Lessons of Engagement
By ANDREW DURBIN

Cosmology and ethics in Etel Adnan’s poetry

In 1966, the American writer Stewart Brand petitioned NASA to release a then-rumored image it had photographed of the whole earth. He printed the question “Why haven’t we seen a picture of the whole earth yet?” on a series of buttons and pamphlets and distributed them around the country with the help of Buckminster Fuller. The campaign took off—and, in 1968, it led Stewart to start the Whole Earth Catalog, a countercultural journal that focused on space, ecology, and art and writing related to the environmental movement. NASA released the image and, for the first time, humanity had a full portrait of Spaceship Earth. Brand believed that the photograph would provide a universal image that might unify the world in efforts toward peace and environmental consciousness. (It is often remarked that Earth Day began only a few years after the release of the image.)

The image of the whole earth provided a counterpoint to the mushroom cloud, which had become “a symbol for the collapse of Western civilization,” as Anselm Franke points out in his essay for The Whole Earth, a recent exhibition inspired by Brand. Franke writes,

The blue planet, on the other hand, exhibits a completely different tendency for bringing about the end of history. It appears to transcend all frames, borders, and preconfigured notions of order, dissolving them into oceanic vertigo: the astronaut Russell Schweickart gave the title “No Frames, No Boundaries” to his memories of seeing the earth from space. Here, all antagonisms, borders, and conflicts “down below” fade into the background, and with them history with its contradictions and struggles.

Of course, the image’s appearance failed to bring about the end of history—or an end to conflicts “down below.” Rather, it presaged the globalist movement, which saw, in the smallness of the whole earth, a whole market, interconnected and easily reached. While the photo of the earth energized the nascent green movement, the blue planet—later downsized by Carl Sagan to a “pale blue dot”—remained mired in its countless contradictions and struggles.

As the 1966 campaign for an image of the whole earth began in the United States, the Lebanese poet, painter, journalist, and novelist Etel Adnan published her first book, Moonshots. In his introduction to Adnan’s newest collection, To look at the sea is to become what one is, Ammiel Alcalay writes that the moon was crucial to Adnan’s early work, particularly for its “virginity”—its remove from the human-caused death and disaster that marked the worldwide 1960s. Cold, beautiful, and lifeless, the moon is a specter that preemptively rhymes with those desolate places effaced by war and colonialism so familiar to Adnan. The moon offers an image of a possible earthly future where competitive forces of violence, particularly the U.S. and Soviet Union arms race, obliterate life on the planet. The moon is both an escape from and a realization of war and desolation, which were Adnan’s primary subjects throughout the 1960s and 1970s, from the Lebanese Civil War to Israel’s occupation of Palestine and the war in Vietnam. Paraphrasing the title of Adnan’s collection, “to look at the
whole earth is to become what one is,” means to become big enough to understand one’s smallness, and the precarity of the ecological and political situation that characterizes life on Earth.

Adorno wrote that philosophy lives on because the moment of its realization has passed. The same could be said of poetry. Like philosophy, poetry does not “promise that it [will] be one with reality.” Instead, it is liberated to explore alternatives. This seems to be true for Etel Adnan, at least, whose works have been recently collected in the generous, two-volume set spanning her literary career. Media of any kind “lives on” because that which is more or less generally assumed to be its “task” remains unfinished, compelling it, as Adorno wrote, “to ruthlessly criticize itself.” For Adnan, poetry has been tasked with memory and memorialization, which for her it never seems to get quite right. Someone is always forgotten.

In her later book-length poem, Seasons, Adnan asks what could be called the general question of her poetics: “Is memory’s function to first break down, by its own means, then pick up the pieces and reassemble them, or is it multiplied?” Adnan’s poetry is largely haunted and shaped by what has been forgotten as much as what has been remembered, and as such it is explicitly a poetry of broken and reassembled pieces: places, people, histories. Writing about these pieces has been a particularly generative process for Adnan, one she has centralized in her poetics of vocalization and record keeping. Through memory loss, Adnan “discovered writing without an alphabet,” a writing of traces and of extinction.

Schooled in French and its imperial culture, Adnan was drawn at a young age to Lebanon’s local language and poetry, which she was discouraged from learning. (She said she later learned to write in Arabic through painting.) The troubling discrepancies she found between life and language at school, at home, and in Beirut’s neighborhoods led her to a “nomadic spirit” that first found its poetic analog in a desolate, cultureless place: the cosmos (“where no paradise can last”), particularly the moon, a corresponding but universal image for the displacement—and desolation—she felt as a child growing up in a country where she did not fully belong to a colonial French culture, with its language that neither her neighbors nor her Greek Christian mother and her Syrian Muslim father spoke.

In her early poem “A Funeral March for the First Cosmonaut,” space and the objects in it offered a literal and figurative vacuum in which human culture and all its aggravated conditions of war, famine, and disease could not occur. If the French were everywhere, at least they were not in space. For Adnan, space—and the astronauts and cosmonauts jettisoned into it—offered an open place for dreams in which a new poetics (and politics) could be imagined in relation to the numerous upheavals of the 1960s in the Middle East, Western Europe, and the United States.

the inmates remaining in the dark
and these images are imprisoned on paper
I see them struggle toward freedom, toward meaning

The life and death of Yuri Gagarin—the first cosmonaut, “carried by our dreams”—provided a unique image for the realization of human potential and its fragility: the first person to complete the seemingly impossible mission to the stars, Gagarin returned to Earth only to die in a routine flight training session.
Later in her career, Adnan began to develop a highly symbolic poetics that represented anticolonial struggles in the Middle East with cosmic imagery, especially the sun and moon. In her astonishing book-length poem, *The Arab Apocalypse*, Adnan pits a colonizing, violent sun against the moon and the earth. In the poem, the image of the moon is recuperated as a consoling, benevolent force of memory set in direct opposition to the sun, which not only gives light to violence (and therefore endorses it) but is itself “a pool of blood”:

There have been mountains of corpses and rivers of blood

Bags filled with bones    baskets filled with eyes    bowls filled with lymph

There have been meadows covered with human skin under the Arabian moon

As Caroline Seymour-Jorn writes in her essay “The Arab Apocalypse as a Critique of Colonialism and Imperialism,” the sun—situated in a “militant sky”—represents colonial power, a daytime nightmare the moon later illuminates with mournful, but penetrating silence. In this sense, the moon might be seen as an agent of memory, shining a light on what remains of places after they have been mostly destroyed. The poem ends with a call to take refuge in the night, a shield against the “dark horn” of the sun. At night “we shall find knowledge and peace,” Adnan writes.

In contradistinction to the heavy symbolism of *The Arab Apocalypse*, Adnan’s novel *Sitt Marie-Rose* is an explicit and realistic account of violence among humans, rather than heavenly bodies. It is also her most comprehensive effort to represent a totality of human relations in wartime, to give an image of the whole earth, as it were, in the situation of a young woman caught in the midst of gruesome conflict. The eponymous heroine is a Syrian-born, Christian caregiver kidnapped by Christian partisans during the Lebanese Civil War. Dismayed and shocked by the kidnapping—an escalation of the war condemned by the international community—the partisans attempt to exchange several prisoners for Marie-Rose. When the Christian partisans inform Marie-Rose of the deal, she surprises them by asking them to decline. “I’m not an object,” she tells them. She denies their authority over her life, and left without choice, they take that life from her. “Whether you like it or not, an execution is a celebration,” Adnan writes. “It is the dance of Signs and their stabilization in Death.”

For Adnan, death and extinction provide a particular, if peculiar, clarity: certain signs go and cannot be recovered, creating—as they did with Marie-Rose—a situation of absence through loss and sacrifice that dramatically highlights the larger political and social structures that do not allow for that loss, but that enable it. However terrible its experience may be, for Adnan the troubling lesson of loss—of individuals, places, culture—is that only in losing can we understand the “obscenity” of power and trace the concentric “circles of oppression” that it builds around the individual. Adnan traces these circles, following their circumscription of Marie-Rose (“a blade of grass in a bulldozer’s path”), of the family, and of the region to underscore the larger discourses of control. Her tracing seeks to uncover the interlaced emotional and historical vectors that structure human relations, which in their summary tide only ever seek to “move on….” She writes in a late poem, “Fog”: “The cataclysm [of the Creation] is still in us. We may come back as grass, be eaten. A trail will remain, a path, the next storm.”

Adnan is not cynical in her assessment of history as a series of violent cycles through which innocents suffer. For Adnan, history and its violence necessitate a poetics of the broadest possible perspective in order to understand them, one that operates in multiple modes of representation, from the symbolic to the highly realistic. Perhaps most importantly, the violence of history requires a poetics that resides in the heart. Adnan writes in her late poem “To Be In a Time of War”:

To search one’s memory for the past’s residues. To indulge in insomnia. […] To transform matter into spirit. To cross the threshold. To abolish all signs, then go after them. To decode the future. To rust. To wonder how to digest defeat instead of vomiting it in the middle of the night, and go back to one’s bed and pull up the covers.

As I write this, the Israeli Defense Forces are bombing the Gaza Strip, land it has illegally occupied since 1967, a year after *Moonshots* was released. Around 1,400 Palestinians have been killed in the assault so far but certainly this number will have increased by the time this essay is published. With renewed conflict, the possibility of a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine has once again receded into the past, leaving few options for the future. The situation is terrifying—and finds echoes throughout the work of Adnan, who has traced the evolution of the colonial situation of the countries and peoples at the heart of the Palestinian cause since her earliest works.
I bring up the current Israeli campaign against Gaza up in particular because I struggle, as I watch the events in Gaza Strip unfold and read Etel Adnan simultaneously, to a find way to reconcile the two through some practical application of her poetics. I do not mean a practical way of reading or addressing the situation in Gaza through Adnan. Nor do I mean a way of witnessing a situation I am too powerlessly removed from and complicit in. What I have found in reading Adnan that does apply, in so far as poetry can be applied in any sense of the word, is her idea of love, that poetry and art are the best routes to love—in particular to an empathetic, political love. Love, for Adnan, is our only way to endure upheaval. It is not sentimental love. It is an ethics that seeks to preserve what we have rather than see it destroyed. It is a particular bravery, too. “Love in all its forms is the most important matter that we will ever face, but also the most dangerous, the most unpredictable, the most maddening,” Adnan writes. “But it is also the only salvation I know of.”