

“Un nouvel internationalisme littéraire”? Dreams and Delusions of “World Literature” in Khatibi, Djaout, and Adimi

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Although much of Abdelkébir Khatibi’s work was published before the boom in theories of world literature that has occurred over the last twenty years, a notion of worldliness can nevertheless be traced throughout his writing. Khatibi is committed to worldliness in the sense that Edward Said gives to it, that is, to the idea that texts are always rooted in and imbued with their particular locality. Said insists that even the most abstract and abstruse works are “always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly” (35), and Khatibi’s works testify to a comparable worldly engagement with place through the attachment to his homeland and ongoing reflection on the Maghreb and its culture. At the same time, Khatibi’s Maghreb is in no way circumscribed or inward-looking; on the contrary it is dynamic, multiple, transnational, and mobile. *Maghreb pluriel* [*Plural Maghreb*] (1983), Khatibi’s seminal study of the eclecticism and open-endedness of the Maghreb in the wake of decolonization, can be read as an affirmation of worldliness in its evocation of a specific culture and history turned outwards to embrace its contact and evolution in dialogue with the rest of the world. The *pensée-autre* [other-thought] that is to emerge in the aftermath of the decolonization of the Maghreb is a transcultural and multilingual mode of thinking that rejects all forms of atavism, and is imagined as “une mondialisation traduisante des codes, des systèmes et des constellations de signes qui circulent dans le monde et au-dessus de lui (dans un sens théologique)” [a globalizing

translation of the codes, systems and constellations of signs that circulate in the world and above (in a nontheological sense)] (Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* 60; *Plural Maghreb* 35]. As Khatibi's thought develops, this embrace of multilingualism, travel, cross-cultural exchange, and constant mobility becomes integral to his analyses of Maghrebian and Arab cultures as well as to his movements beyond them. Cosmopolitanism and transnationalism are to be celebrated in Khatibi's ongoing critique of nationalism and ethnocentrism.

Yet little has been said about Khatibi's contribution to the concept of "world literature," despite this early reflection on the transnational worldliness of Maghrebian culture. And worldliness is also at the center of Khatibi's literary thinking, particularly in *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française* [Figures of the Stranger in French Literature] (1987), where travel, movement, and otherness are privileged in readings of literary works that are shaped by their contacts with places and cultures beyond those of their authors' origins. Khatibi's readings in this work suggest a different form of world literature from that which dominates many critical debates and that serves to define the global literary marketplace. Indeed, in the wake of the revival of the notion of world literature by critics such as David Damrosch, who defines the term as a "mode of circulation and reading" (5) of works that travel beyond the context of their production, it has become apparent that the universalizing and anthologizing sweep of Damrosch's work foregrounds not so much the worldliness of the text in the sense of either its aesthetics or its ethical outlook but the demands of the global market. Those works that are understood to be examples of world literature are those that are widely translated or disseminated, and that as a result are seen to attain a universal significance, even though that significance will be recognized and granted according to certain dominant cultural norms. Graham Huggan has aptly pointed out in this regard that "World Literature institutionally supports what it claims ideologically to oppose or, to put it still more bluntly [...] it represents the cultural *realpolitik* of globalization

masquerading either as a ‘worldly’ cosmopolitanism of reading (Damrosch) or a transnational study of form (Moretti)” (491). Worldliness is in both cases here an attribute that is identified by critics and conferred on works from the outside, as a result of certain critical assumptions that are far from universal.¹

Yet Khatibi theorizes literary worldliness not as the result of a text’s circulation but as a mode of thought. Literature can be both the record and the driver of a restless and dynamic reaching out to other languages and cultures. Cultural and linguistic porosity are for Khatibi not glibly adopted as mere signifiers of ethnic difference to please the market for exoticism. Rather they are the very fabric of a literature committed to challenging and crossing cultural borders. He conceives his own work as a writer and intellectual as that of an *étranger professionnel* [professional stranger], theorized most pertinently in the final, celebratory section on “Nationalisme et internationalisme littéraires” [Literary Nationalism and Internationalism] in *Figures de l’étranger dans la littérature française*, published in 1987, where he asserts, “je suis moi-même, presque, un *étranger professionnel*, dans la mesure où l’écriture ne me préoccupe maintenant que comme un *exercice d’altérité cosmopolite*, capable de parcourir des différences” [I am myself, almost, a *professional stranger*, in the sense that I am preoccupied by writing now only as an *exercise in cosmopolitan alterity*, able to travel across differences] (211).² Here, then, the *étranger professionnel* is the writer and reader who imagines literature as a space for encounter, a spontaneous and unpredictable journey into the world rather than a confirmation of an existing worldview. Jean Genet is held up as an apt example of a writer continually in search of other cultures, other countries, and other languages, as his life is described by Khatibi as one of “apprentissage, exercice d’altérité et d’altération dans une réalité tout à fait traitable et intraitable” [learning, of an exercise in alterity and in the alteration of a reality that both can and cannot be written about] (136). In Réda Bensmaïa’s reading, this mode of existence also affirms an ethics of openness:

To leave, go out, to let oneself be seduced. To become several people, to become someone else (with others), to become, to become, to face the outside, fork off elsewhere, make a rhizome with others, discover oneself to be a foreigner, to create a new identity for oneself. These are some of the odd, foreign elements, some of the varieties of alterity and exposure, that the professional traveler encounters.

(133)

The *étranger professionnel* is a continual traveler, an exemplar of “world literature” because he or she is ethically committed to an ongoing resistance to all forms of cultural determinism. This mode of existence suggests at the same time not just the embrace of world literature in the sense of a globalized canon, but a particular form of reading and writing that continually at once seeks, reveals, and engenders encounters with other cultures. It perhaps conjures an aesthetics reminiscent of Jahan Ramazani’s *Transnational Poetics* (2009), where poetry is seen to cross borders through its multiple cultural idioms and references; but it also represents both an ethical stance and a vision of how interaction takes place through writing and reading practices and can continually transform the subject.

In “Un étranger professionnel,” published in *Études françaises* in 1997, Khatibi goes on to suggest that his writing is itself a practice of translation. His own writing in French has already in its conception gone through a process of translation, not only from Arabic but also from the other languages with which he has come into contact such as Berber and also Swedish, and including imagery derived from Arabic, European and other civilizations. This is what gives it a singular impenetrability that must on some level be preserved in order for it to continue to resist all forms of cultural hegemony and appropriation. This is explored particularly strikingly in *Amour bilingue* [*Love In Two Languages*] (1983), where the *bi-langue* [bi-language] is conceptualized as a space not of the meeting of two monolingualisms, but for ongoing linguistic encounters that produce and reinvent meaning through their

juxtaposition and intermingling, and where porosity is performed through the pursuit of echoes and connotations among languages. The writing of the *étranger professionnel* is not necessarily composed of the juxtaposition of two otherwise distinct linguistic systems, and it is not simply based on the insertion of words from one language into a text in another language, in an example of literary code-switching. Rather, it is in his syntax, Khatibi argues, that he incorporates the rhythms of other languages and texts, rhythms that enter into writing according to the musical processes of “transcription” and “transposition,” as argued by Alison Rice (280–81). Khatibi describes this practice in the following terms:

Écrire le français, le traduire en l'écrivant, à l'intérieur de cette division active où se joue l'écriture. Je la sens comme une traduction en simultané, par une association rapide de signes et d'images. Je les capte en évitant les néologismes, les scories, les télescopages des mots. Par exemple, des mots ou expressions arabes. Parfois je les traduis littéralement des fragments arabes, mais avec inquiétude. Plutôt laisser la langue maternelle arriver, transformée. C'est au gré des improvisations, du rythme sensitif et émotif que je m'applique à réduire les premières associations et leur anamorphose. Le tissage par la syntaxe. C'est la syntaxe qui est ma visée, mon point d'attache et mon sillage dans le temps de chaque vocable. La syntaxe: une unification en mouvement de la langue visée. (Khatibi, *La langue de l'autre* 38)

[To write in French, to translate when writing, in that active division in which writing plays out. I feel it as a simultaneous translation, by a rapid association of signs and images. I capture them while avoiding neologisms, the dregs and collisions between words, such as Arabic words or expressions. Sometimes I translate Arabic fragments literally but anxiously. Or rather I let the mother tongue

come to me transformed. It's by means of improvisations, the sensitive or emotive rhythm that I try to reduce the first associations and their anamorphosis. Weaving by means of syntax. It's the syntax that's my aim, my attachment point, what comes after each term. Syntax: the moving unification of the target language.]

These rhythms may be imperceptible to the reader, but they are at the same time what prevent us from reducing and encapsulating fully the work's complex, polyphonic singularity. In this way, the text retains an ongoing and worldly mobility, an openness to the production of meaning among languages in a process that prevents both writer and reader from adhering to pre-existing cultural frameworks.

The cultural and linguistic plurality that Khatibi celebrates clearly should not be subsumed into the universalizing melting-pot of the world literary marketplace; yet it achieves another form of worldly universality in its commitment to openness: “chaque fois qu’une écriture s’ouvre à sa pluralité, elle contient des possibilités d’universalité.

Universalité: capacité de parcourir les différences, voyage initiatique au tout-autre, à la toute-autre” [“each time a piece of writing opens itself up to plurality, it contains possibilities for universality, the capacity to travel across differences, an initiatory voyage to the wholly other”] (Khatibi, *Figures de l'étranger* 207). This form of universality is a continual address and reaching out to cultural difference and is nothing like the cultural uniformity that risks determining the world literary market. Yet Khatibi's insistence on a worldly literature that continually challenges itself in this way also risks, despite this assertion of a reinvented universality, representing in spite of itself a sort of literary solipsism. Indeed, *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française* focuses on exiles and strangers, unique and marginalized characters who dare to transgress borders, but whose perspectives are also individualistic, despite their commitment to travel and encounter. This association of

worldliness with solipsism can be found across Khatibi's writings on the "étranger professionnel," whose nomadic existence tends to be expressed from the perspective of the individual travelling and discovering the world alone. Khatibi's *nouvel internationalisme littéraire* [new literary internationalism] is suggestive of a form of literary communality, but now this seems to be that of the cosmopolitan intellectual, an educated and privileged figure immersed in a transnational literary community that is also somewhat rarefied.³ Khatibi contributes to conceptions of literary worldliness by foregrounding its ethical significance as well as the aesthetic experiments to which it can give rise in ways that offer a philosophical depth and an aesthetic form to notions of worldliness of a form that is not seen in discourses on world literature. His approach offers a vision of literary potentiality, but perhaps inevitably it is not grounded in the political or economic realities of global cultural practice.

Khatibi's *nouvel internationalisme littéraire* proposes an ethics and aesthetics of worldliness that demands our attention as a visionary corrective to the homogenizing force of the world literature publication market. Khatibi's concept of worldliness is not the result of the text's circulation and translation but is embedded in the very form and ethos of its writing. The world literary text performs an intricate and ambitious cultural and linguistic porosity that testifies to its transcendence of national frameworks. Nevertheless, the borderless literary communality that Khatibi imagines is at the same time extremely fragile. It is a substantial and challenging articulation of world literary ethics and aesthetics, but offers a horizon for thought rather than an inclusive model for cultural practice around the world. In the remainder of this article, I want to offer brief readings of two Algerian novels that also present a substantive vision of literary internationalism that would work to challenge the authoritarianism and cultural stultification of both colonial and nationalist regimes. The literary worldliness of Khatibi's *nouvel internationalisme littéraire* is on some level substantiated as an aspiration for the characters in Tahar Djaout's *Le dernier été de la raison*

[*The Last Summer of Reason*] (1999) and in Kaouther Adimi's *Nos richesses* [*Our riches*] (2017), both of which portray the intellectual liberation brought about by characters participating in a transnational literary communality.

Djaout was an Algerian writer and journalist, born in 1954, who boldly condemned authoritarianism and extremism in post-independence Algeria, and who was assassinated in 1993, purportedly by the Armed Islamic Group, as a result of his dissident writing. Adimi is also an Algerian writer, born in 1986 and currently living in Paris. Both texts present a vision of a form of literary internationalism made up of writers and readers who share a passion for aesthetic innovation and ethical intercultural dialogue. Yet in both cases the vision is crushed, by oppression in Djaout, and by market forces and by apathy in Adimi. Djaout and Adimi testify to the importance and the power of literary worldliness, but they also supplement Khatibi's thought in their depiction of the precarity of Khatibi's ethics and aesthetics of world literarity by portraying the destruction of that vision in societies that either profoundly mistrust or simply ignore literature and the openings it can invite. Their works call for a revived engagement in worldly literature, but at the same time they question the reach of literature and reveal the dangers of allowing it to become disengaged from contemporary social life.

Tahar Djaout's *Le dernier été de la raison* was published posthumously in 1999, at the end of Algeria's decade of violence unleashed by the struggle between Islamist extremists and the authoritarian government of the Front de Libération Nationale. Djaout's work is a powerful testament to his commitment to literary freedom of expression in a highly repressive society. It tells the story of Boualem Yekker, a bookseller living in a society governed by the "Frères Vigilants" [Vigilante Brothers], an extremist regime that has tried to ban literature and sanctions as reading material only "le Livre" [the Book], the sacred text that alone is able to express the Truth. In defiance of this cultural stultification, Boualem

clings on to the literary worlds offered by books even as his bookshop becomes increasingly deserted and threatened by the oppressive regime, until at the end of the narrative the books are burned and the shop is closed down. Yet before this scene of destruction, Boualem repeatedly affirms the creative powers of literature to open its readers up to other worlds, to function as a source of discovery and contact that represents resistance to the Frères Vigilants' closing-down of truth. Transporting Boualem away from the isolation of his own existence, books provide him with a variegated, dynamic, and diverse world of plant and human life that far transcends rigid cultural frontiers. Boualem's literary worlds are dialogic and open-ended, offering contact and discovery in a way that enacts the worldliness of Khatibi's *nouvel internationalisme littéraire*. Reading is itself a form of travel, and constitutes "un univers kaléidoscopique, où foisonnent des arbres qui nourrissent, rafraîchissent et ombragent, des plantes ornementales, des oiseaux en cage et des oiseaux en liberté liés par leur amour du chant, des cafés où l'on discute et rit, des lieux où l'on s'amuse et danse" [a kaleidoscopic universe that abounds with trees which nourish, refresh, and shelter, ornamental plants, caged and free birds brought together by their love of singing, cafes where people chat and laugh, places where people have fun and dance] (Djaout 59). Djaout's natural imagery here both celebrates the biological diversity of the planet and serves as a metaphor for the sorts of cultural and linguistic plurality privileged by Khatibi.

Yet Djaout's novel is dystopian rather than utopian, however, and ultimately the text does not so much celebrate literary worldliness as betray its frailty. As the narrative progresses, Boualem Yekker becomes increasingly isolated, his family desert him in choosing to support the Frères Vigilants, and he has only one friend, Ali Elbouliga, who alone continues to visit him in his bookshop. Boualem gradually withdraws from the world and from human contact, taking refuge in his books, but realizes that they risk imprisoning him if he is unable to bring his reading material into dialogue with others and with everyday

life. His vision of literary worldliness is shared by no one around him and persists as a fantasy that Djaout suggests should be cultivated, expanded and connected with social life, and yet Boualem is unable to achieve this integration of literature and the living world. The burning of the books and the destruction of the bookshop are a testimony to the precarity of the worldliness they offer, and while the text calls its readers to prize literature's ability to open minds and worlds, it warns us that it may struggle to do this in the face of dogmas that risk taking hold. At the same time, however, one of the problems of Djaout's text as a whole is its polarization of Islamism versus literature, the result being that the literary dynamism that Boualem treasures is heightened through its opposition to sacred scripture and ultimately fuels the division between religious and secular modes of reading. The worldliness of literature may be appreciated as an abstract principle, but this principle has no place in Boualem's living world.

While *Le dernier été* sets literary worldliness in opposition to a form of extremism that sanctions only the sacred Truth of "le Livre," Kaouther Adimi's *Nos richesses* contrasts a dream of literary dialogue and sharing with the cultural apathy and indifference of contemporary consumer society. Adimi's literary community in *Nos richesses* is clearly one committed to the worldly ethical and aesthetic principles of Khatibi's *nouvel internationalisme littéraire* but also offers an example of such a community struggling with economic demands and losing its meaning in contemporary Algerian culture. The text evokes Edmond Charlot's bookshop and publishing house Nos Vraies Richesses, named after Jean Giono's *Les vraies richesses* [*Our true riches*], and juxtaposes excerpts from Charlot's fictionalized diary with the narrative of the young protagonist Ryad, Algerian by birth but living in France, who returns to Algiers to clear the bookshop in order to make way for a donut shop. Although Adimi herself is adamant that the text "n'a rien de nostalgique" ['has nothing nostalgic about it'] (Steinmetz 2017), the juxtaposition of Charlot's utopian vision

for his enterprise as a forum for literary connectivity across the Mediterranean with Ryad's disaffection and indifference towards the books suggests that she laments the loss of Charlot's world literary aspiration.

In the early days of setting up *Nos Vraies Richesses*, Charlot's aspiration is clearly expressed as a utopian model of literary internationalism, as if the bookshop could offer a space for transcultural dialogue, a multilingual Mediterranean space linking writers of different origins in providing a forum for debate and creativity: "un lieu de rencontres et de lecture. Un lieu d'amitié en quelque sorte avec, en plus, une notion méditerranéenne: faire venir des écrivains et des lecteurs de tous les pays de la Méditerranée sans distinction de langue ou de religion, des gens d'ici, de cette terre, s'opposer surtout aux algérianistes. Aller au-delà!" [a place for meeting and for reading. A place for friendship, in some way, with a sense of the Mediterranean too: to bring together writers and readers from all the countries of the Mediterranean making no distinction on the basis of language or religion, people from here, this land, and to oppose the Algerianistes. To go beyond!] (Adimi 30). Charlot's dream is a rejection of the "Algerianistes" and their vision for a French Algeria. It is also a call for a more diverse and inclusive community, where literature would generate and fuel friendship, learning, and discovery. While the text details the collapse of Charlot's dream, a reference to Charlot's enterprise as a precursor for world literature figures prominently at its end: "jamais un mot qui avait pu laisser entendre que notre patrie n'était pas seulement l'avenir de l'Algérie et de la France mais celui de la littérature mondiale" [there was never a whisper that would allow us to understand that our native land was not only the future of Algeria and France but that of world literature] (176).

Once again, however, this vision of transnational dialogue through world literature is depicted as fragile. It is as if Khatibi's *nouvel internationalisme littéraire* is here juxtaposed with a modern Algerian culture where literature is no longer invested with significance or

seen as a source of enrichment or contact. Rather, here it is contrasted with a portrait of the disengagement of young people and the reign of consumerism, represented aptly by the donut shop. Charlot's dream of a worldly literature is forgotten in the contemporary landscape of authoritarianism and apathy. Nevertheless, Charlot's project is fragile not only because it belongs to another era disconnected from contemporary youth. It is revealing that this arena for literary dialogue was fraught with difficulties throughout Charlot's lifetime, as well, as the fictionalized diary attests. Charlot struggles to get hold of the paper and ink he needs during the Second World War, and he moves to Paris in 1945. His struggles continue there, however, and the bookshop in the end goes bankrupt. Charlot returns to Algiers to set up another bookshop, Les Rivages [The Shores], but this is then subjected to an attack by the Organisation Armée Secrète in 1961 and everything is destroyed. As in *Le dernier été*, the literary internationalism we also saw modelled in Khatibi stands little chance in a climate of brutal cultural division. *Nos richesses* also notes Charlot's dispute with his colleague Jean Amrouche, as if in a reminder that literary friendships are not always characterized by the spirit of openness, but tensions and rivalries can return. In both Djaout's and Adimi's texts, then, bookshops are depicted as potential spaces for the burgeoning of a worldly literature of the sort that Khatibi too dreamt of in his reference to *un nouvel internationalisme littéraire*. But the aspiration towards a transnational space of literary dialogue is in both cases disappointed, as this literary ethos runs up against societies with other priorities and where various forms of homogenization seem to triumph.

Khatibi, Djaout, and Adimi both express and generate an ethics and aesthetics of worldliness that the "world literature" circulated by the global publishing market does not articulate. Their works portray literary communities that offer a dynamic space and forum for dialogue, one that eschews national and cultural categories and generates dialogue and connectivity. Yet Djaout's and Adimi's narratives indicate that this vision of an international

literary communality is not one in which many people participate, and that its power is limited when confronted with various forms of political and cultural stultification. The dream of literary worldliness in the end appears as the preserve of highly educated but isolated cultural nomads, and though this dream is highly ethical as well as creative, it does not stand a chance in the societies in which the characters live. What we might retain from these works in contemplating the resonance of world literature, however, is both the ethical and aesthetic inventiveness of this literary communality as a horizon for thought, and an awareness of its fragility and an understanding of its uneasy coexistence with other political and cultural forces. Khatibi's *nouvel internationalisme littéraire* must perhaps be preserved as a model for a worldly literary ethics and aesthetics, a forum for continued dialogue and expansion. But Djaout's and Adimi's narratives of dreams and delusions of world literarity remind us that this is a visionary conceptual model that might work as a source of ethical and aesthetic inspiration but that nevertheless sits uneasily with contemporary political and economic realities.

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¹ It has also been noted that world literature is too often associated with writing in English or in European languages with a history of colonial domination. See for example Mufti.

² Translations other than those attributed are my own. Italics here in the original.

³ The phrase "un nouvel internationalisme" comes from Khatibi's opening chapter, "Un étranger dans la littérature française" to *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française*, p. 15.