

# Etel Adnan

---

## To Write in a Foreign Language

Languages start at home; so I will start with the history of my involvement with many languages and with the way the use of languages which were not the ones I should have normally spoken or used in writing poetry and prose, affected me. I will start with some information about my own family's background, and its own struggles on the same theme.

My mother was a Greek from Smyrna, when Smyrna, before World War I, was a predominantly Greek city, a Greek speaking community within the Ottoman Empire. My father was an Arab. He was born in Damascus, Syria. At the age of twelve he joined the Military Academy in Istanbul, called the War College. That was close to the end of the nineteenth century. Damascus was a part of the Ottoman Empire, and my father was an Ottoman officer. Turkey being then an ally of the Kaiser's Germany, my father got training in Turkish, German, and French, besides his earlier studies in Arabic. French was taught in the Ottoman Empire for general education, for the same reasons that it was also taught in Russia.

My father, who was a Moslem, married my mother who, much younger than him, also represented a different culture. This was at the beginning of World War I, somewhere around 1916. So I was told. They spoke Turkish together; the Greeks, living in Turkey, all knew some Turkish and spoke Greek only at home and in their schools. Their lives were very close to their church, and culture and religion were intertwined. There were extremely few marriages outside one's culture-group.

The Ottoman Empire was an "empire," which meant it was not a state with a unified group of people. It was an empire in which Turkish was not even the most spoken language. Turkish itself was a language full of Arabic words and expression, because the Turks, being Moslems, learned the Koran in Arabic. There were also Armenians, in the Empire who spoke Armenian, as well as Turkish. So almost everybody knew at least a bit of another language besides their own; but everyone was rooted in their community language and life.

So, as I said, my parents had Turkish as a common language. My mother had gone to a convent school until she was twelve; the French had convents in all the major cities, and the "educated" people learned French. Some French, at least. So my parents understood French, knew how to read and write it. My mother spoke, but did not study, Turkish. So when my father was on the Dardanelles front, close to Istanbul, for quite a while and through a major battle, he wrote letters to her in French. His language was romantic, in the tone of the German, Austrian, or Russian novels of the time. Many years later, because these letters were carefully kept and

were my mother's pride and joy, I read them. They could have been written within a work like Tolstoi's "War and Peace": they spoke of love, of war, of life and of death. They were written under the sound of the cannons, in black ink and a handwriting that drew the letters of the alphabet very clearly. They are lost today, because of the too many moves I made in my life, and the carelessness of my younger days.

I was born in Beirut, Lebanon, because at the end of World War I my parents left Turkey and came to settle in Beirut. Beirut was close to Damascus, my father's home. Many years later, I was born in a world totally different from the one my parents knew. The Allies had occupied the Arab East and had divided it; the French kept for themselves a region they sub-divided into Syria and Lebanon. They immediately started in Lebanon, a network of French schools run by French priests, brothers, and nuns.

Thus, I went to a French convent school and was educated in French. The children of my generation saw a country ruled by French people who enjoyed for themselves, and their language and customs, the prestige always attributed to Power. We were taught the same books as the French kids in Europe, the capital of the world seemed to be Paris, and we learned the names of all kinds of things we never heard or saw: French rivers, French mountains, the history of blue-eyed people who had built an empire. The French nuns whose families had just suffered an invasion from the Kaiser's armies hated the Germans and passed on to us the hatred of German...and so on. Somehow we breathed an air where it seemed that being French was superior to anyone, and as we were obviously not French, the best thing was at least to speak French. Little by little, a whole generation of educated boys and girls felt superior to the poorer kids who did not go to school and spoke only Arabic. Arabic was equated with backwardness and shame. Years later I learned that the same thing was happening all over the French empire, in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Black Africa and Indochina.

The method used to teach French to the children was in itself a kind of a psychological conditioning against which nobody objected, the people thinking that whatever nuns do is always good and for the best: so there was a system in all the French-run schools which charged a few selected students to "spy" on the others: anybody heard in class or in recreation speaking Arabic was punished and a little stone was immediately put into the pocket of that child; speaking Arabic was equated with the notion of sin. Most of the students spoke Arabic at home, but when they themselves became parents they started talking in either French or Arabic to their own children, or a mixture of the two languages.

Going back to my own childhood: as early as I can remember I spoke Greek and Turkish until I was about five years old, the time I went to school. The fact that at school I spoke French, and that there were French residents in the city — some of them neighbors with whom my mother used the French she herself had learned in Smyrna in her childhood — made us as a family use French at home more and more: my mother happily, my father reluctantly. And there were reasons for that: my father was an Arab in an Arab country and spoke Arabic in his dealings in town or with his friends. My mother, not knowing Arabic, identified somewhat with the French people, although she never thought that being a Greek made her similar to them. No, she only knew their language, imperfectly, and used it, and started to use it also with me, the only child of her marriage.

I remember my father, who was an old man for the child I was and looked rather like the grandparents of the other kids, once in a while, like somebody getting out of a dream, start suddenly to get worried and say to my mother things along

these lines: "we are not in France, and all this French speaking is not right. This child should learn Arabic." She would reply: "Why don't you teach her?" and he would keep silent, or say a few words in Arabic, words that seemed to be swallowed up by the whole house. When I was six or seven I remember my father had a fountain pen which he liked particularly; once in a while he had to fill out administrative papers, and since Arabic was the official language, he wrote, in a regular and distinguished way, lines and lines in a language which was for me neither foreign nor familiar. He taught me the Arabic alphabet, and made me copy it maybe a hundred times. I used to draw the letters with application.

Then, for a short while, he used an old Arabic-Turkish grammar that had survived his own adventurous life. He was proud of telling me that it was the very Arabic-Turkish grammar he had used at the Military Academy as a cadet: the book was thick, narrow, with yellowish pages, and its cover much written over. I learned in it to decline verbs, and short sentences which explained the use of the verb forms. Sometimes I was bored, or distracted; he used to scold me gently, but he used to lose his own patience very quickly, and using my mother as a witness he would say: "it's hopeless, the schools should be doing that, and these nuns are propagandists. Everything is propaganda in this country!" Tired of giving unscheduled lessons, and perhaps, and more seriously, because of being a man vanquished in the war, a witness to the end of an empire for which he fought, got wounded and decorated, this Ottoman officer was not a pedagogue: he told me one day to sit and copy the grammar book, page after page: "copy these lessons, he told me, and you will learn Arabic."

So I remember that once in a while (did it last one year, two years, a single season? I can't tell) I used to sit and copy — which means reproduce faithfully, words after words whose alphabet I understood, but seldom their meaning — never trying to understand what I was writing: I think that I loved the act of writing things I did not understand, and I pretended that I was learning a language without effort, just by writing it down. There must have been something hypnotizing about these exercises because much later, and for different reasons, I ended up doing practically the same thing. Of this I will speak later.

Copying a language I didn't know did not make me learn Arabic; and living in a school where Arabic was the forbidden thing made me feel very alone and want to give it up. My father inadvertently helped; he said one day, maybe out of nostalgia for his student days at the War College — I remember this very clearly, because by then I must have been about ten years old — he said that the future of the world was in the sciences and particularly chemistry, and that he would send me when I grew up to Germany to study and be a chemist. Was I happy to dream of such an extraordinary thing, or was it an ideal excuse not to study Arabic? All I know is that when, a few years later, under the pressure of the Government, the French schools started to teach a course in Arabic for two hours a week, I went up to the Mother Superior of the school and told her that as I was going to Germany some day to study I didn't need to take the course. She said that was all right, if that was what my parents thought. So I took Latin with the French born children and never went beyond the first chapters. Spring in Beirut made children troublesome and summer followed very quickly; extra studies like Latin, drawing, sewing, and botany never went very far with anybody. And as for adding Arabic! Arabic became a second class language within its own country.

When World War II erupted I was in secondary school. I saw the city of Beirut

become an internationally important city. The French and British armies had headquarters in it and the cosmopolitan character of the place glittered with a special romanticism for which movies had prepared us. To a population which included communities of Greeks, Italians, Kurds, and Armenians, besides the native population, were added troops of different nationalities making up the Allied armies: Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, Black Africans, Free Poles. Beirut became a microcosm, a little tornado of war and fun. It did not see real war, but the armies which were tearing the world apart.

For the little girl I was, that meant "new" faces, new "happenings," new languages. We became conscious of the "importance" of the English language, and some Lebanese families who were familiar with Alexandria and Cairo, who had lived there and had come back, brushed up the English they spoke just to be in the stream of History. The American University of Beirut, which had mainly foreign students, started increasing its Lebanese student body. The city which was bilingual was becoming trilingual. When, in fact, about ten years later the Palestinian refugees came to Lebanon, the most educated among them knew Arabic and English and a whole business section of the city, close to the American University, used English and not French as a commercial language.

Universities create cultural areas around them and Beirut revolved around three universities that represented three cultures, three ways of life, three intellectual options, I would say three destinies. And as expected, writers, literary magazines, even newspapers, followed the trend. It was of course a kind of wealth, an opening onto the world, a thrilling diversity. But it also created, in a country too small to easily absorb such a strong wind of change and cultural pulling apart, undercurrents of tensions that were to explode a generation later and practically destroy it.

Little by little, Lebanon developed an intense cultural life, but this was fragmented into linguistic groups: there were major poets (like Georges Schehadeh), writing in French; most were still writing in Arabic, and there were writers, poets and journalists writing in English. For a country of three million people such a phenomenon considerably reduced the audience for each group. It was a genuine problem. A poet or a writer never had the feeling that he or she was addressing himself or herself to the nation as a whole. I was writing in French. I started writing poetry at the age of twenty: it was a long poem that I called "Le Livre de la Mer," "The Book of the Sea," a poem which sees the interrelation between the sun and the sea as a kind of cosmic eroticism. But even here, later on, the fact that the poem was written in French presented me with a problem. My work in poetry is generally translated into Arabic and published in the two or three most important Arab literary magazines. "The Book of the Sea" is not yet translated for the very reason that the sea, as a noun, in French, is feminine, and the sun is a masculine word. In Arabic it is the contrary: the whole poem is developed along the metaphor of the sea being a woman and the sun a warrior, or a masculine principle. So the poem is not only not translatable, it is, in a genuine sense, unthinkable in Arabic.

In the early fifties I went to Paris to study philosophy at the Sorbonne and wrote some poetry. I met American students at the Cité Universitaire and after a short trip back to Beirut I landed in New York, in January 1955, and a few months later in Berkeley, California. I did not realize that changing universities was not just continuing one's studies elsewhere. It was a total subversion of one's own thinking, a little earthquake in a student's life. Going from the Sorbonne to the University of California in Berkeley, in 1955, was like changing planets. Knowing four languages

already, more or less efficiently, was I aware of language as a potential problem? I really still don't know: what I do know is that I arrived in Berkeley, in a philosophy department at the time when Anglo-Saxon universities were — to make matters worse for me — involved mainly in linguistics (and, I should add, symbolic logic). It had not occurred to me that the ten words and five sentences I could manage in English were no preparation to audit such complicated courses. I did my best; read *Time* magazine avidly, listened to jazz records, and within six months I was pretty much integrated — at least superficially — into American university life.

Something happened, though, which determined my life: I fell in love with the American language. I was thrilled by the Californian way of speaking English, by the style, the lingo, the slang, of American publications, by the "specialized" languages of American sports; listening to baseball games or football games was like entering secret worlds. I don't know if I liked the games in their own right or the whole ritualistic language that went with them. I used to feel proud of describing games, to friends, in their right terminology. I was happy to use idiomatic expressions, to understand cowboy talk and small town talk. I knew, in American, things I could not tell in any of the languages I knew, because my experiences in those languages were limited, or seemed limited, or were too familiar to keep for me a sense of discovery. Speaking in America was like going up the Amazon River, full of dangers, full of wonders.

At the University things were different. I had a hard time trying to find interest in my new studies; I had to redirect deeply rooted habits of thinking and feeling. I remember how amazed I was, or rather how shocked, when I heard that one of my fellow students, a young Yugoslav man, had the subject he proposed for his Ph.D. thesis rejected. He wanted to write on Nietzsche and they told him that this was not acceptable because Nietzsche was not a philosopher, but a poet (things have changed since the cultural revolution of the sixties and I doubt that today this subject matter would be refused on the same grounds.) But I was all the more unable to understand the Department's decision, given that I considered philosophy, after Hölderlin and Heidegger, as finding its greatest expression in poetry.

I was doing very little writing those days because I was in a state of permanent discovery: a whole new world was being opened day after day, and that included the discovery of Nature as a force, a haunting beauty, a matter of daylight dreaming, an obsession. Riding in a car on the American highways was like writing poetry with one's whole body. I did not stay more than a few years at the University and never wrote any doctoral thesis. I found a job in a small college in Marin County, close to San Francisco, teaching Humanities. I was happy.

I was starting something new, a new experience, and the feeling of some sort of stability, a profession which has its own rhythms, brought me back to the desire for writing. I still considered myself as a French speaking person, even if I was teaching in English. But when I thought seriously about poetry and writing again, I discovered a problem of a political nature. It was during the Algerian war of independence. The morning paper was regularly bringing news of Algerians being killed in the war, or news of the atrocities that always seem to accompany large scale violence. I became suddenly, and rather violently, conscious that I had naturally and spontaneously taken sides, that I was emotionally a participant in the war, and I resented having to express myself in French. Today I do not have these violent reactions towards the French language because the problem has long been settled. There is peace between Algeria and France. Then, things were different: Arab

destiny as a whole seemed to be dependent on the outcome of that conflict. The dream of Arab unity was very alive then, and Algeria was its symbol.

I realized that I couldn't write freely in a language that faced me with a deep conflict. I was disturbed in one fundamental realm of my life: the domain of meaningful self-expression. Something quite unexpected solved my problem, a solution which was like the opening of a side window, as if one morning the sun did not rise where it was expected to rise, but close by, at a different point of the horizon. I met, on the Berkeley campus, a woman who was the head of the Art Department of the College. Her name is Ann O'Hanlon. We chatted in the middle of an alley next to rose bushes and when I told her that one of the courses I was teaching was Philosophy of Art, she asked me if I was painting, and when I said "no," she wondered how one dealt with the philosophy of a subject one did not practice, and my answer was, I remember clearly, that my mother had told me I was clumsy. She said: "And did you believe her?!"

The fateful conversation not only instantaneously freed my hands, but also, like a planet changing orbits, it directed my attention, and then my energies, toward a new art form which meant a new universe of interests. I went to the Art Department in my free time and I started painting. I soon realized that to me this meant a new language and a solution to my dilemma: I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic.

All this was happening around the year 1960. Furiously, I became a painter. I immersed myself in that new language. Abstract art was the equivalent of poetic expression; I didn't need to use words, but colors and lines. I didn't need to belong to a language-oriented culture but to an open form of expression (many years later, traveling in Morocco, I had a discussion with a Moroccan painter who told me that in his view Morocco has so many good painters because this is the way their best artists solve the language problem, those of the generation who grew up under the dominance of French culture). My spirit was loose. I understood that one can move in different directions, that the mind, unlike one's body, can go simultaneously in many dimensions, that I moved not on single planes but within a spherical mental world, and that what we consider to be problems can also be tensions, working in more mysterious ways than we understand. As time passed, and as I taught in English, I felt more and more at ease with this new language I was using. I was not using this new language, I was living it.

Then, there was Vietnam. America in Vietnam. Vietnam in the American psyche. The war on television. The protests in the streets. The cultural revolution that was taking place in America had Vietnam as one of its sources, and one of its consequences was that the war issue became also a literary rallying point, a concern for the poets and a dynamic subject matter. Poets wrote against the war, or rather, fought against the war through poetry.

One day — I was particularly affected by the war images on the television screen, and was tired and dispirited—I found on the table of the Professors' Lounge, a literary magazine looking like a newspaper folded in four; it said it was distributed freely, and welcomed poetry as action against the war. That was the *S.B. Gazette* (S and B standing for Sausalito and Belvedere, two elegant small towns north of San Francisco). I came home, put a piece of paper in my typewriter and, almost as if not paying attention to what I was doing, wrote a poem: "The ballad of the lonely knight in present-day America," and sent it to the *S.B. Gazette*. In a few days came a

note scribbled with a pencil on a torn notebook page saying "poem much welcome" and below: "send more!" and was signed "Leon Spiro." I was a poet in the English language!

I wrote some other poems, dictated by emotions and events, and felt part of an immense movement of American poets at a time when poetry seemed to grow in that country like music and grass. One day Robert Kennedy was asked by journalists, for maybe the tenth time in his life, how he felt about his brother's absence. Bobby Kennedy cried and as an answer cited Romeo's speech on Juliet's beauty in the night. I was so moved to see a man, in a culture that denies men the need to cry as being a sign of weakness, cry openly for his dead brother and express through Shakespeare his sense of the inner unity of love, that I wrote to him and said I would be happy if he read the poem I had written, the first one, the ballad. I got a wonderful answer telling me he was moved by the text.

Letters arrived asking me if I would participate in poetry readings or have the poems I wrote republished in some anthologies. I received letters from poets from the United States or Latin America which were sent just to share thoughts. That was a time when poetry became, for a few years, the only religion which has no gods and dogmas, no punishments, no threats, no hidden motivations, no commercial use, no police and no Vatican. It was an open brotherhood open to women, men, trees and mountains.

I was entering the English language like an explorer: each word came to life, expressions were creations, adverbs were immensely immense, verbs were shooting arrows, a simple preposition like "in" and "out" an adventure! Writing was a sport, sentences were like horses, opening space in front of them with their energies, and beautiful to ride.

The old ghosts had not disappeared. The Arab World did not vanish from my preoccupations. On the contrary. I was starting to travel in the summers to Morocco, or Tunisia, or back to Jordan, Syria, Lebanon. I made friends with many Arab poets of Arabic or French expression. Poetry and painting stayed separate, but one day when I decided to write, or, to be precise, copy poetry in Arabic with the intent to integrate "calligraphy" into a style of working with watercolors and inks which was contemporary, I engaged myself on a trail that is still in front of me. I found Japanese folded papers, like the old books of Japanese woodcuts where each double page was an image tied, or not tied, to the following ones. Something from my childhood emerged: the pleasure of writing, line after line, Arabic sentences which I understood very imperfectly: I took modern poetry written by the major Arab poets and "worked" with them. I did not try to have them translated to me, I was satisfied with the strange understanding of them: bits here and there, sentences where I understood but one key word; it was like seeing through a veil, looking at an extraordinary scenery through a screen, as if the screen did not erase images but toned them down and made them look even more mysterious than they were.

Year after year I worked on these long papers, like horizontal scrolls, with my imperfect writing, aware that it was the opposite of classical calligraphy that was at stake; it was reading through the art of a poet's work. These works have been exhibited in galleries in the United States and in some Arab capitals. They arouse questions, they provoke passionate discussions, they puzzle most of the time, they make their ways in magazines, articles and critics' studies. They represent to me a coming to terms which I would never have expected until it happened, with the many threads that make up the tapestry of my life. I integrated myself in the cultural

destiny of the Arabs by very indirect ways, and I hope that the search is not over.

Where am I now?

I gave up teaching in the early seventies and went back to Beirut. I left the United States suddenly. I came into a city which was going through its best years. I threw myself into the center of an active volcano. It was fascinating. I found myself again in a French speaking world, French and Arabic, but mostly French for me, as I found a job as director of the cultural pages of a French speaking and newly founded daily paper. It was good to again be where Arab history was seemingly happening, to go to Aleppo for a vacation instead of the Sierras, and to know more of Cairo and Damascus than of New York. It was refreshing, it was exciting, this shift into new territory. Beirut had moved so fast that it was for me a brand new city.

Of course, I wrote in French, left English aside out of necessity. I was too busy to meditate on its consequences on anything called a "literary career." Literature has never been a profession to me, it has been something for books. My own writing was like my own breathing: something I was doing.

A tragic and nasty war erupted in Beirut in 1975. People's lives exploded with the buildings and, like the pieces of the destroyed buildings, they went in all directions. Some of us went to Paris. French speaking Lebanese went to Paris. English speaking Lebanese went to London or New York. Some, mostly for business purposes, went to Arab countries. I went to Paris two years after the war had started, not to stay indefinitely but to wait for things to calm down in Lebanon. Things did not calm down, as we all know, they went from bad to worse, from civil war to occupation. When in Paris, I heard of a terrible thing that had happened in Lebanon: a woman I knew a little but respected immensely was kidnapped by Christian militiamen, tortured and killed. I am not telling her story here, only that the "reasons" for her ordeal were not morally acceptable. I wrote a book, a fiction based on reality, about this tragic incident: *Sitt Marie-Rose* was written and published in Paris. In French.

I had personal reasons, a few years later, to go back to California, as going back to Beirut looked more and more a difficult thing to do. The paper I was working for had closed. Other difficulties were to be considered.

Back in California. What would I do in California but paint and also write. I realized that I think more happily, with a more natural flow, when I don't fight my environment. I would even say that my writing is influenced, or rather grows, the way plants grow out of soil and water, from the land I am inhabiting. So whenever I write in America, I write in English.

What can I say of the fact that I do not use my native tongue and do not have the most important feeling that as a writer I should have, the feeling of a direct communication with one's audience? It is like asking what I would have been if I were somebody else. There are no answers to such questions. These questions are like trying to hold reflections in one's hands. There are a growing number of writers who use an "international" language, like English, who use in fact another language than their own because of history, or because of exile, or because of personal taste.

Do I feel exiled? Yes, I do. But it goes back so far, it lasted so long, that it became my own nature, and I can't say I suffer too often from it. There are moments

when I am even happy about it. A poet is, above all, human nature at its purest. That's why a poet is as human as a cat is a cat or a cherry tree is a cherry tree. Everything else comes "after." Everything else matters, but also sometimes does not matter. Poets are deeply rooted in language and they transcend language.

Someone can stand up and ask me why didn't I, on my own, at some point in my life, learn Arabic? This is a question that sometimes haunts me. I don't go on accusing the old colonial system (like Franz Fanon so beautifully did). I am not, and Arab writers are not, for example, in the situation of the Black African writers whose native languages have been totally eradicated by both the French colonial administration and then by their own governments. Arab writers are totally responsible for the language they use.

I have always been part of the here and now. I did not take time out of everyday life to consecrate all my efforts to acquire Arabic as a full language. When the sun is strong and the sea is blue I can't close my windows and go in and "study" anything. I am a person of the perpetual present. So I stayed "outside"; Arabic remained a forbidden paradise. I am both a stranger and a native to the same land, to the same mother tongue. This century told us too many times to stay alone, to cut all ties, never to look back, to go and conquer the moon: and this is what I did. This is what I do.

---

Also by [Etel Adnan](#): [There](#)

---

[poetry](#) // [interview](#) // [table of contents](#) // [essay](#) // [reviews](#)  
[current issue](#)

The logo for Electronic Poetry Review (EPR) consists of the letters 'E', 'P', and 'R' in a white, serif font, set against a dark blue rectangular background with a slight gradient and a drop shadow.

Copyright © 1996 [Electronic Poetry Review](#)  
Hosted by [Jeonet](#)