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*My Dear Double* by Abdellatif Laâbi

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Transference

Allan Johnston and Guillemette Johnston    Abdellatif Laâbi
My Dear Double (Part I)                  Mon cher double

My double
an old acquaintance
whom I visit with moderation
He is a shameless one
who plays on my timidity
and knows how to take advantage
of my distractions
He is the shadow
that follows or precedes me
aping my gait
He sneaks into my dreams
and fluently speaks
the language of my demons
Despite our great intimacy
he remains a stranger to me
I neither hate nor love him
for after all
he is my double
the proof by default
of my existence

Sometimes
I find him sitting in my place
and don’t dare ask him
to get up
I recognize him by the particular odor
of my finger joints
when I am not well
His carnal inconsistence
troubles me
and I’m a little jealous of it
Since there is only one seat
in my bedroom
I stay standing
I imagine that he works for me
in his own way
He paints on the light
to show me
how I should go about it
with words
and if I decide to open my mouth
he suddenly disappears

When I look at the sea
ignoring the waves
he turns his back to me
—in a manner of speaking—
It seems like he is listening
to the sound of a secret clock
marking off the part
of time allotted to death
When I raise my eyes
from the sea
to the swelling peak
he persists in seeing nothing
but the abyss
He spoils my fun
with his pretentions
to lucidity

As soon
as I discover a country
he surveys another one
and sends me derogatory messages
What amazes me
leaves him stone cold
The language I introduce myself to
does not have the caliber
of the one he sputters
The national dish
I’m about to savor
without preconception
always lacks the spice
or the creaminess he adores
and in the beauty
that bowls me over in passing
he inevitably seeks and finds
the hidden defect
That’s why for some time
I have limited
my voyages

He whispers to me
that he’s holding back
the word I have
on the tip of my tongue
for my own good
If I have become a real master
of hindsight
to whom do I owe it
If I walk with purpose
who decides?
Ah I strongly doubt
my solitude
when I talk to myself
It may be
that it’s only when I kiss
that I completely feel
myself
At the turn of a phrase
of a strophe
I stumble upon words
it would never cross my mind
to use
on hackneyed images
reminiscences of the stone age
of thought
I get alarmed
The artisan I am
suspects some talent
for snake-like deceit
I’m not ready to swallow
I thus deal
with a forewarned bird-catcher
a cultivated censor
a fine craftsman of doublespeak
“Know thyself,” the wise one asserted
Certainly
but things being what they are
I would like to add:
Beware of that self

He claims to be Argentinian
while I have a hard time
considering myself French
You would die more Moroccan than he is
while I revel
in my savage freedom
of statelessness
He argues
in favor of cremation
and me I am far
from having solved
the riddle of where
to be buried
He tries to enroll
in tango classes
without respect
for my fully screwed up
spinal column
To say the least
he exhausts me

Take risks
Make an effort?
It’s not his cup of tea
For me it’s the roller coaster
the pass of Thermopylae
Charybdis and Scylla
the Augean stables
the torment of Tantalus
the throes
of the Iraqi quagmire
the Gaza powder-keg
and the voyages Sinbad
has not dared to tell
I am the overflow
of his fears
the factotum
of his grand ideas
And the worst
is that I put up with it
without flinching

I would have liked
at my venerable age
to quietly cultivate my garden
careess the leaves of my bamboo
and polish them one by one
play the bee to my roses
and gather my fill of nectar
bury my arms in the earth
and patiently wait until they grow back
as two magnolias
and thus stretch out my branches
to collect the dew of the firmament
shelter the migratory birds
or children
who would have read and appreciated
_The Baron in the Trees_
No
it's no good
when I hear the snickering
of the one who persists
in planting around me
a hedge
of deforming mirrors

One day
inspired by Abraham’s story
on official assignment
I get ready to slit the intruder’s throat
hoping
it goes without saying
for divine intervention
in the form of a ram
or lacking that
a turkey
Seeing nothing coming
and getting desperate
I resolve
to turn the weapon on myself
What weapon?
I only see between my fingers
an ordinary Bic pen
and am enraged to discover
it has dried up

I also sometimes happen to reason
to myself saying:
Let us accept this division of tasks
One lookout is not enough
there should be two, ten, a thousand
And then
what is the external voice
without the inner one
weighing carefully
each thing and its opposite
listening to
the most distant memory
the labyrinth’s familiar
guiding us thus
toward accuracy of expression
and comprehensive vision
placing on our tongue
oh so rarely
the melting seed of reconciliation
with ourselves

Without warning
he disappears for a long time
to the point that I start
to doubt
his existence
Like a troubled soul
I feel less useful
than an onion skin
Aridity overcomes me
My inner voice
is only a gurgle
and my being
is reduced to a gut
So
I spread myself on my bed
and close my eyes
cursing poets
and poetry

Is he the despot
or is it me
The empire we are fighting over
is it worth it
Does it truly exist
or is it only a mirage
formed by the vapors of drunkenness
and the chilled steam
of compassion
Is it a haven
Or a trap door?
Poor him
poor me
who play hopscotch
with the bigger kids
pretending to forget
that the guardians of prosperity
also shoot at the old
even if they still
have children’s eyes

Have I invented him
for the sake of the cause?
I assure you no
I can still distinguish
a white thread
from a black thread
the breathing of stone
from the hot breath of living spirit
I am rarely wrong
about the origin of fragrances
the density of air
the nature of prints
left in the sand
on the skin
or the retina
Don’t worry
I have not yet crossed
the fine line

There are blessed days
when I take a break from him
Whether or not he is there
I manage to expel him
from my protective bubble
What happiness!
My pains
give me a respite
the leech of questions
releases its pressure
the Grim Reaper
passes by
without shooting me down with a look
the infinite becomes habitable
and the house of the soul
vast enough to welcome the procession
of my helpless visitors
Master of my own time
I no longer run after harmony
I feel that I was there before her
But he or she returns
Affirming this
May I dare ask
Is he, is she really the same
What do I know about it?
I try in vain to detect the essence of these multiple manifestations and content myself with capturing the subliminal and moreover often trivial message:
Stop smoking
Do something about your OCD
Be careful not to spill on yourself when you eat
Stop watching TV
Decide to buy the complete works of Paganini
Don’t look for a black cat in a dark room especially if the cat doesn’t exist

With him
I lose my sense of humor which it seems makes my friends glad
To lambast stupidity his stupidity as well and all the hellish days is only given to an elect few
However and herein lies my pride I think that my candidacy
has not been usurped
I discovered this propensity
at a late time
and deplore to see it reduced
to the suitable share
because of the shadow of a possible
fantasy that crossed my mind
So what is to be done?
as Comrade Lenin said

Cultivate my uniqueness?
That’s not my style
Consult?
Out of the question
Hunt down my lookalikes
ensnare them like a slave merchant
and lock them in a cargo hold?
No
I don’t have that aggressiveness
Write little poems
about flowers and butterflies
or other very white and plump poems
that glorify the vanity of language?
That doesn’t do much for me
when the horns of the bull
gore my hands
and the beast’s breath
is burning my face
I might as well shout out to my double
while shaking the muleta in front of him:
Toro
come here and get it!
Commentary

The theme of the double is as old as literature itself—witness the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. More recent fictive examples include Joseph Conrad’s “Secret Sharer” and Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. But the interactions with the double illuminated in Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi’s “My Dear Double” complicate any simple arrangement of lawgiver vs. outlaw, man vs. beast, or good vs. evil. In fact the description of the double as “dear” illuminates this ambiguous relationship. Laâbi’s double is a figure defined in part by the (perhaps clichéd) cultural concepts of multiculturalism or postcolonialism, and his writing also bears the mark of the problematic concept of Francophone literature in addition to his coming to terms with his personal political history and the ever-soliciting presence of the endless remaking and remapping of history through ancient and contemporary political turmoils.

Laâbi explored his relation to francophonie in a comment describing speakers/writers of a language different from their native or birth language in a 2001 interview. Answering the question “Francophone is … a political term. What about other terms that get used to further reduce and define Francophone poets as either being ‘inspired’ or ‘politically engaged’?” Laâbi said,

The question ... has to do with all the writers who do not write in their mother-, or, as I prefer to call it, birth-language. Take Indo-Pakistani writers—for example, Salman Rushdie, Ondaatje, etc. In England, the writers who are currently moving literature forward are not necessarily native to England—they are people who come from outside. In France we have the example of Kundera, who decided to write in French. This is a huge phenomenon in the world today. Apart from literature that we’d call “national,” there is a new kind of literature which is currently emerging in what I would call the peripheries of the world—India, Africa, or elsewhere. What is interesting here is that these literatures are straddling between two cultures, two imaginations, and two differ-
ent languages. But these writers are not only “between”—they have mastered both sides. I am perfectly bi-lingual: my birth-language is Arabic, my writing language is French. Perhaps what makes what I write unique is that the two cultures are intertwined. Even when I am writing in French, my Arabic language is there. There is a musicality in Arabic, and these words enter into my French texts. I think that people are not seeing the originality of this phenomenon which is currently world wide.¹

This sense of doubling is amplified as an overall concern in Mohammed Belmaïzi’s study “Introduction à la poétique d’Abdellatif Laâbi”:

Laâbi has forged a twofold textual type of writing, where orality has a preponderant role. In Laâbi’s work, the written French, for which the Latin alphabet is used, is molded through orality. That means that each French word, said out loud, is going to create another word that provides the sonorous image of the Arabic language. Thus, there are two overlapping texts: a written one and an oral one; whatever is said in French will be heard in Arabic. It is the projection of orality onto graphical symbols and vice versa that either makes for confronted or reconciled meanings. As a result, this strategy concerns not only the words, but ends up mixing and doubling the text at all levels: characters, places, and situations, to the extent where it becomes legitimate to consider Laâbi’s poetry and fiction as fantastic literature.²

The emphasis on orality led us to work on retaining Laâbi’s discursive, speaking voice in our translation. For the most part “My Dear Double” eschews punctuation, indicating transitions

between thoughts through capitalization and stanza breaks. We keep this feature to reflect the apparently casual style Laâbi brings to his work. This conversational tone, which lets one imagine (for instance) sitting with Laâbi in a coffee house talking about someone else, best serves the sense of orality that emerges in the work, as for instance when we first hear about the double:

Despite our great intimacy  
he remains a stranger to me  
I neither hate nor love him  
for after all  
he is my double  
the proof by default  
of my existence

Laâbi’s *il me reste étranger*, “he remains a stranger to me,” could be read “he is unknown to me” or “he remains foreign,” echoing in the latter the theme of cultural distance and/or duality implied in the concept of *francophonie*. Yet Laâbi’s own assertion of the intimate relationship he senses between Arabic and French led us, while still retaining the unavoidable universal and political flavor that is traced through history and then through literature, to move beyond a polarized, politicized reading to one addressing the psycho-spiritual complications he experiences with his double. The idea is one of uprootedness and confusion, of not knowing exactly where one belongs. Studying the interventions of his double, Laâbi recognizes the power of this inner presence that participates in the progression of the text borne out of a melting-pot of cultures, a presence that manifests itself in the pluralistic, ever-changing mosaic stemming from the psyche that surreptitiously weaves the text to which it surrenders.

A constant contrast recurs between a simpler world and a more intellectualized, critical one, conveyed for example in the “showing/telling” contrast Laâbi brings up in describing the act of writing:

He [the double] paints on the light  
to show me
how I should go about it
with words
and if I decide to open my mouth
he suddenly disappears

The ambiguity in Il peint sur la lumière, “He paints on the light,” lies on one hand in the possibility that the double is representing light, the way an Impressionist might by creating form and shadow in a painting, to show how to achieve an artistic effect that Laâbi then tries to capture in words (which when articulated orally—“if I decide to open my mouth,” si je m’avise d’ouvrir la bouche—fail him: “suddenly he disappears,” aussitôt il disparaît). But another reading might introduce darkness, concealment, diversion, or deflection, perhaps censorship, as the light is painted over. In either way the quality of doubling points back to a characterization Laâbi makes of his background, suggesting the dual cultural influences informing his work:

I was born in a country that was colonised by the French. In school we did not learn Arabic because we were taught in French. So when I began to write, the only language that I really knew was French.... I was born into an illiterate environment. My parents were never able to express themselves. One of the reasons I started to write was for the men and women who are not able to express themselves, but who are not stupid nonetheless ... to allow them to speak, to have something to say.  

Capturing that duality of experience, that sense of an oral Arabic culture within a literate Francophone one that is then translated into English, suggests the issues surrounding—and hopefully somewhat overcome—in rendering Laâbi’s report on his interactions with this mysterious and elusive double that puts between him and his writing une haie/de miroirs déformants, “a hedge/of deforming [or distorting, or deflecting] mirrors,” in a process of inversion, multiplication, and crossings over of altered cultures and meanings presented in kaleidoscopic style.

3 Interview with Abdellatif Laâbi by Kristin Prevallet.
About this translation

Given that Archipelago Press has just released *In Praise of Defeat*, an extensive bi-lingual volume of Laâbi’s works translated into English by Donald Nicholson-Smith⁴ that includes this poem, one could ask why another translation should be necessary. A good answer, other than the one that different translations reveal different aspects of the writer’s work and different impacts of that work on the literary imagination, is that Nicholson-Smith’s translation drops eight of the eighteen stanzas in Laâbi’s original poem as published in the volume *Mon cher double*, though it does include a few stanzas from later portions of the book. It should be noted that Laâbi himself decided on these cuts; as Nicholson-Smith noted in an email concerning another translation we published in *Transference 7*, “*In Praise of Defeat* is a selection by the author from his own work.”⁵ Yet we feel that reading the poem without these omissions illuminates aspects of the work that do not come across in Nicholson-Smith’s translation. For instance, stanzas 5 and 6 (not included in Nicholson-Smith’s translation) address the double’s interference in the use of language or perhaps even in the creative process, while stanza 8 (also not included) takes us on a rollicking ride through mythology and politics in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.⁶ As an example, note the following passage:

    For me it’s the roller coaster
    the pass of Thermopylae
    Charybdis and Scylla
    the Augean stables
    the torment of Tantalus

⁵ Donald Nicholson-Smith, email correspondence with Guillemette and Allan Johnston, 31 December 2019.
⁶ It should be noted that the stanzas are not numbered, so our characterization of the stanzas by number is based solely on our counting of them. Similarly, Nicholson-Smith’s translation does not number stanzas, and since eight out of the eighteen stanzas of the poem are cut in Nicholson-Smith’s translation, any reference to these stanzas by number may differ from our enumeration of them.
the throes
of the Iraqi quagmire
the Gaza powder-keg

While ostensibly contrasting Laâbi’s political involvement with his double’s passivity or “coolness,” the passage takes us from the famous Greek battle into Homer’s *Odyssey*, the labors of Heracles, and Tantalus’s condemnation in Tartarus before moving on to the contemporary nightmare of Middle-Eastern conflicts. The topsy-turvy roller coaster ride is introduced by an untranslatable pun: Laâbi’s term for “roller coaster” is *montagnes russes*, literally “Russian mountains,” possibly making oblique reference to the Caucasus Mountains, and so alluding to Prometheus’s fate for rebelling against Zeus by giving humans fire, i.e., intelligence, and perhaps even life. Whether or not this is the case, the passage involves an electrifying spin through classical mythology directly into contemporary events.

The note on *montagnes russes* above suggests some of the difficulties involved in translating Laâbi’s work. Literal translation can be problematic when working with idiomatic French expressions such as this one that cannot be translated directly into English, and the situation may be further complicated if the French idiom’s syntax has been remolded and fused to reflect the sounds and structures of oral Arabic. After all, Laâbi claims that “Even when [he is] writing in French, [the] Arabic language is there. There is a musicality in Arabic, and these words enter [the] French text.” An example of this might be the following:

*L’artisan que je suis
soupçonne quelque industrie
des couleuvres
que je ne suis pas prêt à avaler
J’ai donc affaire
à un oiseleur averti
un censeur cultivé
un fin tailleur de langue de bois*

The artisan I am
suspects some talent
for snake-like deceit
I’m not ready to swallow
I thus deal
with a forewarned bird-catcher
a cultivated censor
a fine craftsman of doublespeak

The French have an idiom, *faire avaler des couleuvres à quelqu’un*—literally, “to make someone swallow garter snakes”—which means to feed someone false information or fibs, generally to tease, mislead, or humiliate that person.7 Laâbi employs this idiom in a way that splits its components and isolates images (‘des couleuvres’) while superimposing other images that bring an oral or conversational quality on the passage, illuminating the potential naivety of the recipient as well as the sophisticated craft that inspires Laâbi to write under the bewitching influence of his double. The double here seems to be construed in some ways as Laâbi’s source of inspiration, yet we get a sense that this source operates with a deliberate agenda. This last impression gets enhanced by the description of the double as a *oiseleur averti* (“forewarned bird-catcher”), *censeur cultivé* (“cultivated censor”), and *fin tailleur de langue de bois* (“fine craftsman of doublespeak”). Laâbi’s double here appears to serve as muse while actually directing the process of writing, possibly toward some kind of distortion or censorship. This and other passages demonstrates the way in which Laâbi’s text is paved with colorful and suggestive images that explore idioms, shape lines, and reflect the oral rhythms that emerge via this conflicted creative process.

Many of Laâbi’s idioms require unpacking, and all demand consideration of relation to overall meaning and effect. In the passage above, for instance, *un fin tailleur de langue de bois*, literally “a fine tailor of wooden language,” is nonsensical in direct English translation. The idiom *langue de bois*, literally “wooden language,” idiomatically refers to style, but more directly signifies euphemistic or deceptive uses of language,

7 English idioms associable with this French idiom include feeding someone BS or bull, making someone eat crow, selling snake oil to someone, and selling a bill of goods.
associated in *Le Petit Robert* with *noulangue*, George Orwell’s “newspeak” from *1984*. An American idiom that might come close is “forked tongue,” attributed to indigenous Americans and relating to misdirection through speech, saying one thing and meaning another. This idiom provides an image echoing *couleuvres*, and creates a serpentine field of imagery in a way not readily available in the French. However, we felt “forked tongue” would be too limited in usage (cf. its association with B Westerns from the 1950s, etc., and its concentration on ways of speaking rather than on language use as such), and so settled on “doublespeak” as a more effective way of conveying the idea.

Other idioms that reflect English usage seem too remote. For example, the lines *L’empire que l’on se dispute/en vaut-il la chandelle* that appear toward the end of the poem reflect the English idiom “not worth the candle”—an expression from the Middle Ages referring to work not even deserving candlelight, and so describing something of little significance or value. However, we decided that this phrasing seemed out of date and not reflective of the conversational style Laâbi aims at, so we adopted the outside reader’s suggestion. (One might bear in mind that the French language still uses a lot of imagery in its spoken language that might be construed as archaic in English.)

Strategies of inversion are often used in the poem; see for example the passage *De la mer/que je soulève des yeux/et porte à la cime/il s’obstine à ne scruter/que l’abîme*, which we rendered as “When I raise my eyes/from the sea/to the swelling peak/he persists in seeing nothing/but the abyss,” or the line *Plus marocain que lui tu meurs*, which we restructured as “You would die more Moroccan than he is,” though it could also have been rendered possibly as meaning something like “it would kill you to be more Moroccan” or “You couldn’t be more Moroccan.” In the latter example we stuck with the image Laâbi uses, as the introduction of “you” here points both to direct address to both the self displaced into second person (“‘You’re a fool,’ he said to himself”) and the (French-speaking) reader, contrasting that reader with the double who “pretends to be Argentinian.” Normally the syntax would be *Tu meurs plus marocain que lui*, leading one to consider the role of inverted syntax in the poem. Is there a relation between these inversions and the idea of doubleness? Does it reflect the Arabic orality underneath the
French text? And what is the double but the inverted self that faces you, showing you your other, perhaps unwanted, side, sometimes through the indirection of language?

From another angle, apposition and direct address, and sometimes poetic apostrophe, add theatrical and dialogic dimensions to the text, sometimes reflecting features of 17th century French stylistic structures. Such strategies kill two birds with one stone, as they add both oral and tragic overtones to the text. We may here bear in mind the tragedies of Corneille and Racine, which were largely inspired by classical sources, recalling the classical references in Laâbi’s poem. It is important to note that the very language the colonized were exposed to mirrors the coincidental stabilizing of the French language in the 17th century through the formation of the Academy and the first stage of colonial expansion (largely in Canada, India, and Senegal). Even with the second wave of colonization, starting in 1830 with the invasion of Algeria, the “civilizing” aspect of French cultural dominance included concentration on the literary accomplishments of the French classicists.

An interesting phenomenon Guillemette Johnston has noticed about francophone writers is that they combine traditional literary French textual strategies with imagery and material from their own background. Laâbi’s writing shows this quality—the investing of idioms and structures with a different spirit and culture. The paratactic style, which is part of the oral aspect of the poem, demonstrated by non-complex structures such as J’ai donc affaire/à un oiseleur averti/un censeur cultivé/un fin tailleur de langue de bois, provides echoes of the style found in epic works of both French Trouvères and African Griots, not to mention Homer and other works from the oral tradition. A combination of the hypotactic and the paratactic styles appears in the passage L’artisan que je suis/soupçonne

8 See for instance Corneille’s *Horace*, act IV, scene 5, lines 1301–1304, in which Camille directly addresses Rome in poetic apostrophe, characterizing Rome through apposition of the object of address (Rome) with its qualities:

*Rome, l’unique objet de mon ressentiment !
Rome, à qui vient ton bras d’immoler mon amant !
Rome qui t’a vue naître, et que ton cœur adore !
Rome enfin que je hais parce qu’elle t’honore !*
quelque industrie/des couleuvres/que je ne suis pas prêt à avaler. This latter approach reflects the elaborate constructions of written and spoken French that became more dominant under Louis XIV, while simultaneously embedding internal and end rhymes through the echo of suis in industrie and of prêt in avaler. What makes the word play ambiguous here is the lack of punctuation, which introduces indetermination at the syntactic, rhythmic, and referential levels. The complex structuring of the syntax and line breaks enables the poet to isolate the garter snakes—des couleuvres—in one line, while the word que in que je suis and que je ne suis pas prêt à avaler link both back to L’artisan, generating a paratactic style mirrored in the listing of qualities of the oiseleur averti, the censeur cultivé, and the fin tailleur de langue de bois. The disappearance of punctuation and end rhymes built on metrical forms could reflect the stylistic modifications that occurred in 20th-century French poetry. Notably we can think of Jacques Prévert, whose poetry brings back the spoken style via a lack of punctuation, as well as an influence from surrealistic poetry, which works by association and the influx of the unexpected rather than through adherence to traditional formal strategies.

Finally, there is also of course the inevitable loss or at least the shifting of sound effects and aural and cultural connections that is characteristic of poetry and fixes it in its specific language of origin. An example of one unavoidable loss appears in the stanza about cultivating the garden, where the sound play between roses (“roses”) and rosée (“dew”) in the line me faire l’abeille de mes roses ... pour recueillir la rosée du firmament disappears. More obvious in this passage will be the allusion to Voltaire’s Candide, and the characteristic surrealistic shifting, as for example between the bamboo leaves that Laâbi describes polishing (...caresser les feuilles de mon bambou/et les lustrer une à une...) and the hedge of deforming/deflecting/distorting mirrors (...une haie/de miroirs déformants) that is seemingly, and suddenly, planted by the double. Through such strategies we are sucked into a vertiginous movement where both the center of the identity of the writer and the source of the writing produced on the page cannot hold still.

This book consists of 5 sections listed numerically by Roman numerals I through V, and an epilogue. Only the pieces in section III are named individually. Thus it should be clarified that the title *Mon cher double* could identify the entire collection as well as this individual section. There is no table of contents.