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Within the Opaque Mirror: The Poetry of El-Mahdi Acherchour

Patrick Crowley

> ‘poetry does not easily suffer the demand for clarity, the passive audience, the simple message. The poem is an intransigent exercise’.[1]

> ‘a novel is a mirror journeying down the high road. Sometimes it reflects to your view the azure blue of heaven, sometimes the mire in the puddles on the road below’.[2]

In 1997 the literary review, *Algérie Littérature/Action*, published *L’Œil de l’égaré* [The Eye of the Lost One] by the Algerian and Kabyle poet El-Mahdi Acherchour (b. 1973).[3] *L’Œil de l’égaré* is a long, fragmented poem published by a young poet who was born and grew up in independent Algeria and whose late teens and early twenties coincided with Algeria’s so-called civil war, the *décennie noire* or black decade, marked by horrific acts of violence.[4] *Algérie Littérature/Action*, published by Marsa in Paris, was founded in 1996 by Algerian writers and intellectuals, mainly left-wing, who had moved to Paris in the 1990s in order to escape the violence in Algeria. Given the circumstances of time and publication, it might be expected that *L’Œil de l’égaré* would bear witness to the unfolding events in Algeria. It does not — or at least not in a way that was characteristic of what was called an ‘écriture de l’urgence [a literature of crisis], a literature, mainly novels, which evoked the state of emergency and gave representational form to the realities of the ‘black decade’.[5] *L’Œil de l’égaré*, a hermetic poem stretching across 57 pages, radically challenges an interpretative approach that would read it as a purely formalist construction or as a reflection of the social and political conditions of its production. It is not that Acherchour’s poem is silent on Algeria — it isn’t — but that it says so much more in ways that intensify its poetic status. In this way, *L’Œil de l’égaré* invites a close reading that tests the limits of what can be said about this poem. Central to my reading is the image of the mirror, not as theme or analogy or mimetic

function but as a function of hermeneutic destabilization and productive of uncertain doublings.

In his compelling treatment of North African poetry in French, Yasser Elhariry makes an entirely convincing argument that the poetry of writers, such as Habib Tengour (Algeria) and Abdelwahab Meddeb (Tunisia), is charged 'with the creative inflections of intertextual rewriting within the folds of their own poetic work, as they draw on historiographers such as Ibn Hishām, on Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabī'.[6] For Pierre Joris, Tengour's schooling in the French language results in a poetics characterized by 'the successful relay between modernist Euro-American experiments and local traditions of socio-political and spiritual narrative explorations'.[7] This focus on translingualism in North African literature — also given prominence in the work of Abdelkebir Khatibi[8] — and the examination of Arabic working a linguistic and semantic presence into poetry written in French offers a frame within which we can situate Acherchour's work. Acherchour's first language, however, is not Arabic but Kabyle. In a documentary on Algerian writers from 2003 entitled 'Vivre et écrire en Algérie' [Living and writing in Algeria], we see Acherchour walk towards the camera and, voice off, hear him say in French that his mother tongue is Kabyle.[9] Having learnt French in secondary school, from his brother, a translator, he acquired rudimentary Arabic. This multilingual experience informs his poetic style — he realised, he says, that a language could be invented that would be neither his mother tongue nor French but both at the same time, adding that this experience of languages resulted in a style which, and here he cites Deleuze, is a stammering in one's own language. Acherchour does not pursue Deleuze's reflections on style and its relationship to bilingualism — the need to be 'bilingual even in a single language' — despite its obvious pertinence to Acherchour's experience.[10] We can only try to imagine what it might be like for a young poet to read oneself into texts published in, and often translated into, French from a viewpoint that is Kabyle.

What Elhariry and Tengour highlight above, and what Acherchour reflects upon, is a translingual dimension at work within North African poetry that lies at the margins of a French publishing industry. Elhariry writes that the poems he examines evade 'the editorial and narrative binds that have plagued the francophone condition since decolonization: the dominant, market driven desire to publish novels and migration stories in Paris'.[11] Publishing houses in France sought such stories because they felt that they reflected, or offered a mirror to, the 'reality' of North African experience.

Where Plato, and most Western critics until at least the eighteenth century, had 'recourse to a mirror in order to illuminate the nature of one or another art'[12], it was the novel that came to be seen as having the strongest claim to represent the 'real' by the nineteenth century. The realist novel and political modernity came to be interwoven to a point where narrative was not only deemed to reflect the nation but to partake in its construction. This view informs Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as an 'imagined community' that was mediated by newspapers and the novel.[13] Even amongst critics of Anderson's constructivist argument on nationalism, the mimetic and imaginative role of narrative is mainly uncontested. As Duncan Bell notes, common to other theorists of nationalism — such as Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm and Anthony D. Smith — is the relation between nation and narrative representation that allows individual members of the nation to locate themselves within a 'temporally extended narrative'.[14] Within mimesis, the nation's disparate parts are conjoined, fashioned into an image that presents the citizen with a coherent, national, imaginary order.

Fredric Jameson puts this view of the novel to work within a colonial context with the claim that 'All third-world texts […] are to be read as what I will call national allegories […] particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel'.[15] Jameson highlights the centrality of the novel to 'a

struggle with first-world imperialism — a cultural struggle that is itself a reflexion of the economic situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capital, or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, of modernization'.[16] This cultural struggle can take different forms. In 2012, to mark the ~~50th~~ fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence, the organisers of the fifth, state-funded ~~5th~~ 'Festival International de la littérature et du livre de jeunesse' [*International Festival of Youth Literature and Books*] commissioned a bilingual (Arabic and French) publication titled *Dix escales dans la littérature algérienne moderne* [Ten steps of modern Algerian literature.] for which the academic, novelist and translator Mohamed Sari wrote the introduction. Not surprisingly, Sari's brief text focuses on literature as a practice of anti-colonial struggle and as a chronicle for nationalist aspirations. It begins with a reference to the overwhelming dominance of poetry in nineteenth-century Algeria which he links to the classical Arabic literary tradition. And yet, apart from the inclusion of the 'Kassaman' — Algeria's national anthem written by Moufdi Zakaria (1908-1977) — the ten extracts that make up the anthology are from the novels and narratives of Ahmed Reda Houhou (1910-1956), Mouloud Féraoun (1913-1962), Mouloud Mammeri (1917-1989), Mohammed Dib (1920-2003), Abdelhamid Benhadouga (1925-1996), Malek Hadda (1927-1978), Kateb Yacine (1929-1989), Abou Laid Doudou (1934-2004), and Tahar Ouattar (1936-2010). All men, no room for Assia Djebar or Ahlam Mosteghanemi, possibly as both were still living but also, one could argue, because modernity is often represented as a masculine enterprise and, for Sari, the novel is the mark of Algeria's modernity. The novel heralded Algeria's accession to a cultural plane that had helped define western nations and was now at the service of modern Algeria. This is clear in the title of the anthology and from Sari's Introduction that offers a teleological reading leading to independence. At one point, Sari comments that the late arrival of the Algerian Arabic novel was due to writers remaining 'in the furrow of the literary traditions of the Arabic language'[17] namely, the short story and

poetry. In this reading, if never explicit, poetry is rooted in a noble tradition but one that was not (yet) 'modern'. In Jean Déjeux's overview of poetry in Algeria, he observes that by the 1970s and 1980s younger poets such as Tahar Djaout, Farid Mammeri, Ghaouti Faraoun and Abderrahmane Lounès were less concerned with a militant poetry that celebrates the revolution~~, seeking~~. Instead, they sought to explore the experience of everyday life in Algeria within a poetry characterised by the discovery of new images and bold metaphors.[18] This poetry has been almost entirely neglected, again, I think, because the novel is the genre of choice in the West and the key site of the cultural struggle that Jameson details. And, at the same time, the kind of modernist poetry published by Acherchour is not the kind of 'modern' that suits the teleological narrative of the new nation that Sari foregrounds.

There is a sort of unwitting convergence between the (mainly) Anglophone scholars of nationalism and Francophone Algerian novelists who, since the 1950s, have resorted to the novel in writing of ~~of~~ anti-colonial struggle and post-colonial interrogations. Consider, for example Mohammad Dib's anti-colonial trilogy *La Grande Maison* (1952), *L'Incendie* (1954) and *Le Métier à tisser* (1957) and Salim Bachi's post-colonial novels *Le Chien d'Ulysse* (2001) and *La Kahéna* (2003). These allegories of nation are full of nuance as is Kateb Yacine's avant-garde anti-colonial *Nedjma* (1956). Pierre Joris remarks, that the 'vast ~~ketebian~~ katebian "écriture" […] constantly and radically subverts the western "law of genre" and moves nomadically between poem, novel and play'.[19] Nonetheless, through the trope of allegory — such as the figure of Nedjma as love object and an Algeria to come — there is a consistent delineation of an idea of Algeria that provides Kateb's novel and oeuvre with a centralising focus.[20]

The idea of 'Algeria' was violently contested during the internecine violence of Algeria's 'black decade' during which the centre (of the state) almost did not hold.[21] The 'civil war' followed from the cancellation of the second round of legislative elections after

the *Front Islamique du Salut* (Islamic Salvation Front, FIS), performed strongly in the first round held in December 1991. The result was violent confrontations that quickly escalated and the years that followed are known as the 'black decade' — a phrase that captures the grief of that decade but also its obscurity for the civilian population appeared to be caught between two forces which, if identified as State and Islamism, were in practice composed of many different groups and it was not always clear who was carrying out the killings that saw at least 100,000 dead. The murder of novelist and poet Tahar Djaout in 1993, writes McDougall, was 'one of the first […] of many murders, of journalists, intellectuals and artists but also of many thousands more Algerian women, children and men, to become caught in a controversy over the attribution of culpability'.[22] That writers, intellectuals and singers were targeted indicates that their role in society was not considered to be an abstraction or marginal — because they articulated an Algeria different from that of the army-controlled state and that of Islamist insurgents.

Charles Bonn sees the literature of that decade as moving away from formal experimentation and as being marked by a 'retour du référent' [a return of the referent].[23] For Bonn, this form of literary engagement with the reality of Algeria's conflict resulted in a form of 'témoignage' [bearing witness] that suited French editors whose publishing houses wanted novels that would reflect Algeria's social and political realities.[24] This also had an impact on poetry, even after the conflict. The blurb for the 2007 translation of *State of emergency / État d'urgence*, a collection of poems by Soleïman Adel Guémar reads: 'State of Emergency' […], is rooted in Algerian experience, speaking of urgent concerns everywhere — oppression, resistance, state violence, traumas and private dreams'. [25] The same blurb includes an extract from Lisa Appignanesi's introduction: 'we now have a living voice, both political and lyrical — an intensely individual voice which […] traces the lineaments of a tragic history'. These poems *do* speak of Guémar's experience who worked as a freelance journalist in Algeria

throughout the ‘civil war’ before seeking asylum in the United Kingdom in 2002 but the fact that the link between voice and experience is highlighted actively situates the work within the domain of *écriture de l’urgence*.

In her account of *Algérie Littérature/Action* from the late 1990s, Christiane Chaulet-Achour ends with the observation that ‘the deep crisis that Algeria is experiencing explains the turn to creative writing by many social actors’ — they sought, she says, to resist the pressure to be silent.[26] Many journalists, writers and intellectuals found refuge in France after the outbreak of violence in 1992-93. *Algérie Littérature/Action* — with its mixture of new writing, visual arts and essays — was established by two Algerian ex-patriots, Marie Virolle and Aïssa Khelladi, in May 1996 in Paris, and was supported by writers and academics who had left Algeria during the ‘civil war’. In his study of the journal, Tristan Leperlier notes that those involved sought to reaffirm culture in a time of violence, and that its contributors, editors and supporters viewed culture as a form of political action, (reflected in the review’s title).[27] Chaulet-Achour, herself a member of the journal’s editorial board, makes a brief, enthusiastic reference to the publication of Acherchour’s *L’Œil de l’égaré* alongside *La Cantate pour le pays des îles* (1997) by the established poet Jamel-Eddine Bencheikh. She writes that *L’Œil de l’égaré* ‘can be read as an individual quest by one distraught by love and identity, as well as a reflexion on wandering’.[28]

But any thematic summary of *L’Œil de l’égaré* is at the expense of its active incoherence or opacity. *L’Œil de l’égaré* begins and ends self-reflexively, the lyrical subject explicitly announcing the poetic intentions of the text as poetry and as a love poem in which the written poem is subordinated to the idea of the Poem, a doubling (poem/Poem) that is a recurring feature throughout Acherchour’s poetry:

Contente-toi de ceci dit *tel*
il m’est moins agréable de t’écrire

un poème d'amour que de te revoir

pour l'amour du Poème (p. 5)

[Be satisfied with this, *he* says[29]

It would be less pleasant for me to write you

a love poem than to see you again

for the love of the Poem]

There is here reference to the loved one, the love poem, and the love of the Poem. The creative act draws all three together but not in a way that conjoins them (within allegory or narrative). Between the writing of a love poem and the gesture to see the lover for the love of the Poem there is a gap that is not that of allegory. This is not a poem that allows for a simple mapping from poem to lover, nor is the relation of poem and Poem an uncomplicated doubling as we are invited, possibly, to consider the distinction between the poem as act and the Poem as transcendental signifier. The next fragment contains the line 'Quelque chose m'observe dans ce Poème / Course furibonde de rosées médiévales / couchée une nuit sur tes vingt ans / La patience jusqu'à l'aurore / console tous les poèmes' (p. 5) [Something is watching me from within this Poem / furious race of medieval dew / lain upon your twenty years / patience until dawn / consoles every poem]. The effect of the sudden shift from the first line to the second that brings us back, if through the non-sequitur of the medieval dew, to the loved one should not, however, allow us to forget the observing eye from within the Poem. The lyrical subject invites us to imagine the poet as reader and as lover, as lover and as lover of the Poem that observes. The seeing eye is seen but by whose eye or which kind of eye? What do we see when we look into *L'Œil de l'égaré*? The image of the mirror appears towards the beginning and the end of the poem:

'Je dirai

que je me suis éloigné avec un pauvre miroir…

[…] je m'éloigne pour de vrai

avec le miroir des pauvres' (p. 6)

[I will say

that I wandered away with a poor mirror…

[…] I really am wandering

with the mirror of the poor'

The final page reads:

Raconte-moi ô princesse tes empires défendus

[…] Ici le pauvre miroir enrichit ta beauté

Ici je blasphème tout avec tes prières endormies (p. 63)

[Tell me, oh princess, of your forbidden empires

[…] Here the poor mirror embellishes your beauty

Here I blaspheme everything with your sleeping prayers]

What might a 'mirror of the poor' mean and why does it appear at the beginning and at the end of *L'Œil de l'égaré*?[30] In Acherchour's later volume of poetry, *Le Chemin des choses nocturnes* (2003), there is a reprise of the image: 'Pour moi, tu sors fatigué d'un miroir/ Noir dans mes yeux pleins d'endroits' [For me, you come out tired from a mirror/ Black within my eyes full of places].[31] 'Le miroir noir t'a toujours dit:/ Je suis le pire endroit qu'il y ait/ Pour changer le monde ; suis-moi/ Et ne me prends plus pour un autre (p. 28) [The black mirror has always told you:/ I am the worst place there is/ in order to change the world; follow me/

And mistake me no longer for an other]. So, the lyrical subject wanders with the poor mirror — the mirror can variously embellish, speak, be an inadequate site of transformation. This article will focus primarily on the first collection so as to explore the work's interpretative uncertainties, arguing that the mirror does not reflect but troubles — and possibly doubles — the image of the lyrical subject such that the reader is faced with interpretative possibilities but also failure.

The eye of the poem's title, the eye of the lost wanderer, is from the epigraph to the volume taken from a collection of love poems by the Andalusian Sufi mystic Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240), titled *Le Chant de l'ardent désir* [The Song of Ardent Desire]]. It reads "'Where are the loved ones? Where are their camels gone?' (They answer), 'Behold them traversing the vapour in the desert. Thou seest them in the mirage like gardens: the vapour makes large in the eyes the figure (of one who walks in it).'"[32] The final sentence in French reads 'Tels des jardins dans le mirage, tu les vois, l'œil de l'égaré amplifiant le mirage'[33] suggesting that Acherchour's reference is to the French translation of the Arabic rather than the Arabic original and the likely source is Sami-Ali's translation. In his Introduction to the translation, Sami-Ali interprets the poem as providing a notable example of those kinds of space created within Ibn 'Arabī's poetry that allow for 'singularly complex forms of reciprocal inclusion' with its striking play of mirrors and doublings that bring each element into the other within a structure that is circular.[34] The lover herself, comes the response, sees her image in flowers and garden for they exist in the mirror of the man she beholds in that same garden scene.[35] Sidi-Ali lightens the hermeneutic task with the reminder that the Arabic word in '*insane*' can mean 'man' in the sense of a human being, the pupil of an eye and a visual image. She is present in the eye she beholds which itself is reflected throughout the garden.[36] Sidi-Ali's interpretation is consistent with scholarship on Ibn 'Arabī's use of the image of the mirror to present a world in which every object is a reflection of God.[37] And

while Acherchour's *L'Œil de l'égaré* draws upon the wandering subject of desire (God or God through the loved one) that drives Ibn 'Arabī's *The Interpreter of Desires*, his work does not have a single point of gravitational pull and the image of the mirror is not one that offers a synecdoche for a greater totality.

If we move away from classical Arabic Sufi poetry and link the mirror to the oral culture of Acherchour's ~~Kabyle region~~ native Kabylia, then the mirror can be read as reflecting the state of being and the identity of the individual. In traditional Kabyle poetry, the mirror is often the subject of the lyrical subject~~s~~'s apostrophe and is called upon to reveal the state of the enunciator.[38] It appears, for example, in a range of songs by one of the great Kabyle singers Lounis Aït Menguellet (b. 1950) where the mirror authenticates identity: 'You, walker in the night / What do you fear in the light of day? […] / Look in the mirror [and] you will see / Appear before you the one who you flee / It is yourself / That you fear to meet'.[39] Here too the mirror reflects a truth back to the eye of the viewer. Again, Acherchour's mirror refuses a simple reflection (of object, or of truth); instead his poetry, to borrow from Badiou, articulates 'a kind of migration among disparate phenomena'.[40]

At the outset of *L'Œil de l'égaré* the lyrical subject announces 'I wandered away with a poor mirror' yet if Acherchour's poem is to reflect an object — 'Algeria', 'lover'[41] —then it is largely dissolved by the migration of words from one image to another, partly hidden within the folds of the Poem. Within the poem are a series of elsewheres, other than Algeria, which are integrated into the lyrical subject's *errance*, a wayward drift though poetic worlds that are licenced by the imagination and that parallel the world of experience or of other texts. For example 'et notre bateau trace/ la mauvaise ligne du parallèle voyage' (p. 39) could be read as a reference to Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre* and that poet's coming to poetry. Unlike the faithful reflection of the referent in the Standhalien mirror, as it appears in the epigraph, the voyage in parallel appears to re-mark poetry and poetic possibility:

chausser le feu et le fer

marcher droit perdre l'œil droit

longer Galta au Mexique

voir Eros coincé entre les seins d'Isis

revenir comme chameau sur laine

hors désert hors errance

hors soif hors chien hors bleu (p. 15)

[Put fire and iron upon your feet

walk straight lose the right eye

walk along Galta in Mexico

see Eros caught between Isis's breasts

come back like a camel upon wool

beyond desert beyond wanderings

beyond thirst beyond dog beyond blue]

Hallward writes that, for Badiou, '~~A~~[a]rtistic events take place on the border of what is formless'.[42] Acherchour's poetic world explores that borderline which appears to conjoin and separate what has been disjoined from the certainties of geography and the conventions of the familiar. Galta — also known as the Temple of Monkeys — is taken from Jaipur in India and placed in Mexico, Eros and Isis are brought together, the Greek god of sexual desire and sensuality is combined with the Egyptian mythological figure associated with mourning, motherhood, and protection. This Glissantian *relation* sets up a criss-crossing across the geographies and cultures of four continents or rather a collage of abrupt juxtapositions where

unexpected couplings startle. The exemplary figure here is that of the ‘serpent à plumes’ [*trans.*] (p. 35), the Mesoamerican deity — named as Quetzalcoatl by the Aztecs — whose feathers represented flight and whose body referenced the earth over which it would slide. This ‘impossible mariage’ (p. 35) [impossible marriage], this duality, is interwoven into the lyrical subject’s efforts to inscribe the lover and the sign at the same time:

‘ô clarté du signe
on est quel jour? dit *tel* ô sommeil de l’impossible

vingt ans hier seulement plume sans vertèbres
métempsycose du serpent à plumes
plume dans la panique
gardait le silence
gardait l’originale morsure

[…]

L’Age de la fleur : goûter sa véritable fleur
En déchiffrant clairement
les rêves du Signe (p. 35)

[o clarity of the sign
what day is it? *he* says o sleep of the impossible
twenty years old only yesterday a spineless feather
metempsychosis of the feathered serpent
a feather in panic
remained silent
retained the original bite

[…]

the Age of the flower: taste her true flower
by clearly deciphering
the dreams of the Sign]

This extract recalls the poem/Poem of the opening page as it moves from the clarity of the sign to the dreams of the Sign. This movement from sign to Sign — from clarity to the overdetermined possibility of a dream-world — takes a detour through a passage that evokes the subject of desire and a series of juxtaposed images that could be linked to the transmigration of meaning across them, in the way that metempsychosis is linked to the feathered serpent. And yet the images change too quickly for meaning to congeal and are almost too overdetermined for the reader to press into a determining network of interpretation — 'beyond dog, beyond blue'. Or almost. Algiers is named five times on a single page:

partir et Alger ne sait plus repartir
Alger est faite à l'image
de ses corbeaux sur les places *rouges*

se réveiller la bouche bandée
ainsi est né le rêve d'Alger

une larme me regarde à l'envers
tombe tel un martyr (p. 49)

[leave and Algiers no longer knows how to go back

Algiers is made in the image

of its crows upon the *red* squares

wake up with a gagged ~~month~~ mouth

in this way is the dream of Algiers born

a tear looks at me upside down

falls like a martyr]

Where an Algiers made in the image of crows upon red squares defamiliarizes the city, the references to the 'gagged mouth', the 'tear' and the 'martyr' could be read as signifiers of Algiers's present and past. But detail here is sparse and the observing tear brings us back to the eye that observes the lyrical subject from a place (a poem, a tear) that unsettles the reader's viewpoint. Unsettles the capacity to theorise the poem in that sense of *theoria*, from the Greek θεωρέω ('theōréō,' I look at, view, or examine). The eye of the wanderer is located within a shifting ground and we cannot see what it sees, how the places seen are filtered through the places read or how it is seen by the gaze it encounters. We are reduced to a few phrases and near silence. A masquerade ball in Spanish Grenada falls silent:

Averroès *se tait* aussi

dans un conte borgésien

ce conte qu'on habite

parce qu'il ne nous quitte plus jamais (p. 60)

[Averroes also *becomes silent*

in a story by Borges

that story which we inhabit

because it has never left us]

This reference to Jorge Luis Borges's story 'Averroës' Search' could be read as an explicit literary allusion that partakes in the young poet's process of individuation, but it could also be read as a hermeneutic clue to the figure of the mirror.[43] Central to Borges's story is Ibn Rushd or Abū l-Walīd Muḥammad Ibn ʾAḥmad Ibn Rušd, (1126-1198), the Muslim Andalusian scholar whose name was Latinized as Averroës. Averroës is in the process of translating Aristotle's *Poetics* but is unable to find the meaning for 'tragedy' and 'comedy' as his Islamic culture does not have a tradition or practice of theatre. On two occasions in the story, Averroës is presented with examples of acting but fails to recognise them. In the end, 'something had revealed to him' the meanings of the two words and so he translates 'tragedy' as 'panegyrics' and 'comedy' as 'satires and anathemas' (*AS* 241). The story continues: 'He felt sleep coming upon him, he felt a chill. His turban unwound, he looked at himself in a metal mirror. I do not know what his eyes beheld, for no historian has described the forms of his face. I know that he suddenly disappeared' (*AS* 241). The narrator intervenes in the following paragraph and tells us 'In the preceding talk, I have tried to narrate the process of failure, the process of defeat. […] I recalled Averroës, who bounded within the circle of Islam, could never know the meaning of the words *tragedy* and *comedy*. I told his story' (*AS* 241). But then the narrator reflects on his own failure, that Averroës's attempt to imagine a play 'was no more absurd than I, trying to imagine Averroës yet with no more material than a few snatches from Renan, Lane, and Asín Palacios.' (*AS* 241). The narrator fails to describe what Averroës sees in the mirror because historians have not described him. This doubling of failure is a doubling of the narrator twice over: 'I felt, on the last page, that my story was a symbol of the man I had been as I was writing it' (*AS* 241). There's a vertiginous pursuit of

the earlier narrator by the narrator that continues the chase such that we are left with a mise-en-abyme as well as the disappearance of Averroës. For Peter Hulme the face in the mirror is that of the reader: 'That determinedly Islamic mirror which refuses to reflect the face of Averroës, also refuses to let us glimpse Borges there as a comforting and recognizable validator of interpretation: there is no third voice to stabilize the dialogic confrontation.'[44] Setting aside the 'determinedly Islamic mirror' and what that might mean, we can join with Hulme's notion that the reader becomes a protagonist within the story that reads them and transforms them into a fiction. For Hulme the reader can move outside of the labyrinth of the text upon recognising themselves in the mirror but that, as with Averroës, leads to annihilation. However, Acherchour's lyrical subject remains within the text, remains the reader captured by the compelling intricacy of Borges's story and is alive to possible selves within mirrors, separated yet linked to Acherchour, this leads to the figure of the double, highlighted in the long poem *Sosies tragiques* (1999)[45] and pursued throughout *Chemin des ~~chose~~ choses nocturnes* where the lyrical subject confronts its uncertain other.

Yet, whether intentional or not, the story of Averroës's failure, of Borges's failure, is also our failure of interpretation, or at least the limits of what I can say. How can we understand the tragedy of the black decade? Where Borges has the historian Ernest Renan as a guide, we have our contemporary historians, and where Borges's narrator says that 'no historian has described the forms of his [Averroës's] face' so it is that we cannot fully possess the detail of the Algerian tragedy, the 'black decade', because of its opacities. Of that decade we know much due to historians, but its lived tragedy can only be echoed, half traced through disjointed lines at the edge of what was almost formless, because incomprehensible. The final four lines of *L'Œil de l'égaré* read:

Bref/ en dépit de la tragédie organisée / mon poème organisera une fête:/ il envoie les cartes d'invitation' (p. 63)[46] [In short / in spite of the organised tragedy / my poem will organise a party: it is sending invitation cards].

No final period, surprisingly prosaic, these lines justify a reading of the poem that gestures to the 'black decade'. All the more so as that same final page evokes an image of Algiers that awakens each morning 'entre bouche-à-bouche et bouches de fusil' [between mouth-to-mouth and the muzzle of a gun] between the kiss of life and the threat of death, again that between that joins and separates two possibilities. And, again, there is a doubling between the organised tragedy and what the poem will organise: a dark carnival that would counter planned acts of terror. To fail to fully understand is to acknowledge that Acherchour's poetry, Acherchour's lyrical subject, echoes the incomprehension of a historical tragedy and of love and wraps them, and doubles itself, within opacity, occasional clarity and the possibilities of poetic language. To look for semantic clarity is, I think, to refuse the 'carte d'invitation'.

Alain Badiou sets up an opposition between poetry and '*dianoia,* the discursive thinking that connects and argues'.[47] If we stay with Badiou, and his claim that the 'thought of the poem is not a mimesis' then we need to ask what is it that Acherchour's poetry does?[48] In the same extract on style as a stammering that Acherchour cites, Deleuze says that style is a 'no style', a lack of a 'reflective organization'.[49] Acherchour's poetry affirms itself through nocturnal and oneiric pathways that bring us to halting points that we could name as Ibn 'Arabi, Borges, Pre-Columbian Mayan cultures and more, and call us to moments of interrogation that are distinct from discursive thinking, that dissolve all certainty beyond the assertion of the poetic language before us and its invitation. Argued here is that the poetry of *L'Œil de l'égaré* serves to unthink Algeria, disjoin its narrative filaments, dislocate the architecture of allegory in a way that speaks to Algeria's 'black decade' but refuses to reflect

it, to offer a coherent image, a clear reflection. Instead, we are invited into the poem to encounter unsettling parallel worlds that do not satisfy the search for narrative meaning.

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[1] Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, Trans. by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 233.

[2] Stendhal, *Scarlet and Black. A Chronicle of the Nineteenth Century*, translated and with an introduction by Margaret R. B. Shaw, (London: The Folio Society, 1965) p. 340

[3] References in this article are to El-Mahdi Acherchour, *L'Œil de l'égaré* (Algiers: Marsa, 2002). This second edition includes reproductions of artworks by poet and painter Hamid Tibouchi (b. 1951). Born on May 27, 1973 in the town of Sidi Aïch, in the Wilaya (province) of Béjaïa in Kabyle, El-Mahdi Acherchour, grew up in Algeria before moving to Amsterdam in 2005 where he took up a residency in Anne Frank's former home as part of the Stichting Amsterdam Vluchtstad (Foundation for Cities of Refuge) scheme. See https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/anne-frank-home-offers-writers-refuge-323187.html (Consulted November 14 2017).

[4] Acherchour's work has received little scholarly attention. Recent work includes Ammar Benkhodja, 'L'errance à l'œuvre dans la prose et la poésie d'El-Mahdi Acherchour: regards littéraires et anthropologiques' (PhD thesis, Université de Lorraine, 2016); Dalil Slahdji, '*Lui, Le Livre* d'El-Mahdi Acherchour ou la déconstruction du champ romanesque', *Synergies Algérie* 13 (2011), 57-64. Drawing from semantic isotopy, Benkhodja's reading identifies the key motifs of Acherchour's poetry in his analysis of Acherchour's poetry (pp. 226-299). An extract from Acherchour's prose appears in a special edition of the journal *Celaan*, titled 'Nouvelle poésie algérienne', in 2007. I am very grateful to Prof. Hedi Jaouad for providing me with a copy and to François Bonneville for his help and pitch-perfect translation of Acherchour's extract.

[5] Joseph Ford, 'Rethinking *urgence*: Algerian francophone literature after the "décennie noire"', *Francosphères* 5.1 (2016), 45-65.

[6] Yasser Elhariry, *Pacifist Invasions: Arabic, Translation and the Postfrancophone Lyric* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), p. 30.

[7] Pierre Joris, *Justifying the Margins*, (Cambridge: Salt, 2009), p. 17. Joris's chapter on Maghrebian poetry is titled 'On the Nomadic Circulation of Contemporary Poetics', pp. 7-23.

[8] See Abdelkébir Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983) and *La Langue de l'autre* (New York: Mains secrètes, 1999).

[9] Documentary, 'Vivre et écrire en Algérie', ARTE France, 2003. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Owvdn6n8mas&t=1902s (Consulted November 23 2018).

[10] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, Trans by. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), p. 4. Pierre Joris, amongst others, has noted the pertinence of the notion of 'minor literature' advanced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, to Maghrebian literatures in French. Joris, *ibid* p. 13.

[11] Elhariry, *Pacifist Invasions*, p. 31.

[12] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 32.

[13] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, [1983] 1991): pp. 24-5.

[14] Duncan S. A. Bell, 'Mythscapes: memory, mythology, and national identity', *British Journal of Sociology* 54: 1 (2003): 63–81, p. 69.

[15] Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88, p. 69.

[16] Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', p. 68.

[17] Mohamed Sari, 'Présentation générale', *Dix escales dans la littérature algérienne moderne* (Algiers, 2012). Free copies of this booklet were distributed to the public in the vicinity of Riadh El Feth, where the festival was held.

[18] Jean Déjeux, *La Littérature maghrébine d'expression française* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992), p.33. Jean Sénac's poetry from the mid 1960s should also be referenced. His poetry radically stages the body and, writes Blandine Valfort, 'displays a forgotten poetic and political commitment, a struggle for a multicultural Algeria and an avant-garde approach in its demands for queer status that have no real successors'. See Valfort, 'Individual and Collective Identity in Algerian Francophone Literature: Jean Sénac's "Poetry on All Fronts", in Rabah Aissaoui and Claire Eldridge (eds.), *Algeria Revisited. History, Culture and Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), pp. 99-117 (p. 113).

[19] Joris, *Justifying the Margins*, p. 12. The citation is from Joris's chapter on Maghrebian poetry 'On the Nomadic Circulation of Contemporary Poetics', pp. 7-23.

[20] See Jane Hiddleston, *Writing after **P**ostcolonialism: Francophone North African Literature in Transition* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017) for an insightful reading of national allegory in the work of Tahar Djaout and Salim Bachi that conveys the subtlety of allegory, pp. 119-41.

[21] The reference to the centre not holding is an allusion to William Butler Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming'. Written in the wake of the Irish civil war (1921–2), which followed the War of Independence against Great Britain (1919–21), the poem includes the lines 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; /Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, /The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere /The ceremony of innocence is drowned; /The best lack all conviction, while the worst /Are full of passionate intensity'.

[22] See James McDougall, *A History of Algeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 290. See also James D. Le Sueur. *Algeria since 1989. Between Terror and Democracy* (New York and London: Zed Books, 2010).

[23] Charles Bonn and Farida Boualit (eds), *Paysages littéraires algériens des années 90: Témoigner d'une tragédie?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), p. 11.

[24] Bonn and Boualit (eds), *Paysages littéraires algériens des années 90: Témoigner d'une tragédie?*, p. 15-17.

[25] Soleïman Adel Guémar, *State of emergency / État d'urgence*, Trans. by Tom Cheesman and John Goodby introduced by Lisa Appignanesi. (Todmorden: Arc Publications, 2007).

[26] Christiane Chaulet-Achour, 'Une revue inédite: Algérie Littérature/Action' in Charles Bonn and Farida Boualit (eds), *Paysages littéraires algériens des années 90: Témoigner d'une tragédie?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), pp. 129-39, (p. 134)

[27] Tristan Leperlier, '*Algérie Littérature Action:* une revue autonome dans la guerre civile?', *COnTEXTES 16 (2015)* [section 15, online version], (Available at: http://journals.openedition.org/contextes/6121. Consulted November 17 2018).

[28] A second publication of Acherchour's *L'Œil de l'égaré* appeared in 2002 and was published by Marsa which, at that point, had established itself in Algiers.

[29] Reading the poem aloud brings out the essential ambiguity of the opening line as 'dit *tel*', an unexpected combination of verb and indefinite pronoun, is likely to be heard as 'dit-elle' [she says].

[30] The image of the mirror of the poor can be contrasted with the genre of the 'mirror for princes' that goes back to both medieval Europe and the Arab world, and which offered advice on good governance to leaders. Jocelyne Dakhlia argues that the *Mustatraf* of al Ibshîhi (1388-1446) was a work that remained popular in the Maghreb until the mid-twentieth century. See Dakhlia Jocelyne, 'Les Miroirs des princes islamiques : une modernité

sourde ?'. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 57. 5 (2002): 1191-206, p. 1201. Available at https://www.persee.fr/doc/ahess_0395-2649_2002_num_57_5_280102 (Consulted October 20 2018).

[31] El-Mahdi Acherchour, *Chemin des choses nocturnes* (Algiers: Barzakh, 2003), p. 15.

[32] From *The Tarjumán Al-Ashwáq*. A collection of mystical odes by Muhyi'ddín ibn Al-'Arabí. Edited from three manuscripts, with a literal version of the text and an abridged translation of the author's commentary thereon, by Reynold A. Nicholson. Arab. & Eng. (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), p. 82. Commonly translated as *The Interpreter of Desires*.

[33] Ibn 'Arabi, *Le Chant de l'ardent désir*, poems selected, translated, introduced by Sami-Ali (Arles: Actes Sud, 1989), p. 55

[34] Sami-Ali, 'Introduction', in Ibn 'Arabi, *Le Chant de l'ardent désir*, p. 22.

[35] The lover is believed to be the daughter of a Sufi master. Her name was Nizame, also called 'L'Œil du soleil' [Eye of the sun], see Sami-Ali, 'Introduction', in Ibn 'Arabi, *Le Chant de l'ardent désir*, p. 11.

[36] Sami-Ali, 'Introduction', in Ibn 'Arabi, *Le Chant de l'ardent désir*, pp. 22-3.

[37] See, for example, Michael Sells, 'Ibn 'Arabi's Polished Mirror: Perspective Shift and Meaning Event', *Studia Islamica* 67 (1988), 121-149.

[38] I am grateful to Mohand Akli Salhi (Department of Amazigh Language and Culture, Mouloud Mammeri University, Tizi-Ouzou, Algeria) for providing me with this information as well as the suggestion to read the lyrics of Lounis Aït Menguellet.

[39] 'Lxûf' [Fear]', cited in Abdelkrim Aït Mokhtar, 'La poésie chantée de Lounis Aït Menguellet ou le miroir éducateur d'une société désarçonnée', *Horizons Maghrébins* 47 (2002), 50-7, p. 55. Available at https://www.persee.fr/doc/horma_0984-2616_2002_num_47_1_2058 (Consulted October 18 2018).

[40] Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, p. 237. This is from Badiou's chapter 'Language, Thought, Poetry' where Badiou's recurring points of reference are to modern French poetry, in particular the works of Mallarmé and Rimbaud.

[41] Jean Amrouche's collection of traditional Kabyle songs includes a section on 'Chants à Danser' [Dance Songs] in which we read 'Qui veut être envié de tous./ Qu'il prenne fille à miroir d'argent./Qui recherche la gloire du monde,/Prenne une fille à miroir d'argent' [He who wishes to be envied/Let him take a girl of a silver mirror/ He who wishes the glory of the world/ take a silver-mirrored girl]. In Amrouche *Chants berbères de la Kabylie* (Paris: Éditions Charlot [1939] 1947), p. 145. Acherchour's 'miroir noir' could be read as counterpoint.

[42] Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 195.

[43] Jorge Luis Borges, 'Averroës' Search' in *Collected Fictions* Trans. by Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998), pp. 235-41. Hereafter *AS* in the text.

[44] Peter Hulme, 'The Face in the Mirror: Borges's "La Busca de Averroes"', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 15. 3 (1979): 292-97.

[45] El-Mahdi Acherchour 'Sosies tragiques', *Algérie Littérature/Action* 33 (1999). Online. Available at http://www.revues-plurielles.org/_uploads/pdf/4_33_1.pdf (Consulted December 27 2018).

[46] References to the conflict of the 'black decade' as a 'tragedy' appear as early as 1996. See Lahouari Addi, a political scientist who left Algeria in 1994 to teach at the University of Lyons 2, and his article 'Réflexion politique sur la tragédie algérienne' *Confluences [en] Méditerranée* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), 43-9.

[47] Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, Trans. by Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano, (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 240.

[48] Alain Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, p. 239.

[49] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, p. 4.