet in the gaze that goes from the viewer to the flame and back from the flame to the viewer.

To read this into “Feu à fruits” requires placing it in the context of the full collection and its main reference points: fire and water, inside and outside, word and corporeality, an even, steady poetics and a mute animality of desire and hurt. These binaries can seem simple on a first glance, but superimposed they create a world of reference that includes landscape, figure, emotion and affect. A poem, resonating in this space, reflects meaning at different levels: so “Feu à fruits”, while never ceasing to be an account of staring at a fire, becomes a part of a landscape, a communication, and an image of thought. This technique is typical of Dib's poetry from *Omneros* onwards, and these worlds of images appear in the novels – *Feu beau feu* in particular resonates with *Le sommeil d'Ève*. This poetics touches recognizable

physical specifics in places – in particular, recognizing the Nordic landscape of the novel in the poetry shows these points.

This technique bears some similarity to the Andalusian poetry described above, but the world of reference is particular to Dib rather than belonging to a recognizable society. Many of the binaries and central images in Dib's poetry and prose are quite familiar (this has prompted readings in terms of Jungian archetypes, alchemy, etc.), but it is their particular combination that characterizes his work. As a particular writer's creation, the worlds of imagery Dib creates are necessarily limited and fragmentary; unable to stand fully inside any given tradition, they aim to create their own resonances. This may contribute to their seeming simplicity, obviousness, or even sentimentality – they carry the strangeness of viewing an unknown culture in pieces or in translation, without the solidity of a history behind them. But unfolding in repeated reading, they aim to open up a world where description and interpretation overlap, where the visual is overlaid with the emotion – a poetics modelled with a classical scope.

To say that Dib's poetics are influenced by Arabic and Andalusian poetics is not to say that his work maintains fidelity to a tradition, or that it shows the true or authentic way of maintaining and updating this tradition. Many other Maghrebin writers have drawn on local poetic traditions in very different ways. At the same time, many of the aspects in Dib's poetry that I am linking to this tradition might also be analyzed within the history of French poetry, as I've tried to show, or within other rubrics. Post-colonial literary theory has long noted hybridization as a characteristic of the literatures it studies, and each form of hybridization is unique. But, at the same time, to derive an understanding of what writing does from two different directions is also to suggest a connection or overlap between those two streams. A theory of writing as something that is rooted in a historical moment but reaches into a space that resists location must itself be able to be at least minimally portable. In the North African context, this is not only to suggest, as Abdelkebir Khatibi did, that post-independence Maghrebin culture is still intimately shaken by the “question” of Europe, that for the Maghrebin to engage with European culture is “un travail sur soi, un travail permanent afin de transformer ses souffrances, ses humiliations et ses dépressions dans la relation à l'autre et

aux autres”²⁰. It also suggests that even outside of the intercultural relation set up by the colonial encounter, the two already have a possibility of overlap, that, despite everything, both are already aiming at something that can be translated into a commonality. To return to Glissant's framework: the problem of trying to reconcile the writer to the world, the lived world to the total world of sense and the full historical world, that helped give rise to French modernism was also confronted by the colonized writers of North Africa. This confronted them not only as writers, particularly those writers working the language of the colonizer, but as colonial subjects. The dilemma stems, at least in part, from the inability of existing systems to account for new modes of experience stemming from the increased visibility of the world as something that affects us beyond our capacity. In France this was sparked by mechanization and imperialism, by war and by the appeal of fascism, all of these indigenous growths that fragmented from within; in Algeria by the violent imposition of economic and social systems that also revealed the incapacity of the indigenous community to successfully resist its imposition. This is not to suggest that colonialism is nothing but a form of modernity (or vice versa); each situation is unique, and the equation of the two (or of different forms of colonization or modernization) has led to or justified destructive actions. But the revelation of a world as hostile and exterior is simultaneously the revelation of a world in common, a shared horizon of possibilities that appears differently to each different position. In this situation, the tradition of a poetics, such as that in Algeria derived from Arabic poetics, that had repeatedly managed to continue through dislocation and defeats has much to offer. Among this is the insight that, rather than aiming at the entirety of the world or at the specificity of the local, writing can introduce the poet's visible world into a chain of connections that is itself rooted in a constant process of interpretation, an endlessly repeated but constantly unique experience of the world; that full explanation is not the writer's responsibility. But, in response to a poetics that roots itself in the unity and continuity of a particular people, the modernists of France's imperial age show that no world of meaning, not even a projected one, will be fully complete, that even the great book of the world would

20 Khatibi, “Pensée-autre”, in *Maghreb pluriel*. p. 12.

remain full of gaps since no connection between words can be fully guaranteed²¹.

The world which is seen is exceeded by the world of meaning, the realm for symbols and images gives way to the full possibilities of experience. But this second world is invisible, and the attempt to make it show itself will show only a fragment, and one appearing from one particular viewpoint. An attempt to equate the two results in overwriting the visible world, reducing its complexity. The world of meaning is only approached on the basis of experience in the visible world; to deny this will result, once again, in presenting a limited experience as universal. What writing can do, and to me this describes Dib's writing well, is to move between the two, increasing the realm of visible by extending chains of figuration, putting each fragment forward so that its particularity might reflect back in a shared space of meaning, giving access to experience that is shared but never fully named. These fragments may show the lives of people usually passed over, or they may show aspects of life usually uncommunicated; they may show what, in the experience of landscape or of others, brings one locale close to another, distant one. Writing as a tool “functional as a technique of expressing the unrepresentable”, as Bachir Adjil characterizes Dib's experimental writing in *Les terraces d'Orsol*, is equally descriptive of writing in the realist mode²².

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21 See here Roland Barthes: “In classical speech, connections lead the word on, and at once carry it towards a meaning which is an ever-deferred project; in modern poetry, connections are only an extension of the word, it is the Word which is 'the dwelling place', it is rooted like a *fons et origo* in the prosody of functions, which are perceived but unreal... Fixed connections being abolished, the word is left only with a vertical project, it is like a monolith, or a pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings, reflexes and recollections: it is a sign which stands.” Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 53.

22 Adjil, *Espace et écriture chez Mohammed Dib: la trilogie nordique*, p. 68.

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