ART AND THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION IN MUḤAMMAD BARRĀDĀH’S AL-ḌAWʼ AL-ḤĀRĪB (THE FUGITIVE LIGHT)

Muḥammad Barrādāh is among Morocco’s most prominent scholars and writers today; yet his literary work has received little attention to date. His first novel, Luʿbat al-Nisyān (The Game of Forgetting) (1987), translated both into French and English,¹ has found its way to the shelves of numerous libraries, but has drawn the critical attention of only a handful, while his second novel, Al-Ḍawʼ al-Ḥārīb (1993) (The Fugitive Light), translated into French,² remains virtually unknown. In addition to his novels, Muḥammad Barrādāh is one of the Maghreb’s leading critics and translators. His educational background, which took him first to Egypt’s Cairo University and then to the Sorbonne in Paris, has allowed him to work concomitantly with both the Western theoretical and literary cultures and the Arabic literary tradition. He has translated into Arabic such diverse writers as Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtine, Le Clezio, Abdelkebir Khatibi and Tahar ben Jalloun. However, his engagement with these authors extends well beyond the translations, for in his writings, both literary and critical, and especially on the question of the novel, Barrādāh is in constant conversation with the thoughts of these thinkers and many others. In addition to his translations and critical essays, he is also the author of Muḥammad Mandūr wa Tanẓīr al-Naqd al-ʿArabī, a collection of short stories entitled Salk al-Jīlīd, and Mīthl Ṣayfīn Lān Yatakarrar, his memoirs of Egypt, published in 1999 (for more detailed information on Barrādāh’s life and work see Boulatta’s introduction to The Game 1-12).

The central concern in Luʿbat al-Nisyān is the question of memory as the novel (re)constructs history through writing. While telling the story of a past, the narrative interrupts this telling by asking the question of the game that such a process of remembering plays. Al-Ḍawʼ al-Ḥārīb focuses on the problematic of (re)presentation and art. While thematically and stylistically these two novels differ from each other—the first concerning itself


primarily with memory and narrativity and the second with art—the seminal question for both works is one and the same: the question of the modalities of presentation in art and through art. The two novels call to each other, comment upon each other and direct attention to each other. These points of intersection reveal the centrality of the thorny issue of the relationship between art and philosophy for Barrādah’s literary itinerary. This paper will address this relationship by following the trajectory of a movement of rapprochement between writing and painting as laid out in Al-Ḍaw‘ al-Hārib. As will be shown, the path of this rapprochement between the two arts leads to theoretical insights into the question of art and its relationship to works of art. Brief references, however, will be made to the first novel as well in order to demonstrate the continuity of these thoughts in Barrādah’s work.

Jean-Luc Nancy opens his reflections on aesthetics with the question “why are there several arts and not just one?” There has never been art but always arts, as there has never been a Muse, but Muses. The issue that interests Nancy is the relationship between the unity implied by “art,” a term in use only since the romantic period, and the multiplicity that seems to belong to the “essence” of art, to its very origin. Since the multiplicity of the arts is no longer posited as secondary manifestations of an original moment of unity, the ground of their being, the task of thinking is no longer that of tracing the arts back to a single source. With the origin always already plural, the traditional philosophical question of “what is art?” which always seeks the truth, the essence, the singular origin of the thing, is replaced by the questions “where does art happen?” and “what happens when there is art?” Here thinking finds a new direction by turning from the question of essence to that of presentation.

Al-Ḍaw‘ al-Hārib confronts the problematic of presentation on several levels that include both form and content: first, it is a novel and as such addresses the issue of the relationship between this art of language, that is, literature, and the world, that is, the real. Second, it tells the story of a painter and his relationship with the images that he creates or rather does not create. Third, it explores the relationship of these two art forms with each other.

We begin with the end of the novel, for it is here that we best glimpse the inaugural dilemma of presentation. This final section of the novel is entitled “min daffātir al-ʿAyshūnī” (from al-ʿAyshūnī’s notebooks). These are a series of journal entries, the last of which tells of the project for the novel and thus exposes two levels of complexity with which we must contend. First, the painter gives his journal entries to a writer friend to construct a

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