

2019

The Shoulders and the Burden by Abdellatif Laâbi

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Recommended Citation

Johnston, Allan and Johnston, Guillemette C. (2019) "*The Shoulders and the Burden* by Abdellatif Laâbi," *Transference*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/transference/vol7/iss1/6>

Allan Johnston and Guillemette Johnston Abdellatif Laâbi
The Shoulders and the Burden *Les épaules et le fardeau*

By itself
the gate gave way
The invitation is polite
and firm
A few short steps
and the world comes again
just as it is
with familiar shipwrecks
As an eyewitness
submerged to the neck
you will have to stretch yourself
even more
Will your heart hold?

Vertigo from standing
holding a vague helm
Frail is the boat
The reefs redoubtable
The prayer words forgotten
The anchor
will not be thrown
from heaven

If only an azure gap
the piercing of a hardened star
speaking

before the obligatory meeting
with twilight
How easy it would be
to nourish
the horses of reason
straight from
the manger of clouds

The earth
flat or round
What's the difference?
if we must inevitably
retrace our steps
and find nothing
but collapsed bridges
carcasses of houses
where crows have made nest
profaned gardens and graves
concrete arch from whose mast
the same flag hangs half-mast
and no living soul
to recount without adding
the thousandth episode
of this pitiful apocalypse

The human-inhuman beast
more and more intelligent
still using
old worn out ruses
such as this one-way path
to salvation

where today bulldozers carve
the highway of a civilization
as basic
as the hamburger
that serves as its mascot
And enslaved people
scrambling to the gate
with perfect awareness
and last-ditch despair

As if one could choose
from the range of horror
covering the planet
Reason wavers
but we must recover
Be indignant
denounce
certainly
For all that
will our debt be paid?
Anger cools down
while other raging fires
present themselves
to the permanence of horror

At dinner time
images announced as unbearable
We look away
no longer knowing what distinguishes
decency from indecency
and when we look

the line is just as thin
between cowardice and courage
At the end of the meal
We sometimes wonder
if we have not eaten
the flesh of our neighbor
more precisely
that of our own children
The soccer match
or the prime time movie
comes just in time
to sweep away these little worries

Hell is well stocked
but the shelves
are empty
except for the ever more
sophisticated cameras
The tours are led
by scholars in uniform
and ethnicolor headwear
“In the name of God” proclaims one
“What you must know” warns the other
and all start singing the same war cry
“Get thee behind me, Satan!”
Modern hell
has a damn good advantage
over its predecessors
It is shot in a studio

Unlike all the messages
constantly drummed in
on compassion, justice
hope, love
the wrath of heaven descends first
—let it be said in passing—
on the convicts of existence
the helpless ones
without teeth and shoulders
And the ones whose hearts cannot hear
the narrow-minded in spirit
the toothy ambitious grave diggers
with faces completely remade
barking in the face of the survivors
and right in the ear of the dead:
Atone for your sins!

From one disaster to the next
immutable scenario
Help is slow
eventually arrives
The neediest
are the last ones served
Scraps as usual

Note to illegals:
with those poorer than they are
the poor
can be pitiless
They have that at least in common
with the rich bastards

How beautiful she is
today's Africa!
It was yesterday
—and it already seems unreal—
that we celebrated the wedding
of her newfound freedom
and the bride
more desirable than in our dreams
“dressed in her color that is life”
insolently young
exhibiting her flower and heated breasts
leading the trance
that gives soul to the body
light to the eyes
inspired words to lips
the nigger finally standing
united in the recognition of blood
the only approved human color
That was yesterday
orphaned day
of an aborted genesis

Africa!
Your pariah peoples
withered limbs of the primary stump
conceived in your alluvial silt
Your errant peoples
in the frozen furnace of an enclosure
with the dimension of the continent

Your blinded peoples
harnessed
bending under the yoke
turning the wheel
that crushes
the fruits of their womb
The envious
who insidiously praised your youth
have condemned you to die young
The announced extinction of the species
will commence with you

Under so much abuse
the vessel of memory
risks overflowing
and besides no one knows
if its bottom is watertight
Should it be warmed up gently
or left to cool?
The soup of crime
naturally abundant
is more widely distributed
than soup from soup kitchens
It often sits in the stomach
and can cause nausea
but its vapors
numb consciences
cyclically

The list cannot be exhaustive
There are children tossed aside
for the scavengers of sex and war
the blackmail of famine
the dealing in despair
the organ trafficking of thought
the white-washing of filthy ideas
There is the abduction of rebels
who raised their hand to the Temple
the crushing of the least bud
that had the idea to open
in memory of dead hope
There is the perfect crime
the immunity of Power
knighted and hailed at the Stock Exchange
There are the glasses they clink
the decent smutty ones
and the laughing of the winners
two steps from the mass graves

Knowledge is unforgiving
It gnaws at you
Of what would you be guilty?
Of some omission
or of having gone too far
Of feeling yourself burning with the words
that you gave to the unspeakable
and staying screwed down to your seat
while sipping your coffee?
Just say it:
even innocent of evil
you are its hostage

Can one pacify the hearts of executioners
change humanity?
No one has the answer
Redemption, Redemption
you murmur
that unsolvable equation

Let us not talk about the tyrants
who lately sought to impose on you
the law of silence
nor of the small-time dictators
peddlers of renown
only lending to the rich
at the cost of revenge
More unworthy are the cultists
of an immaculate poetry
who not only keep silent
or prevaricate
but who would like
to gag you
at the first opportunity

No matter what happens
you will use your right of insurrection
You will acquit yourself
with an open face
of the duty to discern
unveil
lacerate
each face of abjection
You will be guardian and vestal virgin

of the speck of light
dispensed to your species
sunken into your guts
With these prerequisites
you will merit your true name
man of his word
or poet if you wish

It is not a matter of shoulders
or of biceps
the burden of the world
Those who have come to carry it
are often the most frail
They too are subject to fear
to doubt
to discouragement
and sometimes end up cursing
the splendid Idea or Dream
that has exposed them
to the fires of Gehenna
But if they bend
they do not break
and when by frequent misery
they are cut and mutilated
these human reeds
know that their bodies
lacerated by betrayal
will become as many flutes
as the shepherds of awakening will play
to capture
and convey to the stars
the symphony of resistance

Commentary

“Les Épaules et le fardeau” is perhaps one of the best-known poems by the prize-winning contemporary Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi. The final stanza in particular has been widely circulated online by bloggers, enthusiasts, and poetry lovers. A translation of the poem by Donald Nicholson-Smith appeared in 2016 under the title “Back and Burden” in an extensive bilingual volume of Laâbi’s works.¹ However, our version translates Laâbi’s *épaules* as “shoulders” since we felt this word more effectively imparts the sense of the weight of the world carried by the poet. The image reverberates with the mythical tasks and woes of a Sisyphus or Hercules. In addition, beyond the fact that multiple translations often reveal different aspects of the writer’s work and different impacts the work has on the literary imagination, eight out of the nineteen stanzas of the version of the poem published in *Tribulations d’un rêveur attiré*² do not appear in Nicholson-Smith’s translation. This is not to slant Nicholson-Smith’s formidable and admirable undertaking, but rather to suggest that a more comprehensive version of the poem might illuminate other aspects of Laâbi’s work. Sections of the poem that did not appear in Nicholson-Smith’s version include passages pertaining to controversies such as illegal immigration and criticism of “liberated” post-colonial Africa.

Three stanzas at the beginning of the poem that are not in Nicholson-Smith’s translation introduce a surrealist scenario of vertiginous destruction and decadence, weighing it against a wish for peace. Thus the third stanza, not in Nicholson-Smith’s translation, reads:

*Si seulement une trouée d’azur
la percée d’une étoile aguerrie
parlante
avant le rendez-vous obligé*

¹ *In Praise of Defeat: Poems by Abdellatif Laâbi*, Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2016, pp. 672–689.

² It should be noted that the stanzas are not numbered in Laâbi’s poem, so all references to stanzas by number are only meant to enable discussion of their location in the poem.

*du crépuscule
Comme il serait aisé
de nourrir
les chevaux de la raison
à même
la mangeoire des nuages*

If only an azure gap
the piercing of a hardened star
speaking
before the obligatory meeting
with twilight
How easy it would be
to nourish
the horses of reason
straight from
the manger of clouds

The passage divides into two main ideas, one pertaining to a wish (“If only...”) and the other, perhaps, to a consequence that would exist should that wish be fulfilled (“How easy it would be...”). Neither of these concepts is “fulfilled” in the sense of being presented as a complete sentence, illustrating one characteristic feature of the poem that affects the translation process—Laâbi’s general avoidance of punctuation. Here, capitalization and grammatical sense suggest the division of the stanza into unfulfilled wish and unfulfilled consequence of that wish—the piercing, hardened star that would speak before the meeting with twilight would allow “the horses of reason” to nourish themselves from “the manger of clouds.” Symbolically, illumination by some natural celestial event or presence, perhaps something akin to the shining “star of wonder” of Christian mythology that leads the Magi to the newborn child, would allow reason to nourish itself on nature, permitting connection between “reason” and “heaven” (“the manger of clouds,” again an image echoing the Christian nativity). The passage establishes tension through the double-edged confrontation of wish with denial, positing a distinction of the poetic from the pragmatic.

A reading such as the above is of course highly interpretive, as the poet and the poem are working here through im-

agistic juxtaposition to create surrealistic effect rather than rationalistic discourse. The word *aguerrie*, which we translate as “hardened,” could for example also mean “experienced,” “seasoned,” “veteran,” or “expert.” Since many of these meanings relate to humanistic qualities, we thought “hardened” best suited the portrayal of a celestial body while offering the connotations of “seasoned,” “experienced,” and “veteran.” The hardness allows the piercing, perhaps related to a visionary seeing. The piercing, or coming through, pertains to the speaking, which animates the star. A non-rational cause/effect relation is set up between the piercing star and the speaking that would permit reason, or its horses, to nourish themselves from the clouds. Can we say that the piercing refers to starlight coming through the clouds? We also interpreted *du crépuscule* as “with twilight” rather than “of twilight” since the passage hints at interaction between twilight and the (unidentified) speaker, even though the meeting is described as obligatory (*obligé*), since twilight is an expected moment in every day’s cycle.

As noted above, also not appearing in Nicholson-Smith’s version are some stanzas that confront contemporary issues such as illegal immigration, and a triad of stanzas about Africa, sometimes addressing the continent in direct apostrophe. We believe these stanzas help the reader see some of the issues that fuel the poem and lead the poet at the end to claim his “right of insurrection” (*Du droit de t’insurger tu useras*) to become a “man of his word / or poet” (*homme de parole / ou poète*) so he can help, as the last lines of the poem notably mark, “convey to the stars / the symphony of resistance” (*convoyer jusqu’aux étoiles / la symphonie de la résistance*).

Some of the difficulties presented in translating Laâbi’s work stem from the fact that he seldom uses punctuation, relying instead on capitalization and stanza breaks to convey distinctions between thoughts. This approach runs ideas and lines together in uncharacteristic ways, as we see in the stanza quoted above, and in the following one, also not in Nicholson-Smith’s translation:

*D’une catastrophe l’autre
scénario immuable
Les secours tardent*

*finissent par arriver
Les plus démunis
sont les derniers servis
Des rogatons comme d'habitude*

From one disaster to the next
immutable scenario
Help is slow
eventually arrives
The neediest
are the last ones served
Scraps as usual

Laâbi's style can be seen here in the telegraphing of lines such as "Help is slow / eventually arrives," which conveys urgency even while pointing out how slow relief often is in moments of crisis. The narrative itself can be applied to disasters ranging from famine to ethnic cleansing, horrors linked to later passages on Africa that use imagery evocative of the works of Césaire and the *Négritude* movement.³ Indeed, from the stylistic and literary perspective embedded in the stanzas pertaining to Africa come echoes of Césaire, whose *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* made history with its virulent words and message portraying the fate of slaves exported from Africa, their suffering, and their intention to remain standing in their rebellion against their situation. One can also hear echoes of messages put forth in Senghor's poetry and in Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnés de la terre*) in Laâbi's passages on Africa. Yet one also senses Laâbi's disappointment at a world that has not changed as dramatically as one might have wished, since despite these writers' warnings the now-independent colonized territories have not achieved complete harmony and freedom. Additional literary connections to other poets or writers may suggest to the reader the human condition in light of the path of history. For instance, Laâbi's use of the expression *la bête humaine*-

³ For example, the passage [*La*] *négraille enfin debout / unie dans la reconnaissance du sang / seule couleur agréée de l'homme*, ("The nigger finally standing / united in the recognition of blood / the only approved human color") may echo a passage from Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*:

inhumaine, “The human-inhuman beast,” may allude to Zola and the Naturalist movement, which sees humanity as trapped by genetic predispositions and socioeconomic determinism.

A particularity of style we often confronted involved inversion of words or even lines. One could look, for example, at stanza 2. Emphasis here is put on adjectives describing the reefs, the prayer, and the boat (*Frêle est l'embarcation / Redoutable les récifs / Oubliés les mots de la prière....*; “Frail is the boat / The reefs redoubtable / The prayer words forgotten”). We switched the positions of nouns and adjectives in this passage to make it closer to conversational English, as the inverted adjectival structure we retained in the first instance, “Frail is the boat,” sounded stilted when continued in the other lines. By putting the adjectives after the nouns, we also put emphasis on the obstacles and linked them with the repetition of “the” at the beginning of each line, creating a rhythmic cadence through repetition.

Another use of inversion occurs in the penultimate stanza of the poem, which begins as follows:

*Du droit de t'insurger tu useras
quoi qu'il advienne
Du devoir de discerner*

*la négaille assise
inattendument debout*

*debout dans le vent
debout sous le soleil
debout dans le sang
debout
et
libre*

the seated nigger scum
unexpectedly standing

standing in the wind
standing under the sun
standing in the blood
standing
and
free

Aimé Césaire: *The Collected Poetry*, tr. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, pp. 80–81.

dévoiler
lacrérer
chaque visage de l'abjection
tu t'acquitteras

The syntactic inversion of placing subject and verb at the end of the line (*Du droit de t'insurger tu useras* instead of *Tu useras du droit de t'insurger*) puts greater emphasis on the poet's responsibility to himself and to others to fight for the good of humanity. This gives the passage an imperative style worthy of the "commandment" the poet is addressing to himself and the world. Inversion introduces a tonality one might associate with incantation and urgency. But this strategy seemed to render the lines too oblique or stilted if presented with the inversion in English. This stiltedness intensifies if one considers impact of the use of the familiar, second-person pronoun *tu* in the passage, a distinction that has become archaic in English.⁴ Following the French syntax, and respecting the pronoun usage and subsequent verbal declension, a literal translation into English would read:

Of the right to rise up thou shalt make use
no matter what happens
Of the duty to discern
unveil
lacerate
each face of abjection
thou shalt acquit thyself

The first two lines could also be rendered in English as "The right to rise up thou shalt use / no matter what happens." Either way, in French the inversions have a commanding effect, while in English they are confusing, making the subject/actor

⁴ The obliqueness or stiffness is accentuated by the distinctions between English and French 2nd person pronoun forms. French retains the distinction of the polite/plural "you" (*vous*) from the intimate/singular "you" (*tu*). Old English bore a similar declension in *eow* (modern "you") and *þu* (modern "thou"). But in modern English "thou" is archaic. Comparing the Ten Commandments in English to the Commandments in French, one notes that the "Thou" of "Thou shalt not kill" seems archaic and perhaps overly formal when compared to the French *Tu ne tueras point*.

(the poet, the reader, or both) ambiguous, and may even seem pompous. In French the line *Du droit de t'insurger tu useras* puts emphasis on the right to insurrection, but English loses its subject (thou) in the list of possibilities. Part of the effectiveness in the French comes from the alliteration of the **d** sound in **Du droit de** or **Du devoir de discerner / dévoiler**, and the assonance of **oi** (English “wah”) in *droit, quoi, devoir*, and *dévoiler*, as well as of **u** in *t'insurger tu useras*. These effects are lost in the English, so we rendered the passage as

No matter what happens
you will use your right of insurrection
You will acquit yourself
with an open face
of the duty to discern
unveil
lacerate
each face of abjection

Our inversion of the first two lines here permits us to tie the actions together, and to include both in the realm of all possibility (“No matter what happens”).

Evocation of the poet’s role sets us up for the last stanza of the poem, the famous passage that concludes this impressive work. The potential incapacity for acting that has been contradicted by this invocation of the need, or duty, to act—one that will allow you to “merit your true name / man of his word / or poet if you wish” (*A ces conditions préalables / tu mériteras ton vrai nom / homme de parole / ou poète si l'on veut*). The potential incapacity for acting presented earlier is contrasted with the “human reeds / ... / lacerated by betrayal” — *[des] roseaux humains / ... lardés / par la trahison*—who become

... as many flutes
as the shepherds of awakening will play
to capture
and convey to the stars
the symphony of resistance

*... autant de flûtes
que des bergers de l'éveil emboucheront
pour capter
et convoier jusqu'aux étoiles
la symphonie de la résistance*

These powerful words invite the reader to recognize the role of the poet as the bringer of hope and presents the poet as the “shepherd of awakening” who shows us how the human condition can be overcome.

Source text:

Laâbi, Abdellatif. *Tribulations d'un rêveur attitré*. Marsam, 2009, pp. 33–53.