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# The Poetics of the Orphan in Abdelkébir Khatibi's Early Work

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Two of Abdelkébir Khatibi's early works, *La mémoire tatouée* [*Tattooed Memory*] (1971) and *Le lutteur de classe à la manière taoïste* [*Class Warrior—Taoist Style*] (1976), present a poetics of the orphan that in its different manifestations leads to a compelling ethics of encounter that defines Khatibi's views on how to deal with cultural and social difference. I refer to the texts with the term "poetics" to suggest that they operate through inherent structures and thematic obsessions that assert that the term "orphan" can be recuperated from negative connotation to mean a positively constituted rootlessness. This rootlessness, in turn, when we consider it as characterizing a person in the face of cultural difference, presents an ethics of encounter. By "encounter," I mean any meeting between any two people, as any such meeting presents the challenge of differences of all sorts—religion, race, sex, culture, age, and so on. But within Khatibi's context, a Moroccan writer whose oeuvre stretches over the historically significant moment of that country's independence from colonial rule, we should also understand the word to mean the meeting of cultural difference. The first work presents an implicit poetics, with the term "orphan" used but infrequently; yet the text's form itself, its stated themes, and the concentration of these themes upon a singular term, the "Very Large Violence" [*la Très Grande Violence*], all provide examples of what the poetics of the orphan can mean. In short, they begin to detail the dispersive, hopeful rootlessness of the orphan as this figure welcomes meeting with all sorts of difference, labeled under the umbrella category of the Other. In the second work, the term "orphan" takes on a more pronounced mediating and meditative role, as Khatibi uses it in this poetic manifesto on identity as an ideal figure capable of attaining useful knowledge and able to assert a philosophically satisfying stance for addressing the world.

To be an orphan is to be rootless; the notion of rootedness implies place. Hassan Wahbi writes of how place inheres in Khatibi's work: "The originality of Khatibi is thus entirely in the work of relating the revelation of what the possibilities are for living the life of the sensible and for the finding of oneself in a place of being, a country" [L'originalité de Khatibi est ainsi tout entière dans ce travail de correspondance entre la révélation de ce qui est donné à vivre dans la fréquentation du sensible et la reconnaissance d'un lieu d'être, un pays].<sup>1</sup> But we should be careful to read too literally the designation of country; some works seem rooted in specific places and their histories, but many works, perhaps the strong majority, seem to be first and foremost not accounts of historical times and places but of the processes and experiences of the life of the body and mind.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, we find many statements issued by the writer himself about his distaste for the overvaluation of origins in various realms of thinking—summarized as the "metaphysics of origins"—and his preference for that which I've designated the poetics of the orphan. In *Le scribe et son ombre* [*The Writer and His Shadow*], he writes of himself and his working methods:

I think I've been made according to an identitarian fluidity and a multipolar inclination. [...] I don't have a fixed method. [...] This multipolar inclination—I'll speak to this later—encouraged in me a strong sentiment of uncertainty—by chance—that made me an orphan of all spiritual masters who would have served as models for me.<sup>3</sup>

[Je crois m'être construit selon une fluidité identitaire et une tendance multipolaire. [...] Je n'ai pas de méthode fixe [...] Cette tendance multipolaire—sur laquelle je revendrai—nourissait en moi un fort sentiment d'incertitude qui m'avait—par chance—rendu orphelin de tout maître spirituel qui aurait guidé ma formation.]

As is well known, Khatibi continues his good friend Jacques Derrida's critique of the cult of parousia, or pure presence, that defines the entire Western metaphysical tradition.<sup>4</sup> Derrida reads metaphysics within the Western philosophical tradition as an onto-theology that depreciates the reality of difference within singularities. Above, Khatibi emphasizes the workings of the self as progressive, unstable, and multiple. Wahbi sees Khatibi's polyvocal, polygraphic multivalence as being directed toward the conceptualizing of possibilities beyond traditional limits:

Abdelkébir Khatibi is without a doubt a writer difficult to categorize, a writer of great variety, whose writing is without clear differences between genres or even texts. His variety is easy to understand: a plural oeuvre, rich and fascinating because of the audacity of forms and the risk of thoughts; we can take him to be a revealer of the possible.<sup>5</sup>

[Abdelkébir Khatibi est sans conteste un écrivain multiple et polygraphe dont l'espace d'écriture est sans frontière étanche entre genres ou textes. Sa polygraphie se comprend aisément: œuvre plurielle, foisonnante et fascinante par l'audace des formes et le risque des pensées, on peut la prendre comme provenant d'un éveilleur de possibles.]

Wahbi writes of Khatibi's "passion for the unknown" [une passion pour l'inconnu].<sup>7</sup> It is the orphan, cognizant of not having the rooting of a pure point of descendance, or any ancestry to speak of, who has a greater chance than others to exceed a point of origin, wandering into the world to discover what it contains. The figure of the orphan is, thus, the person who breaches frontiers; as such, the frontier belongs within the poetics of the orphan. Later in life, while writing about Freud, Khatibi again shows his investment in the idea and practice of exploring and exceeding frontiers. Here, he is interested in how disciplines shape knowledge negatively because of the usual practice of receding or retreating from a discipline's frontier: "The question I propose to address is that of theoretical frontiers. All fields of knowledge are marked by a tracing out of limits where all theory, whatever it may be, suspends its exploration of the unknown."<sup>8</sup> Frontiers, for Khatibi, must be explored; these are the frontiers of nation, self, genre, mind, and sexuality.

*La blessure du nom propre* [*The Wound of Identity*]<sup>9</sup> is one of only two works that intervene between the two major works under investigation here. In that volume's first essay, "Le cristal du texte" ["The Crystal of the Text"], he writes that the text itself is "an orphaned being, a being of exile" [un être orphelin, un être de l'exil].<sup>10</sup> While I will return to the possible difference of the orphan and the exile, I note for the time being that he repeats the assertion about the text's orphaned status in his last essay "La voix du récit" ["The Voice of the Text"] in conjunction with the idea of identity. First, identity itself is constituted through "the orphaned circulation [of identity]" [la circulation orpheline [du nom propre]];<sup>11</sup> equally, the text itself has an orphaned status: "Like identity, the text is orphaned" [Comme le nom propre, le texte est orphelin].<sup>12</sup> Properly conceived of, the logic of identity is the primary constraint upon the text itself: "The orphaned sign, identity constrains the text to the thinking of a nomadic identity expropriated in the desire for the other" [Signe orphelin, le nom propre contraint le texte à la pensée d'une identité nomade, expropriée dans le désir à l'autre].<sup>13</sup> To read Khatibi, we must read his texts as pointing toward how the reader can conceive of both the text and latterly the world as sites for the nomadic existence of the orphan who exceeds frontiers where cultural difference does not represent the Glissantian threat of the superimposition of culture upon a silenced self but rather presents the hopeful possibility for growth and expansion of the self's identity.

## Mémoire: First Encounter

The form of Khatibi's autobiography embodies the poetics of the orphan in its openendedness, variability, and self-distancing from the standard inscription that autobiography presents, that is, the use of the trope of origins as the determining factor of identity, either in the persistence of some quality deemed bound to that first place and the incipient formation of the self, or in the repudiation of that place and what it symbolizes. *Mémoire* is composed of two lengthy chapters, or what Khatibi calls "wandering series" [série hasardeuse], an interesting title because in addition to highlighting the wandering, serial nature of the anecdotes to be recounted, the term suggests the danger and arbitrariness that characterizes the figure of the orphan: the danger inherent, supposedly, in not having parents to guide and care for the child; and the arbitrariness that comes to define connections, whether human or geographical (the two collapsing into one sense), when a person lacks parents. Autobiography is an excellent generic frame through which to question identity as a stable entity because the form allows Khatibi to critique self-consciously the way that autobiography creates identity through the act of narrating the past. Moreover, Khatibi is aware of how any act of self-narration, any act of anecdotal retelling, creates identity through the recital of the self. He presents himself as potentially orphaned when writing about how as a seven-year-old he witnessed the death of his father and how he was subsequently trundled between his grieving mother and a loving aunt: "The orphan of a father who had disappeared and two mothers, would I have a sort of toggle set inside me?" [Orphelin d'un père disparu et de deux mères, aurais-je le geste de la rotation?].<sup>14</sup> Having admitted the uncertainty concerning the physical location and emotional poles of his childhood, he wonders whether his familial circumstances endowed him with a personal tendency toward restless movement, only avoiding the overvaluation of this possibility—the very one characteristic of the "metaphysics of origins"—by not declaring this idea in propositional syntax but rather by presenting it with the interrogative form's open-endedness. He goes on to question the genre of autobiography:

Is it possible, the portrait of a child? Because the past that I choose now like a motif of the tension between my being and its others settles into place just as does my incantatory celebration, itself a pretext for my desired violence leading to madness or any other circular idea. Who will write their own silence, a memory on the edge of nothingness?<sup>15</sup>

[Est-ce possible, le portrait d'un enfant? Car le passé que je choisis maintenant comme motif à la tension entre mon être et ses évanescences se dépose au gré de ma célébration incantatoire, elle-même prétexte de ma violence rêvée jusqu'au dérangement ou d'une quelconque idée circulaire. Qui écrira son silence, mémoire à la moindre rature?]

Wondering whether it's even possible to write of his childhood, he sees how his narrative choices function as instruments for presenting versions of his self: whether he emphasizes "tension" or "celebration," each has its own pre-inscribed, narrative agenda. His last rhetorical question encapsulates in his characteristically enigmatic language the conundrum of autobiography: because childhood is characterized by a sort of silence—the silence that precedes the adult's necessity for self-narration, we might say—then each person must choose to emphasize something, to make something out of the child's corporeal life of the present and the limited narrative scope that a child has for self-expression. A poetics of the orphan, then, criticizes the facile way in which autobiography generally maps a directed, focused narrative in a one-to-one way onto the self, creating a retrospective identity that nevertheless might fail to match the self in the present. The form, then, of Khatibi's autobiography is orphaned from its presupposed genre in not abiding by its major tropes, not just because he negates the place of origins as being all important, but, here, in the way that the narrative's meta-critique breaks from transparency to ruin the sheen of inevitability inherent in the genre—its ability to present as self-effacing and self-evident the normalizing function of narrative upon the diversity, chaos, and resistance to narration that the self and experience present.

Wahbi argues that the unifying rationale of Khatibi's oeuvre is that "there is no conflict between the written text and the writer's life" [Il n'y a point de conflit entre l'écriture et la vie].<sup>16</sup> The transformation of the textual space into one not of the representation of the self, or a self-mimesis, but one that extends or increases life beyond the subtending physical life is a significant idea when considering the orphaned form of *Mémoire* and, more generally, how the poetics of the orphan becomes evident through many of the text's thematic tropes. This transformation makes the act of writing and the act of reading the text into phenomenological experiences where the text emerges into the present tense as a staging ground presenting (making present) a self rather than re-presenting a formerly attributed self that the writer confirms for others through the act of re-presentation, or mimetic art. The importance of writing conceived as an act of exploration cannot be overemphasized in Khatibi; he takes it as a primary point of departure in this work, as he states in his preface, "[I]t was as if writing, in giving me to the world, reinitiated the shock of my life-force, in the fold of an obscure doubling" [comme si l'écriture, en me donnant au monde, recommençait le choc de mon élan, au pli d'un obscure dédoublement].<sup>17</sup> This defines the act of writing as integral to life and becoming, an open, non-pre-determined act, just as life itself is constantly changing: élan is a vital and ongoing force, and thus the text is vital and full of a progressive expansion of the self rather than a retrospective confirmation.

This sense of writing as leading to the development of identity leads to the poignant portrait of himself during his adolescence, when he, like many teenagers, knew that his “real life,” his mature life, had not yet developed; writing was one means through which he sought its realization:

I was floating. What orphaned or aggressive story could push me out of this condition? I was waiting for time to unwind, for my real life to start in an exaltation of a new birth. [...] I wrote, without desperation but so as to control my somnambulism, my rootlessness. I wrote because it was the only way to disappear from the world, to save me from chaos, to hone me through solitude.”

[Je flottais. Quelle histoire orpheline ou agressive pouvait me dessaisir? J’attendais que se dénouât le temps, que commençât ma vraie vie dans l’exaltation d’une nouvelle naissance. [...] J’écrivais, acte sans désespoir et qui devait subjuguier mon sommeil, mon errance. J’écrivais puisque c’était le seul moyen de disparaître du monde, de me retrancher du chaos, de m’affûter à la solitude.]

The act of writing becomes refuge and assertion of the self. It is a double movement: through “disappearing,” he appears. This is an important hinge in the narrative not only because it marks another moment of using writing as an exploration of the self and a transition from the adolescent to the adult man—a thematic trope that positions the text as autobiography, to be sure—but also because this moment of self-questioning and self-questing will eventually lead him toward the open desire to live in the present, in the world that the present offers, which characterizes the figure of the orphan. This turn can also be seen in the reiteration of a single phrase, namely, “of aggression and love,” the first mention of which occurs in a passage where he sketches his thoughts about how to define himself, and the latter at the text’s very end when Khatibi’s reconsiders the ontology of the self and its various potentialities. The first is as follows:

The mythic redolence of this encounter with the West led me toward a single quavering image of the Other, a contradiction of aggression and love. As an adolescent, I wanted to define myself in the nostalgic retelling of the initial myth.”

[La fraîcheur mythique de cette rencontre avec l’Occident me ramène à la même image ondoyante de l’Autre, contradiction d’agression et d’amour. Adolescent, je voulais me définir dans l’écoute nostalgique du mythe initial.]

At this early point in his life, the West is a symbol for all that might be contained within difference. The image must be like that of a mirage, quavering in the near distance, because, first, he has still to explore the West as Other, but also, and just as importantly, when we think more broadly, if there is one other, *an* other, there is another and another as well. He returns

to this point. Identity is not a polar construction, an alternation between the West and Morocco, as it were; it is when he is introduced to philosophy in college in Marrakech that he realizes how mixed-up his identity is, and how the fact of its mixing, its jerryrigging, points to the fact of the multi- and poly- ontology of the self. Interestingly, it's his realization of the instability of Western culture that leads to his epiphany. His sense of the grouping of many under the one comes to be defined usefully with the term "bricolage":

I recognized in that culture the mixing knowledge, repression, and disorientation; I noticed how all of this conformed exactly to my being. [The] West is a part of me, which I can deny only in so much as I struggle against all wests and easts that oppress me or that disenchant me.<sup>23</sup>

[Je reconnaissais de cette culture le bricolage du savoir, la répression, le dépaysement ; j'en saisis la faille dans l'intimité de mon être. [L]'Occident est une partie de moi, que je ne peux nier que dans la mesure où je lutte contre tous les occidents et orientes qui m'oppriment ou me désenchangent.]

The noun and adjective "double," as well as the verb "double" [dédoubler], are everywhere in the text and in Khatibi's discourse concerning the self, but, ultimately, doubleness itself isn't enough for Khatibi. A double is just two, and in this, we might say that the second merely reaffirms the first principle; that is, the double is, in one way, but the minor face of the first. In his thinking through the expansion of identity beyond parousia, he renders the West in lower case and pluralizes it, and with the similar transformation of the notion of the East, we then see the constitutive plurality of the self. In the same passage, he shows us that this multivalence of the self requires a renunciation of nostalgia; without a dominating, monolithic (or monolingual) past, the self can be ventriloquized through the "love of the Other": "To love the Other is to talk in the lost place of memory" [Aimer l'Autre, c'est parler le lieu perdu de la mémoire].<sup>24</sup> The poetics of the orphan sponsors a subject position of variability and openness.<sup>25</sup>

Returning to the passage in which "of aggression and love" was cited above, we see how, if the mythic Other represents aggressive violence and love, nevertheless violence and love aren't held primarily within the Other; rather, it is through the process of identifying and disidentifying with the Other that violence and love are produced. This is echoed in the "struggle" against oppression, and this term foreshadows the second text under discussion here. When he reprises the same language in the book's penultimate section, the miniature play, or dialogue, "Double contre double (Dialogue)" ["Double against double (dialogue)]," he again describes the toggle between the presumed one and the other as being not that between two entities but rather a "pure explosion of signs":



A: [...] to descend into myself, in my double identity, or if you prefer to sharpen the pure explosion of signs, by a movement of aggression and love [...] It was about violence, in a combination of greater and greater complexity [...] In fact, this combination came about from nowhere but the pure explosion of signs.<sup>23</sup>

[A: [...] descendre soi-même, dans sa double identité, ou si tu préfères aviver la pure éclosion des signes, par un mouvement d'agression et d'amour [...] Il s'agit bien de la violence, dans une combinaison de plus en plus complexe [...] Disons la stricte vérité, cette combinaison ne se désigne que dans la pure éclosion des signes.]

He couches the phrase “pure explosion of signs” as meaning the infinite combinations for the identity possible through identifying and disidentifying with, or otherwise through interacting with, the world.

The myth of ancestry comes under intense scrutiny as well. Khatibi describes it in various terms, but the text is bookended by the phrase “the trajectory of maternity” [l’archet maternel].<sup>24</sup> The person nostalgic for origins, for roots, is the inverse figure to the orphan, the person opened to difference. Without acknowledging his “double identity” [sa double identité], the nostalgic, ancestry-obsessed person “is left adrift in a vague land or in pure nostalgia” [identité à basculer dans un terrain vague ou dans la nostalgie pure].<sup>25</sup> An orphan is, by contrast, never lost, but rather fully conscious of the possibilities for realizing a mature identity beyond any essentializing movement toward the consolidation of identity around a node of first emergence, or origins. Khatibi dramatizes the violence inherent in this position of expansion and the constant challenge of re-forming identity through the term “the Very Large Violence” [la Très Grande Violence].<sup>26</sup> This term serves as a sort of umbrella signifier or conceptual referent. Its violence is not negative or excessive; it is not terrorizing, terrible, terrifying or awful. His last mention of the “Very Large Violence” summarizes it as a tripartite energy or momentum—in short, the very nature of the exploration of identity: first, the tattoo [tatouage], the trace of ancestry upon the body; second, perfume [parfum], with its evocation of the most basic and least understood of the senses—the sense of smell—the ambient trace that “calls the person toward the unknown” [m’ouvre lui aussi des énigmes]; and the sign [graphe], with its own multivalence signifying both the letter, and thus logos, and the aesthetic mark, or artistic sign.<sup>27</sup> To knot and to unknot [nouer, dénouer], to tear and to impress [déchirer, inscrire] are the modalities for fulfilling identity in all of its potential richness; they have within them a violence of union and disentanglement that takes place within the self. Without the moorings of a stable, even, we might say, overdetermined, past, the orphan is a figure of the present. Being in the present is a form of being orphaned; it is being without the guarantee of a narrative of the self, without the guarantee of the potential for autobiography. The poetics of the orphan

is implicit here; the Very Large Violence is the spirit of the identity's bricolage as the self moves from the traces of the past writ upon the body, the page, and imbibed through the air; and toward an orientation of constant renovation that characterizes the orphan in the world.

### Lutteur: Second Encounter

*Mémoire* presents an implicit poetics of the orphan; *Lutteur* employs an explicit version of the same. The second work is introduced, in a way, by the first through two uses of the phrase “class warrior” [lutteur de classe]. The first instance comes when Khatibi writes about his childhood living beneath the heavy shadow of his father and elder brother: “With time, I found myself without father and elder brother—his impossible image—while I dreamed of abolishing all tribes, of becoming a class warrior” [Avec le temps, j’ai succédé au père, à l’aîné—son image impossible—, alors que je rêve d’abolir toute tribu, d’être lutteur de classe].<sup>28</sup> Khatibi implements Marxist rhetorical flourishes in *Lutteur* to help generate the rhetorical vigor necessary for a manifesto. The phrase “class warrior” signifies within Khatibi’s early work not a literal Marxist apparatchik or revolutionary, but rather it points, as the quote above signals, to Communism as a form capable of erasing the nostalgia of ancestry that Khatibi feels restrains people from achieving a correct view of identity and from fulfilling their potential growth through encounters with other people and their cultures. The phrase’s second and final comes when Khatibi begins his postface to *Mémoire*; here, the term finds metaphoric value in the idea of a literary “warrior”: “To be a class warrior in ‘the tribe of words,’” [Etre lutteur de classe dans ‘la tribu des mots’].<sup>29</sup> The rhetoric of revolution and warring (or, warriors) serves to emphasize the vigor that Khatibi believes characterizes the nature of identity as the self develops through meeting the constant challenge of the present’s heterogeneity and potential for difference. This contextualizing is of the utmost value as we try to understand *Lutteur* as a poem-cum-manifesto because it leads us away from a direct confrontation with the historical circumstances of the time, namely, we understand that this text does not serve a literal Marxist-political perspective that would ask us to reconcile it with the French left’s support of the Marxist revolution in Cambodia led by Pol Pot.<sup>30</sup>

While the Marxist vocabulary of *Lutteur* may be its most noticeable lexical feature, it is the poetics of the orphan that dominates as theme. The word “orphan” (whether as noun or adjective) is present eighteen times, appearing for the first time in the second numbered poem and being, in fact, the text’s very last word, where the manifesto’s speaker concedes with perhaps false reluctance to be a prophet of the poetics of the orphan, “I steal the title of the orphaned prophet” [Je prendrai furtivement le titre de sage

orphelin].<sup>33</sup> The manifesto is an excellent form through which to propagate his beliefs about the self's achieving its fulfillment through an openness to difference.<sup>32</sup> Khatibi avails himself of the genre's vigor to profess his beliefs. The openly antagonistic tone that characterizes the form leads, as Mary Ann Caws notes, to a form that is "loud, immodest, excess[ive], and exuberant."<sup>33</sup> These are all qualities on display in *Lutteur*. Moreover, it is through the opposition to something that the ideological ends of the manifesto find their correct tack: "As if defining a moment of crisis, the manifesto generally proclaims what it wants to oppose, to leave, to defend, to change. Its oppositional tone is constructed of *againstness* and generally in a spirit of a one time only moment."<sup>34</sup> The crisis, as outlined in the text's first lines, is that of the hollowness of words and mistaken ways of thinking:

history is a word  
 ideology a word  
 the unconscious a word  
 words are like dares  
 in the mouths of the ignorant

[...] don't get lost in your own thinking  
 don't disappear into that of others<sup>35</sup>

[l'histoire est un mot  
 l'idéologie un mot  
 l'inconscient un mot  
 les mots voltigent  
 dans la bouche des ignorants

[...]ne t'envole pas dans ta propre parole  
 ne t'évanouis pas dans celles des autres]

It is against this backdrop, which suggests the unveiling of a "correct" way of thinking, that the next poem introduces the figure of the orphan. We are to understand that the orphan, then, is the correct thinker in addition to being the literary "class warrior"—in short, the paragon of thinking and acting—and that Khatibi's poem's speaker is the correct, or righteous, educator:

the orphan  
 is the class warrior  
 the sovereign orphan

[...] everyone cherishes identity  
everyone looks for origins  
and I teach orphan knowledge

[...]I teach difference without return  
and precision violence  
that's what "orphan" means\*

[orphelin  
est le lutteur de classe  
souverainement orphelin

[...] tout le monde chérit l'identité  
tout le monde cherche l'origine  
et moi j'enseigne le savoir orphelin

[...] j'enseigne la différence sans retour  
et la violence exacte  
tel est le sens du mot <orphelin>]

The implicit poetics of the orphan in *Mémoire* has become a detailed exposition: in both, the speaker positions himself against the obsessive search for origins, but, here, the speaker proposes "difference without return," a constant drive toward the Other that leads to a radical position of the self's constant renovation through incorporating aspects of the new and different; the rhetorical vehicle of the Very Large Violence has morphed into a Marxist revolutionary; and in this positioning of the subject so as to make it impossible to return to false origins, there is "precision violence" not unlike the demand placed upon the self of the Very Large Violence's "contradiction" and "movement of aggression and love." We see an explicit poetics of the orphan in which we must acknowledge the importance of the orphan's sovereignty. The word "sovereignty" means not only the ideas of personal freedom and political self-rule, but it also suggests the qualities of power, activity, and possibility. The sovereign orphan, then, stands in sharp contrast to the exile, a figure burdened by the weight of nostalgia, loss, personal and political powerlessness, and, thus, a person without the desire

or ability to act in the present. The text makes the inverse relationship, or portraiture, of these two figures clear at one important juncture:

identity difference  
two words to point to the same knot

to untie these words [...]  
is to enter into exile  
to consign oneself wildly to the other  
is to open oneself to difference without return<sup>27</sup>

[identité différence  
deux mots pour nommer le même nœud

dénouer ces mots [...]  
c'est se mouvoir dans l'exile  
s'exiler sauvagement à l'autre  
c'est s'ouvrir à la différence sans retour]

The word choice in French is particular: the negatively connoted exile is, as I mentioned, passive; but the positively connoted orphan is a self-willing exile who acts violently without self-pity [s'exiler sauvagement] to effect his ends. This is the heart of the poetics of the orphan, the tying of identity to difference. Identity is tied to forward-leaning difference, inverting the usual belief in the importance of origins for the stability and vitality of the self. To disassociate the two, to "untie these words," is the same as giving up on the potential for self-realization that can take place through the meeting with others. A person, then, becomes an exile for him- or herself in the way that not fulfilling this destiny of identity through difference consigns the self to a diminishing identitarian space of atrophy, decay, and decomposition. These motifs continue through the manifesto. The violence of the class warrior is necessary to separate himself from the nostalgia of personal history. He holds against himself the threat of annihilation in order to achieve self-realization. Life is inherently violent; the formation of the self is also so, and just as in *Mémoire* where Khatibi announces that his goal is to "vary myself to infinity" [me varier à l'infini],<sup>28</sup> here too the same language erupts in the acknowledgement that "the world is a wound" [la blessure au monde]. When this fact is borne constantly in mind, the speaker pronounces he is "infinitely orphaned" [je suis infiniment orphelin] and "capable of destroying myself" [capable de me détruire].<sup>29</sup> As harsh or challenging as this position may seem, it is the poetics of the orphan.

This constant openness to difference and willingness to destroy a momentary version of the self finds expressive motifs in the idea and act of voyages and migrations. If the poetics of place accrues symbolic weight through the register of connotations surrounding placement, then the poetics of the orphan relies upon an imaginary of displacement to generate its affective reach. Perhaps at the center of the affective power of the ideas of placement and displacement is the metaphor and first mooring of the body.<sup>40</sup> Khatibi's speaker defines the body as discombobulated, a non-body, effectively. At the very least, a non-singular body: "place your body in the pleasure of the other / [...] without a center without a right or left / will your body be the sovereign orphan?" [déplace ton corps dans le plaisir de l'autre / [...] sans centre sans droite ni gauche / ton corps sera-t-il souverainement orphelin?]<sup>41</sup> The manifesto ends with the most image-laden and scenically evocative poem. Here, the voyage of the self into the land of the Other takes on magical realistic dimensions. We find the speaker on a boat, having "abandoned the ordered course" [et voici que je quitte la parabole ordonnée];<sup>42</sup> he falls asleep over his ruminations about life; he wakes up on a shore of an unknown desert, where he is greeted by a hunter of sunken treasures and a gazelle. Finally, the treasure hunter speaks to him, reminding him that the desert is an "orphaned truth" [une vérité orpheline],<sup>43</sup> and imploring him to "separate yourself again from your origins from your childhood" [sépare-toi encore de ton origine de ton enfance].<sup>44</sup> It is only then that the truth of the self's plurality can be grasped.

### Poetics of the Orphan to Ethics of Encounter

This paper has attempted to sketch out the major moments and motifs of Khatibi's poetics of the orphan used in different manners but for similar ends in two of his first major works. The word "poetics" in this context suggests a working method and philosophical preoccupation. While it's not my desire to suggest that a poetics leads necessarily to an ethics, certainly, as I hope this paper has shown, the poetics of the orphan is intimately tied to an ethics of encounter. In meeting others, we find ourselves, Khatibi suggests, not merely by identifying with others, but we find ourselves *in* others, dissolving the rational, corporeal divide of beings into an affective network of shared feelings, perspectives, and mutual definition—two parts of a larger bricolage unity and not two separate nodes held at bay in discrete austerity.<sup>45</sup>

Lionnet notes that Khatibi's belief in the "radical potential of open exchange"<sup>46</sup> projects an air of utopianism: "Khatibi's gesture toward a knowable and attainable future has a quasi utopian dimension congruent with his belief that openness to heterogeneity, heteroglossia, and heterophony [...] holds a promise and is 'le signe d'un avenir dans un monde à

*transformer*' [the sign of a future yet to come, of a future becoming in a world in need of change] (Khatibi 1985: p. 63)."<sup>47</sup> But it would be hard to argue that Khatibi's poetics of the orphan ascends to the status of utopian reverie for, at the very least, the reason that the violence each person must wreck upon the self makes it far from an easy feat. The realization of the multifaceted self is a sort of life's work. But, I take it, that's one reason Lionnet couches her characterization as "quasi utopian." Latterly, if there is a hopefulness within the ethics of encounter to which the poetics of the orphan leads us, there is no reason to feel as though a hopeful ethics must be pushed aside for a more conceivably practical—viz. unhopeful—ethics of encounter.

In the poetics of the orphan, Khatibi's thinking about identity is remarkable for its openness to others, as well as to the future—"an identity that is to come" [une identité qui est en devenir], *cribs de Toro*.<sup>48</sup> Many of his ideas accord with, or prefigure in some way, those of Jean-Luc Nancy in *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*.<sup>49</sup> Khatibi was, in his own words, a "believer [in] alternative globalization";<sup>50</sup> in particular, [in] the sort that Nancy marks against the imperial form of globalization as that of "mondialisation" [world-forming]: "[t]he word *mondialisation*, by keeping the horizon of a 'world' as a space of possible meaning for the whole of human relations (or as a space of possible significance) gives a different indication than that of an enclosure in the undifferentiated sphere of a unitotality [which characterizes *globalization*]."<sup>51</sup> The world is absolutely for Khatibi's orphan a "space of possible meaning for the whole of human relations." Khatibi's idea of identity subsumes, or includes, all of the world and its peoples. The identity of an individual is inseparable from the whole of what constitutes the human. Nancy insists that the world (though, presumably, he means that of the Western-oriented world) was transformed from something whose value lay in a vertical relationship with God in heaven to a horizontal relationship with other humans; his "new" world is a world opened to difference, a world that is, like that of Khatibi's orphan, shorn from the narcissistic fable of origins:

If the world, essentially, is not the representation of a universe (*cosmos*) nor that of a here below (a humiliated world, if not condemned by Christianity), but the excess—beyond any representation of an *ethos* or a *habitus*—of a stance by which the world stands by itself, configures itself, and exposes itself in itself, relates to itself without referring to any given principle or to any determined end, then one must address the principle of such an absence of principle directly. This must be named the "without-reason" of the world, or its absence of ground.<sup>52</sup>

Separating ourselves from the religious commentary, we can see that Nancy's thinking shares with Khatibi's critique of origins a willingness to turn from a foundational myth: separated from a pre-ordained location and its inherent value ("*ethos*" and "*habitus*"), the self enters into a new

condition, describable either as the “without-reason” and “groundless[ness]” of the world, or the world of the orphan, both of which foster endless encounters with others. Nancy’s statements in his book’s latter portions also coincide with Khatibi’s desire to exceed identitarian boundaries: “By virtue of the gift and the incessant sharing of the world one does not know where the sharing of a stone or of a person begins or ends”; and “What is appropriate is thus defined by the measure proper to each existent *and* to the infinite, indefinitely open, circulating and transforming community (or communication, contagion, contact) of all existences between them.”<sup>3</sup> These two passages resonate with Khatibi’s ethics of encounter. The correspondence in thinking suggests that there exists an intellectually enriching and not yet explored dialogue between Khatibi and Nancy, and, beyond Nancy himself, between Khatibi and those thinkers, scholars, and social agents who, whether through the lens of theories of globalization or the social realities of current human migrations, are thinking about the possible ethics of encounter available to us today.

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<sup>1</sup> Hassan Wahbi, *Abdelkébir Khatibi: La fable de l’aimance* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2009), 11.

<sup>2</sup> For Khatibi personally, Morocco was an important place, as he expresses in a late work, *Le scribe et son ombre* (Paris: La Différence, 2008):

I live and work in Morocco. This country has a real life to it. I owe it my birth, my name, my initial identity. How could I not love it with benevolence? A critical and vigilant benevolence. A homeland isn’t only the place where a person comes into the world, but a personal choice that gives a sense of belonging. (9)

[Je vis et travaille au Maroc. Ce pays est de force vive. Je lui dois ma naissance, mon nom, mon identité initiale. Comment pourrais-je ne pas l’aimer avec bienveillance! Une bienveillance critique et vigilante. Une patrie n’est pas seulement le lieu de la venue au monde, mais un choix personnel qui fortifie le sentiment d’appartenance.]

Within our context, it’s important to read this statement carefully: first, it’s not a statement about his working methods or critical perspective but about his personal life; secondly, it’s notable that his act of benevolence toward Morocco is, as stated, that of vigilance and critique.

<sup>3</sup> Françoise Lionnet, “Counterpoint and Double Critique in Edward Said and Abdelkébir Khatibi: A Transcolonial Comparison,” in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. by Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (London: Blackwell, 2011), 390.

<sup>4</sup> Khatibi, *Scribe*, 23-4.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida’s critique in *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1967) is deservedly famous; he points to parousia as,

[...] life without difference: another word for death, the historical metonymy where the name of God holds death in respect. It’s why, if this movement opens its epoch in the form



of Platonism, it is accomplished in the moment of the metaphysics of infinity. Only the infinite being can reduce difference into presence. [...] Only the positive infinity can efface the trace, “sublimate” it. (104)

[...] vie sans différence: autre nom de la mort, historique métonymie où le nom de Dieu tient la mort en respect. C’est pourquoi, si ce mouvement ouvre son époque dans la forme de platonisme, il s’accomplit dans le moment de la métaphysique infinitiste. Seul l’être infini peut réduire la différence dans la présence. [...] Seul l’infini positif peut lever la trace, la “sublimier”]

<sup>6</sup> Wahbi, *Abdelkébir Khatibi*, 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Khatibi, “Frontiers Between Psychoanalysis and Islam,” trans. by P. Burcu Yalim, *Third Text* 23.6 (Nov 2009): 689. [Previously published in French in *Cahiers Intersignes* 1 (Spring 1990): 13-22.] His interest in Freud is guided by Freud’s exploratory approach to frontiers: “Freud then transforms his margin, this frontier, into a working laboratory” (ibid).

<sup>9</sup> Khatibi, *La blessure du nom propre* (Paris: Denoël, 1974). The richness of Khatibi’s idiom means that his best work follows the Derridean, post-structuralism tendency to emphasize how meaning is multivalent. Generally, Khatibi uses a strategy whereby a steady diet of signifiers are reiterated over different textual topographies so that these terms find new meanings within themselves—like one valley will give a slight variation to a species found also in the surrounding valleys. While the idea of the frontier is paired with the orphan, the orphan arises in conjunction as well with his playful term for personal identity, “le nom propre.” *La blessure de nom propre* is the only major work that he published between *Mémoire* and *Lutteur*, with the exception of *Vomito Blanco* (Paris: Union générale des éditions, 1974), a tract on Zionism.

<sup>10</sup> Khatibi, *La blessure du nom propre*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Khatibi, *La blessure du nom propre*, 213.

<sup>12</sup> Khatibi, *La blessure du nom propre*, 226.

<sup>13</sup> Khatibi, *La blessure du nom propre*, 234.

<sup>14</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 1971 (Rabat: Okad, 2007), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Wahbi, *Abdelkébir Khatibi*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 87.

<sup>19</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 107-8.

<sup>21</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 108.

<sup>22</sup> The term “bricolage” returns at a key juncture in “Double against Double (Dialogue).” The role B, a portion of his self that we might see as being traditional or skeptical of the new poetics of the orphan that the role A espouses, reacts with shock and disgust to the idea of a composite identity, “What a mixed-up identity!” [Quel bricolage d’identité] (181). This, though, we are

meant to understand as a reactionary and regressive position that does not understand the appeal of the poetics of the orphan.

<sup>23</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 183-4.

<sup>24</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 10, 187.

<sup>25</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 184.

<sup>26</sup> The term is mentioned for the first time in the context of the protection and love that women lavished upon him as a child (49). He characterizes it at a later point as “revolution against revolution” [révolution contre révolution] (156), which has the double sense of a turning (an inversion) against a previous turning (version), but also has the violence associated with revolutions of the warring kind. Of note as well, he mentions the “Very Large Violence” nine times in the text’s last twenty pages, which we might think of as, first, the final crescendo and, then, the apogee or thematic crystalization of the poetics of the orphan in this text.

<sup>27</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 186.

<sup>28</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, 191.

<sup>30</sup> The historical circumstances that link, if only coincidentally, Khatibi with the Khmer Rouge are the following: the Khmer Rouge invaded Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975, and *Lutteur* was published in France the next year. While it wasn’t until 1979 and the fall of Pol Pot’s regime that the French Marxist left renounced, or regretted, their support, Lionnet mentions how Khatibi was anything but a stereotypical figure of the French left and that, moreover, he offered his own critiques of Marxism (394, 400).

<sup>31</sup> Khatibi, *Le lutteur de classe à la manière taoïste* (Paris: Sindbad, 1976), 73.

<sup>32</sup> Lionnet writes of the success and variety of generic ways and discursive means that Khatibi employs to tease out the different strands of meaning latent within his position that identity and difference are bound in conversation: “Throughout his career, Khatibi sustains his interest in the way identity is always interwoven with difference, and he keeps searching for discursive modes that can best enable productive dialogue among differently situated voices (De Toro, 2008; Gaertner, 2002)” (391).

<sup>33</sup> Mary Ann Caws, “The Poetics of the Manifesto,” *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), xvi.

<sup>34</sup> Caws, “The Poetics of the Manifesto,” xvii.

<sup>35</sup> Khatibi, *Lutteur*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Khatibi, *Lutteur*, 13-4.

<sup>37</sup> Khatibi, *Lutteur*, 62. Yet two things must be said here. First, this contrast does not emerge as clearly in the former text, though we might expect this difference to obtain, as each text has its goals and discursive formations. In *Mémoire*, when writing of his time as a Master’s student in Paris, Khatibi mentions two friends, Jacques and Pierre, who were “orphans, exiled like me” [orphelins, exilés comme moi] (121). Three other mentions of the word “exile” include characterizations of Khatibi’s student and post-student life when he lived (and wandered) in Europe: “Paris neutralizes loneliness, gives to each person recompense for his exile, brightens boredom, and undercuts the most persistent resistance” [Paris neutralise la solitude, donne à

chacun la monnaie de son exil, décolore l'ennui, rend vacillante la résistance la plus sûre] (130); "Added to the city like so many exiles, I wandered in Paris, zealous and undefeated [...]" [Additionné à la ville comme tant de nostalgies exilées, je glissais dans Paris, acharné et invaincu] (140); London was "the garden of the exile" [le jardin de l'exilé] (152). Secondly, *Lutteur* isn't entirely consistent with this differentiation, though this variability doesn't ultimately undermine the difference between the two figures as described in the passage above. In the manifesto's last poem, the exile is a figure of universal human suffering and perverse pleasure: "sometimes freeing his wings the exile gets drunk / [...] a plaything of difference the exile luxuriates in a strange suffering / this is the human lot" [tantôt libérant ses ailes l'exil l'enivre / [...] et jouet de la différence il effleure une étrange souffrance / il est donné aux hommes] (69). I add these notes for bibliographic thoroughness, and trust the reader of Khatibi, as well as this essay, to see the point I'm making.

<sup>38</sup> Khatibi, *Mémoire*, 152.

<sup>39</sup> Khatibi, *Lutteur*, 38.

<sup>40</sup> In writing about *Mémoire*, Alfonso de Toro writes of both Khatibi's thematic use of the body and of migration: "We have a type of thinking, of culture, and of nomadic identity, always on the go, moving, and finally, migratory" [Nous avons un type de pensée, de culture et d'identité nomade, toujours en marche, en chemin, migrante finalement] (74). This could equally be said about *Lutteur*, in particular its last poem. In de Toro, "Au delà de la francophonie: Représentations de la pensée hybride au Maghreb (Abdelkebir Khatibi-Assia Djebar)," *Neohelicon* 35: 63-86.

<sup>41</sup> Khatibi, *Lutteur*, 33.

<sup>42</sup> Khatibi, *Lutteur*, 69.

<sup>43</sup> Khatibi, *Lutteur*, 72.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> de Toro summarizes Khatibi's views in *Penser le Maghreb* (Rabat: SMER, 1993) in the following way: "The encounter with another culture and its appropriation takes place thus in a process of mutual appropriation" [La rencontre avec l'autre culture et son appropriation se fait ainsi processus d'appropriation mutuel ainsi qu'appropriation de l'autre identité] (79). Indeed, we could easily extend the investigation of the poetics of the orphan across Khatibi's entire oeuvre.

<sup>46</sup> Lionnet, "Counterpoint and Double Critique in Edward Said and Abdelkébir Khatibi," 401.

<sup>47</sup> Lionnet, "Counterpoint and Double Critique in Edward Said and Abdelkébir Khatibi," 402.

<sup>48</sup> de Toro, 79.

<sup>49</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, trans. by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> Khatibi, "L'Intellectuel et le mondialisme," *Oeuvres III* (Paris: La Découverte, 2008), 323; quoted in Lionnet, 391.

<sup>51</sup> Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 28.

<sup>52</sup> Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> Nancy, *The Creation of the World*, 110.