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# Tattooed Memory

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*Translated by Peter Thompson*

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## *Reading Khatibi*

Having now this *Tattooed Memory* in English reminds us of the store of Khatibi's (and the Maghrebi?) memory—of all its sources and his Moroccan childhood. But it also reminds us of our language and our languages, and that they (say, the original, French, version of this book) are not just the end point but also the source. In this case the sources are Berber, Arabic, and French. And a new end point (a source for the translator) is English.

Perhaps the deepest source is Berber culture. Childhood, mother, argan scents, tattoos on hands. And language. With all the other sources of this difficult poetry, we must remember that Arabic, French, Koranic ones come later.

The strain and discovery that marks writing/thinking in (at least) two languages throughout this narration produces the special trait of Khatibi's style. But the strain and discovery are also his content, his subject. This has been commented by many, but English readers have never been able to see its development (development through the growth of the self) as we do in Khatibi's first novel.

If there is another that urgently needs to be translated it is *La Blessure du nom propre*. It is here that language issues, Maghrebin struggles, and—once again, in Khatibi's innovative way—identity questions reach their fullest expression.

If there were a translator to take on this project, would that it be a poet-practitioner as honest and sympathetic as one Peter Thompson. ~~

*Nabile Farès*, winner, Kateb Yacine Prize, Lifetime Work





## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This translation has been long in coming—perhaps, we imagine, because of its difficulty. One of the challenges came—in Morocco—in securing rights after Khatibi's death. The only other novel in translation is Richard Howard's version of *Amour bilingue* of twenty-five years ago.

Now, Gentle Reader, it is time to get down to what a friend of ours has called “brass tactics.” This is a translation that “reads like a translation,” and it does so because it is meant to. That is because the original reads like a translation. Or, to be exact about it, the original reads in Khatibi's unique “*bilangue*.” This is a word, different from the adjective “bilingue” (bilingual) which Khatibi invented to explain what language was doing to him. Or to explain the odd sound of his written language and the way it reflects (putting it very briefly) conflicted interior idioms—especially in the novels (and most of all in this novel).

There is much to be said about identity, post-colonial ontology, “the language question”—and much has been very carefully said by Khatibi and others about his *bilangue* in this context. It is not easy to keep this discussion simple, especially when *Tattooed Memory* employs this linguistic trait along with all the different registers that meant so much to Khatibi: parable, Koranic reference, Berber language and folklore, Arabic, and references to calligraphy and to the Christian West. We add to that a specific theme, the tattoos—permanent Berber tattoos, or the temporary designs, usually on the hands, worked in henna—which serve as memories, preservers of culture, codes. A special pleasure is the polyvalence of this book's title: we think both of memory

which bears a tattoo, and of memory that is itself tattooed onto a surface.

Conveying all this is a doubled language, one that never relaxes into a complacent *mono-langue*, but which instead seems uncomfortable in its own skin. The most important consideration is that, for Khatibi, the situation is positive. He has spoken positively—somewhat the way Chinua Achebe does—of the tension between the colonial language and the mother tongue. Césaire, Senghor and others have found that writing in the colonial language has some positive features and that, at the very least, their inward tension is rich and stimulating. The difference is that the settled idiom of their writing (except for some of Césaire’s poetry) doesn’t show the tension as Khatibi’s *bi-langue* does. A closer analogue might be Amos Tutuola, whose *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is a linguistic experiment that blends two languages in a continuously startling way. His subject, though, stands apart as a series of magical vignettes that (in part) mimic African folk traditions. Khatibi, by contrast, uses a language that suggests discomfort, strain—in some ways Frantz Fanon’s “nervous condition” of the colonial subject. And the tension—not always a negative element—is doubly effective because *Tattooed Memory* is part bildungsroman (even exploring life outside Africa at times) and pursues an investigation of problematic identity, linguistic and otherwise.

The translator, then, has to step back and see if the strange vocabulary, neologisms, awkward syntax and sudden changes of rhythm and register have come through in the English. Quite often they have, for reasons that are easy to imagine. Sometimes things need to be tweaked, in a direction that reverses the translator’s usual efforts.

Everyone's ideal, for some reason, is a "smooth" translation. Here that ambition would be illegitimate.

We have avoided footnotes. Notes by Khatibi clarified that "St. Phallus" alludes to the artist Niki de Saint Phalle, and that the magnificent Sartre which the narrator has "in his hands" is *Existentialism Is A Humanism*. I note that the first poetry citation is from Baudelaire, and the second ("...and I've read all the books") is from Mallarmé.

I am greatly indebted to Fatma Ghailan, who offered very substantial help in a number of areas. The Provost's Foundation to Promote Scholarship and Teaching at Roger Williams University provided an invaluable course release. And Mme. Amina El Alaoui Khatibi, was especially generous. The translation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Cameron Thompson.

Rabat, May, 2016



## *Tattooed Memory*

*Long have I guarded the sacred ritual of my birth. They put a little honey on my lips, a drop of lemon on my eyes, the first gesture to free my gaze toward the universe and the second to invigorate my mind, to die, to live, die, live, doubled upon my double—what, was I born blind to myself?*

*I was born at the Aid el Kebir festival; my name suggests a thousand-year rite, and it happens now and again that I imagine Abraham cutting open his son. There's nothing to be done—even if the song of throat-slitting doesn't obsess me—there is still, at the root of it all, the name's rending; from maternal violins to my own will power, time remains fascinated with childhood, as if writing, by giving me to the world, replayed the shock of my bursting forth, in the fold of a dark doubling. Nothing to be done, my soul takes to eternity.*

*My name keeps me at the moment of birth, between God's scent and the starry rhythm of signs. I am a servant and I reel; my self deleted through images, I align with that question of mine that wanders among letters. There isn't a green blade, nor a dried up one, that can't be found in plain writing!*



## *Tattooed Memory*

I was born with the second war, so I grew up in its shadow and few memories come back to me from that time. Adrift in my recall are vague words about the scarcity of goods or the drama of parents brought together willingly or by force. Radio Berlin seized our fathers' attention; international history entered my first years through the voice of the sinister dictator.

Expeditions, during air raids, in a vacant lot by the sea. We left behind a city completely extinguished; pillage and theft were king. In the street I made myself gobble the bread I was supposed to bring home from the shared oven. I got home with my legs strained and tense. Poor country people, fleeing the nearby plain, crossed through the neighborhood in a whirlwind of violence. Other lives, much the same, drag through that past. Long after, when I tried to transcribe that misery, I could only do it through a shrill disorder of my whole body, barb-wired into the most extreme uncertainty. Was I dreaming paradise? Rivers of honey flowed nowhere in the irradiation of my little illusions; I was the son of him who begat my father, a child in whom his tribe withered, in a genealogy more and more broken. And now I think my profession—this divided gaze toward others—takes root in the off-chance, in the lure of finding myself again, beyond this humiliated group who were my first people.

During the sirens I stayed late to slip among the ghosts, at the edge of the rocky square, while the men prayed, a trembling huddle whose fear drifted as an echo in my own ravings. Nothing erases these wanderings on the beach but the mad rain, falling through my drowsiness, while the leaning voice of my grandmother recited, at night, new heights of stridency. Tumble, grandmother!



Other people's war went by quickly, like a far and imaginary combat, without corpses, without tangible blood, a combat with invisible adversaries ending with episodes that at first seemed funny. Fuck fuck lady, the Americans asked while handing out gum. With them I learned the way to the whorehouse. The town's prostitutes were amused, I was told, by these stubborn chewers who hid their members in little baggies no one had ever seen before.

The labyrinth grew more challenging for these Americans, looking to fornicate. On their approach everyone in the neighborhood disappeared. The Americans stormed about, raging madmen. I caught them threatening my father with their weapons—my father, who, not knowing what they wanted from him, was trying to get away. He succeeded, now left to his terror. No-Luck, the famous hoodlum of the quarter, defended our honor. What would my father have done if the soldiers had broken down our door and raped my mother? This fantasy was ever with me.

No-Luck divided his time between jail and the street, his flabby form blurred in space, beating the air with his tattooed hands. This crook, fascinating to us kids, smashed the obstacles of the street, slamming into the walls with his swaying shoulders. He stank, grunted, gave the pavement a confused look.

In reconstituting itself, the portrait of this hoodlum, surging back with doubled strength through my sexuality, now sends me back to the sophistication of people—or characters—of old predictions, as if desire, never exhausted in abstinence, can only fixate on the flowers of another language entirely, before the frustrated joy of my body rushes forth.

The same fascination before every tattooed Bedouin woman. When she unfolds her ancestral hand I wed my