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Mary Jo Muratore

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Abstract

Its latent poetic bedrock and implicit celebration of triumph notwithstanding, Assia Djebar's *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* appears to be in ludic embattlement with its very being. Signifiers are often separated from what they ostensibly signify, a subversive de-coupling of rhetoric and meaning that creates an ambivalent text, one decidedly at odds with the gauzy myths of triumph and re-birth suggested by the title. Shifting constantly between the horror of what was lost and the uncertainty of what lies ahead, the narrator struggles visibly in her attempt to communicate that which is not yet, and might never be. The structural disarray is too blatant to be accidental or unintentional, and leads the reader to infer that the cataclysmic event depicted (the French-Algerian war) is one that language can but jaggedly bestride.

Its latent poetic bedrock and implicit celebration of triumph notwithstanding, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*, as textual entity, endlessly deludes and, in a real sense, combats the reader. Refusing to drive the novel's plot in any clear direction, the narrator moves a hodgepodge of characters back and forth in time without offering any indication as to how their conglomeration might serve to create a unity of purpose. Ciphers stand as ersatz sign-posts, misguided and misleading, and seem conspicuously fashioned to invoke the contours of a fragmented and senseless universe. Obligated to wander through the tangled jumble of adversarial personages, conflicting themes and disjointed ideas without the benefit of clear signals from the narrator, the reader struggles to find a unifying thread that might serve to weave the disparate components together. Connecting the episodic vignettes proves impossible, however; the slipperiness of the novel's self-reflective surfaces defy the reader's efforts to force integration¹. Indeed, the narrative appears to be in ludic embattlement with its very being.

As is endemic to Euro-imitative post-modern novels, of which *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* is surely an example, linearity is eschewed and, as consequence, unhinges the very precepts of conventional tale-telling². But unlike other post-modern fictional accounts, Djebar's novel appears to be in constant struggle against itself, constructing, then deconstructing, any over-arching meaning by separating signifiers from what they ostensibly signify. This subversive de-coupling of rhetoric and meaning, combined with the absence of closure, creates an ambivalent text that

(1) D. HESS, *L'Histoire et la perception du temps: La non-linéarité chez Assia Djebar*, «Présence Francophone: Revue Internationale de Langue et de Littérature», 54, 2000, pp. 65-80, theorizes that Djebar's elliptical style is a response to the tension and conflicts of her historical and cultural past, while E. ACCAD in *Assia Djebar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision*, «World Literature Today», 70, 4, 1996, p. 806, compares her circular style of writing to

that of the Algerian writer Kateb Yacine.

(2) G. BIGELOW in *Revolution and Modernity: Assia Djebar's "Les Enfants du nouveau monde"*, «Research in African Literatures», 34, 2 2003, p. 14, argues that the novel's modernism is not intended to be an imitation of European models but is rather an attempt to translate new behavioral paradigms and social roles that citizens were obliged to adopt in the wake of the revolution.

is decidedly at odds with the gauzy myths of triumph and re-birth suggested by the title. Whatever meaningful messages the text might be harboring are carefully hidden behind dense thickets of highly stylized prose that embellish but do not elucidate³.

A number of factors contribute to the text's overall opacity, one of which is surely the narrator's reluctance to establish a clearly defined point of view, either towards the pivotal conflict at hand, or the myriad characters whose lives the war disrupts⁴. The war as spectacle is center-staged briefly in the opening chapter, but this pivotal event is in fact accorded, as though in passing, minimal allusion, and is cast less as a heroic confrontation between good and evil than a blind destructive force crushing the placid contentment and well-being of whomever it encounters. Though the fighting on the mountain draws the occasional attention of the town's inhabitants, it is significant that the narrator chooses to "narrate" from the mountain only twice, by which point, the novel has all but played out. The reader is thus obliged to rely on the accounts of the characters in witness to make sense of the war, characters whose understanding is in turn limited and unreliable. As they struggle to make sense of what they see, many observers are unable to accurately distinguish triumph from tragedy. Evasive aerial dives are mistaken for crashes: «"Un second abattu!", s'exclame-t-il, prenant le vol piqué d'un autre avion pour sa chute»⁵. The Algerians peering at the war from their windows or watching it play out as they sip coffee in the cafés are not alone in misunderstanding the war. The Europeans fail to grasp the depth of Algeria's commitment to the cause, and attribute the current violence to a handful of agitators: «La guerre, nous la faisons contre une poignée d'agitateurs – commence Ferrand, comme d'ordinaire – nous aurons vite fait d'en finir!»⁶. Many anticipate a quick return to the status quo: «"La guerre, la montagne", un simple éclair de folie, à guérir comme toutes les folies»⁷.

The narrator's reluctance to communicate a clear position toward the war can be seen in the representation of the characters' viewpoints as well⁸. The omniscience of the narrator extends not only to the Arab protagonists fighting for their country's independence, but to the French soldiers who tyrannize and humiliate them, to the police who torture and kill suspected conspirators, and even to Algerian informers who denounce their compatriots⁹. This strategy dilutes the reader's focus and cre-

(3) B. COOPER in *Banished from Oedipus? Buchi Emecheta's and Assia Djebar's Gendered Language of Resistance*, «Research in African Literatures», 38, 2, 2007, p. 148, discusses at length some of the linguistic dilemmas encountered by post-colonial writers, specifically Emecheta and Djebar, who wrestle with a number of identities and personalities: «What both writers, nonetheless, share profoundly, in their novels, and this is the pith of my argument, is a focus on finding their voices and identities in the context of the multiple cultures and languages». Another interesting article on Djebar's use of gendered language is by Z. SMAIL SALHI, *Between the Languages of Silence and the Woman's Word: Gender and Language in the Work of Assia Djebar*, «International Journal of the Sociology of Language», 190, 2008, pp. 79-101.

(4) See also, BIGELOW, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

(5) A. DJEBAR, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*, Paris, René Julliard, 1962 («10/18»), p. 15.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 256.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 146.

(8) In a masterful review of Djebar's career-long interrogation of the tensions and hierarchies of Algeria's post-colonial condition, H.A. MURDOCH offers the following observation in *Woman, Post-Coloniality, Otherness: Djebar's Discourses of Histoire and Algérianité*, «L'Esprit créateur», 48, 4, 2008, p. 32: «If, in a point that was made at the beginning of this essay, writers like Djebar ultimately seek to reclaim the notion of the nation from a contested set of discourses predicated on power and its implicit corollary of repression, then uncovering renewable palimpsests of discursive representation helps to mediate identity into patterns of remembrance and re-creation rather than nationalism's finite and limited paths of forgetting».

(9) See also J.-M. CLERC, *La Guerre d'Algérie dans l'œuvre cinématographique et littéraire d'Assia Djebar*, «L'Esprit créateur», 41, 4, 2001, p. 91: «Aussi caractéristique est le souci qui s'amorce, dans ce roman, de faire entendre toutes les voix, même celles des "bourreaux", avec une égale préoccupation d'impartialité et d'authenticité».

ates ambivalence. The narrator's habit of recording the thoughts of the Europeans, the presumed enemy, serves to humanize them, especially when their sentiments appear to align with those of their Algerian counterparts. Both sides in the conflict despise the war; both are paralyzed by omnipresent fear; both wax nostalgic for pre-war conditions. Certainly, the narrator offers numerous examples of French military arrogance and cruelty:

Le soldat, sa mitraillette en avant, lui frôle le ventre: «Redresse-toi! Debout!», et l'homme les yeux voilés de fatigue, dans un ultime effort répète: «Debout! Debout!». Ses jambes flagellent, ses genoux s'amollissent. «Debout! chien! Fils de chien!» gronde le soldat qui, de ce pays, a pris les insultes et la passion¹⁰.

Détail peut-être cocasse, mais qu'il n'oubliait pas: durant tout le trajet, Martinez, d'un air froid, vidait la cendre de sa pipe en la frappant à petits coups sur le crâne de Youssef¹¹.

But it is noteworthy also that the Europeans are not wholly demonized. The French soldiers are portrayed not just as blood-thirsty aggressors, but as weary subordinates forced to fight in a war they hate («Sale guerre!» marmonne-t-il encore et il suit des yeux le dos de l'officier, un homme sec qui est venu, a interrogé, en passant, avant de partir»¹²). One of the most sympathetic characters in the novel is Bob, a young Frenchman about to begin his military service. His tender attachment to Touma, a liberated Arab woman, reveals a cultural open-mindedness that is certainly atypical in his culture. Moreover, his palpable grief in the wake of Touma's death serves to make him more victim than victimizer: «Tandis que les cris stridents des voitures effilochent le silence, Bob, au milieu de la place désolée, se penche sur Touma, la soulève. Et le garçon, avant de pénétrer dans son café vide, l'aperçoit qui erre autour du kiosque: le corps de la jeune fille sur ses bras tendus de suppliant, il déambule aveuglément»¹³.

Conversely, not all Arabs rally around the cause of the rebel fighters. Suzanne's husband Omar flees to France, even though his beleaguered countrymen desperately need his legal expertise. While the reasons for his departure are never fully elucidated, there are a number of plausible explanations: fear, self-protection, disapproval, cowardice, even arrogance. Rebel and former close friend Mahmoud believes Omar's departure can be traced back to his intellectual pride: «Omar ne représentait pas seulement le cas banal de l'intellectuel dépassé par la réalité; mais s'il ne sombrait pas dans l'embourgeoisement, il s'avancait sur un chemin plus dangereux: celui de l'orgueil solitaire qui se grandit lui-même et choisit pour cela le désert»¹⁴.

The narrator's occasional sympathy towards both French and Arab characters creates the impression of a text at war with itself. This sense of internal conflict is strengthened by the random, disconnected nature of the narration. The narrator seems unable to sustain a focus on any one subject, temporal moment, or geographical setting for any length of time. More problematic still, there is little or no connection between vignettes. Each episodic enterprise that appears intended to engender meaning, simple or co-extensive, remains inconsequential. For example, Chérifa's early and culturally uncharacteristic marital rebellion, the focus of attention in chapter one, appears to be without meaningful follow-up or consequence.

(10) DJEBAR, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 193.

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 21.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 282.

(14) *Ibid.*, p. 262.

On the contrary, the courageous defiance she exemplified when she rejected her first husband seems to evaporate when she learns that her new husband, Youssef, is on a list of suspects about to be arrested. Her earlier boldness («Cet éclair en elle – et elle se découvrit tenace, non plus nonchalante, ni indifférente –, sans encore savoir ce qu'elle allait faire, elle se vit prête à obéir sur-le-champ, allégresse qui l'envahit, à cette nécessité du départ»¹⁵) has all but disappeared. How to reconcile the daring audacity of the unhappily married Chérifa with the anxiety she now manifests at the prospect of walking through the town unaccompanied by an escorting spouse¹⁶? Indeed, upon learning that Youssef is in danger, she remains rooted in fear, unable to take control of the situation, unable to access the rebellious courage so prominently on display during her first marriage: «Pour une épouse heureuse vivant au coeur d'une maison d'où elle ne sort pas, selon les traditions, comment prendre, pour la première fois, la décision d'agir?»¹⁷. In fact, in her second marriage, Chérifa appears to exemplify the traditional values of her culture. She is an extremely devout and conservative Muslim whose noble bearing and sense of inner peace is the envy of all: «...oui, même elles, saluaient en Chérifa sa noblesse, son charme fait de réserve lointaine»¹⁸. As Youssef's wife, she betrays no trace of self-centered rebellion, reveals no resentment towards her subordinate status. Completely devoted to her husband, Chérifa appears content to be nothing other than her husband's reflection:

Chérifa, dans la chambre voisine où du coin du rideau soulevé, elle surveillait le cortège qui partait, ne pouvait distinguer s'il éprouvait à cet instant une douleur trop vive. Elle le regretta, prête, comme elle l'était depuis le début de ce second mariage – «heureux», soupirait-elle – à guetter sur le visage de l'époux chaque sentiment qu'elle se mettait aussitôt, dans un mouvement de mimétisme spontané qui l'emplissait de joie diffuse, à ressentir sur-le-champ avec une égale intensité. «Son miroir, disait-elle, je ne suis plus que son miroir!»¹⁹.

Unlike some of the women in the community, Chérifa does not envy the freedoms enjoyed by her European counterparts. On the contrary, she takes pleasure in her role as traditional wife and devout Muslim. She finds great satisfaction taking care of her home where she can «s'asseoir des heures entières sur un matelas, à la turque, faire les moindres travaux accroupie, pieds nus, sur le carrelage»²⁰.

Chérifa's early rebellion is but one example of a significant event that appears almost superfluous in that it is not exploited or developed as the text progresses. Though Lila, one of the two primary female protagonists, is distraught at the death

(15) *Ibid.*, p. 35.

(16) The issue of the female gaze (both as subject and object) is a frequent subject of critical commentary. Some articles related to this topic include M. BACHOLLE, *Women in Their Apartment: The Trespassing Gaze*, «West Virginia University Philological Papers», 48, 2001-2002, pp. 18-28; M. DOBIE, *The Woman as Look and the Woman as Voice: Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar*, «Constructions» 9, 1994, pp. 89-105; L.-C. HUUGHE, *Déconstruction du regard panoptique orientaliste: La Contribution narrative d'Assia Djebar et de Leïla Sebbar*, «Études Francophones», 15, 2, 2000, pp. 89-99; L. HUUGHE, «Écrire comme un voile»: *The Problematics of the Gaze in the Work of Assia Djebar*, «World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma», 70, 4, 1996, pp. 867-876; K. EILERAAS, *Dismembering the*

Gaze: Speleology and Vivisection in Assia Djebar's "L'Amour, la fantasia" in *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing*, ed. N.A. HASSAN GOLLEY, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2007, pp. 16-34; M. MORTIMER, *Reappropriating the Gaze in Assia Djebar's Fiction and Film*, «World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma», 70, 4, 1996, pp. 859-66; S.F. TEIXIDOR, *The Gaze Beneath the Veil: Portrait of Women in Algeria and Morocco*, in *Francophone Women: Between Visibility and Invisibility*, eds. C.H. MCFADDEN and S.F. TEIXIDOR, New York, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 47-76.

(17) DJEBAR, *op. cit.*, 137.

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 50.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

of both her mother and her young infant, neither of these tragedies serves to elucidate her acute resentment in the wake of her husband's decision to join the fighters on the mountain. Nor does her close relationship with her father, detailed at length in the novel, serve to deepen our understanding of her motives or demeanor. Likewise, Omar's quarrel with Mahmoud, frequently referenced in the text, has no discernible consequence or aftermath. Other episodes prove equally tertiary. Youssef's guilt for having arranged an unhappy marriage for his sister Zineb appears to be nothing but random commentary: «Non, inutile de se mentir, pense Youssef, cela avait été plus grave; il le sait mais veut l'oublier, car il se croit responsable – responsable du malheur d'une jeune femme qui ne s'arrête de pleurer le jour de ses noces, et les mois qui suivent»²¹. In fact, Zineb eventually adapts to her unhappy situation: «...on pouvait dire que son ménage allait sans histoires, comme tant d'autres. On croit étouffer un jour; on se résigne ensuite, plus ou moins vite»²². Likewise, the battling Chicou brothers do not advance the plot in any way. They offer a comforting cadence to the passing hours, appearing as they do at key points in the narrative where they provide ribald entertainment and philosophical inspiration to their compatriots. But the ritualistic vulgarity of their quotidian squabbling/reconciliation appears little more than a *mise en abyme* of the novel's inability to communicate a unified message.

Objects, as well as characters and events, prove to be equally misleading. Items with symbolic potential are saliently decontextualized, only to re-appear, and often, as but a misplaced redundant refrain, in alternative segments within which they have neither focus nor function. Re-emerging visual markers, like the kiosk, the bitter orange trees, and the palm tree on the square, tease the reader with an anticipated consequentiality that fails to materialize. These recurring images provide an illusion of continuity and coherence that is at odds with the fractured nature of the narrative wherein they materialize.

Perhaps the most significant evidence of a narrative at war with itself can be found in the various chapter titles. As configured, they belie the very notion of titular ascription in that the content they would purportedly foretell is bypassed and overridden by numerous intrusions. Often, the highlighted characters only adopt, if that, a tertiary status that is almost unworthy of mention. Of the nine characters for whom each chapter is named, six occupy a marginal role in the chapters to which they lend their name. Had the narrator not placed the named characters in a position of prominence, it is unlikely the reader would have identified them as principal participants at all. The disjunction between the significance afforded to the characters by virtue of their titular designation and the reality of their marginal status establishes a conflict between what is rhetorically signified and what actually takes place. With rare exceptions, the chapter opens with characters other than the one named in the chapter title. More significantly, perhaps, the titular character often plays a minor role in the overall narrative (the case for Khaled, Hassiba, Bob) whereas characters vastly more significant (Bachir, Saidi, and Youssef, for example) have no chapter named for them at all.

As indicated above, each chapter is named for a single individual, but with rare exceptions (chapters one and two specifically), the story of the titular character is embedded deep within, and in many cases, overshadowed by another character's more compelling story. Even in the first two chapters where the focus is sustained primarily on the character named in the title, significant digressions serve to de-

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 54.

(22) *Ibid.*, p. 55.

focus and at times even trivialize the targeted subject. Chérifa, the titular character of chapter one, is introduced only after a description of the secluded compound she shares with several other women, an account of the residents' obsession with watching the fighters on the mountain, and an introspective peek at how both Algerians and the French view the war in which they are engaged. One might argue that this Balzacian strategy has a certain logic behind it, but no such logic justifies the decision to cut short Lila's story (chapter two) at the very moment a visitor knocks at her door. The narrator's abrupt decision to abandon Lila in mid-story is not the only time her story-line is interrupted. While Lila is the primary focus of the chapter dedicated to her, other significant events and characters intrude upon her account. La vieille Aicha's funeral takes place during this chapter, a funeral where we meet the young medical student Bachir, a key figure in the narrative. The chapter also includes a segment depicting the relationship between Chérifa and her neighbor Amna, a friendship that will prove vital to Youssef's survival. These digressions momentarily displace Lila from center-stage and dilute a focus that was supposedly hers alone.

Chapter three is titled for Salima, an imprisoned school-teacher and rebel sympathizer. But she is accorded only secondary attention in the chapter she heads. Her story is bracketed between the more compelling story line involving Hakim's growing suspicions about Chérifa's husband, Youssef, and his wife Amna's decision to lie to her husband to protect Chérifa. Chapter four's ostensible focus is the despicable Touma, the informer. While Touma does play a significant, though sinister, role during the course of the novel, in this particular chapter, she is hardly more than a footnote. Touma's chapter begins with the narrator picking up the thread of the story line that was abruptly abandoned at the end of chapter two (Suzanne's visit to Lila's apartment). The narrator then moves the reader's attention to Chérifa's anxiety-filled trek through town to find her husband's furniture shop. Touma, seated at an ice cream shop, catches sight of Chérifa as she passes by. It is only then that the narrator begins to focus on Touma who meets up with Bob and his friends. The chapter ends with Chérifa still frantically trying to reach her husband. Chapter five opens with Hakim's story, the man for whom the chapter is named. But the narrator does not devote exclusive attention to him. This chapter also contains a detailed description of Ali's and Lila's relationship. The reader is also informed (via a lengthy account told by Ali to Lila) of Saidi's earlier arrest after a three day tryst with a European woman. Saidi will later be arrested and tortured to death after Touma reports his activities to the police.

As the chapters progress, the significance of the titular character becomes increasingly muted. Chapter six is named for Hassiba, a woman committed to helping the rebel fighters on the mountain. We encounter her as she steps off the train from the capital that makes a stop at the Palais d'Armes. As a symbol for the many heroic women who took up arms alongside their Algerian brothers, Hassiba exemplifies female heroism. Nevertheless, she is only a background figure in a chapter focused more intently on the respective pasts of Youssef and Lila. Hassiba's story is fleshed out, albeit briefly, in chapter seven, a chapter named for Khaled, a character who plays an extremely minor role, both in the chapter and in the overall narrative. Khaled is a lawyer who was commissioned by Suzanne to provide legal assistance to the imprisoned Salima. In the chapter, he can be found visiting Suzanne when Lila happens to pay her a chance visit. Because of the lateness of the hour, Khaled accompanies Lila back to her apartment when they meet Bachir, an encounter that unleashes a tragic sequence of events for Bachir and Lila, but not for Khaled. Alerted by Lila's landlord who has been suspicious of Lila since their first meeting, the police arrive, murder Bachir (suspected of arson) and arrest and imprison

Lila. In addition to the Lila/Bachir encounter, this chapter actually includes some of the most significant events of the novel: Chérifa's arrival at her husband's shop; Youssef's decision to accompany Harissa as she leaves with a contingent to join the fighters on the mountain; Touma's murder by her brother; Lila's first halting steps on a journey of self-awareness and self-liberation. Khaled is external to all of these events. The eighth chapter is named for Bob, a character who plays no significant role in the novel at all. He is by every «Bob» definition an outsider: he is French, he is about to join the military, and he is in love with Touma, the woman all respectable Algerians despise. He does witness her murder, but he is for all intents and purposes, an irrelevant bystander. The last chapter is named for Ali, Lila's husband. References to him are strewn copiously throughout the narrative, but as a physical presence, he has an extremely minimal role. In the chapter that bears his name, he utters but a few words («Tu as eu peur?»), a question he twice repeats, and one that was posed initially by the rebel leader, Mahmoud.

The misleading chapter titles find their parallel in self-annulling and/or contradictory images embedded in the text's descriptive passages. Events are centered around the town's square, la Place d'Armes, perhaps the text's most unifying feature. However, as a unifying trope, the square fails to achieve its intended goal. The geographical space where all unfolds (or, actually, does not) is a melting-pot of sorts, a locale of multi-cultural gathering, akin to Rick's Café Américain in the film *Casablanca*. But the seeming resemblance is deceptive and short-lived. Whereas the film, like the novel, does accommodate a chaotic blend of multi-hued characters in a variety of circumstances, there is in the 1940's script a purposeful assemblage of personages – all aspiring, all in quest. The heterogeneous blend of personalities ultimately head in a common direction of sorts. Not so in the work of Djébar where the grand hub of activity takes place on the same day, but with no coherent direction or purpose. Those who frequent the square have different allegiances, values, and concerns; once they leave, their limited sense of community evaporates. So what might have been a stead of coherence and signification appears as little more than a disappointing contrivance, as allusive as those who inhabit it. Arabs and Europeans occupy separate spheres with little or no contact. Opposing social entities eye each other warily; enemies seem to be everywhere and nowhere. Unemployed Algerians idly nurse a cup of coffee in the Arab cafés while affluent Europeans frequent their own bistros. The Algerian community itself lacks a sense of solidarity. The Chico brothers quarrel endlessly; Youssef chastises a waiter for insulting Touma; Youssef's partner refuses to let Chérifa wait for Youssef in his shop; Touma informs on fellow Algerians; her brother kills her for dishonoring the family²³. Though they frequent the same cafés, Algerians appear isolated from one another: «...ou qu'ils rêvent devant le seul café turc qu'ils peuvent se payer de la journée»²⁴; «Ils les entendent [les convois], les oublient et ne songent plus qu'à leur sieste où ils vont pouvoir sombrer»²⁵. United in their ideological quest for freedom from colonial oppression, they are bound together not because of a communal allegiance to the land or their shared culture, but rather by bloodshed and death: «Le jeune Youssef découvrait ainsi qu'une patrie, ce n'est pas une terre commune, ni même seulement une misère partagée mais du sang versé ensemble et dans le

(23) Accad argues that Touma's murder demonstrates how the «old order» continues to dominate the ideology underpinning the revolution in that he must restore the family honor by killing his sister before the rebels will accept him as one of their

own. Touma's real crime then is not collaboration with the enemy, but rather moral turpitude (*op. cit.*, p. 807).

(24) DJÉBAR, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

(25) *Ibid.*, p. 196.

même jour, les mêmes chants interrompus»²⁶. Characters come and go, sometimes to return again, each time rather insipidly, for the framework of the text forbids any but scattered and variegated «instantanées». Against the backdrop of a distant war, they appear bereft of significance, either individually or collectively.

The novel's interpretive dilemmas are conflated further by the ploys intrinsic to the perambulating structures that pervade and ultimately overtake the text: so that, the Frenchman, «Bob» is assigned a name at odds with the cultural heritage he would presumably represent, just as the over-arching title of the whole, *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*, conjures up a notion of rejuvenation, an arena of re-birth and joy, that the work fails to center-stage or even to actualize. At the level of structure, utter incoherence and structural disarray dislodge the very possibility of consecution or sense. Flashbacks of various historical periods, some recent, some further back in time, are interwoven with the present. The future, the new world celebrated in the title, is but a theoretical articulation. If the end of the novel is to be interpreted as a victory, it is one that is only barely distinguishable from defeat. From the bombed remnants of a village emerge an old woman and a child, neither of whom expresses fear, but, if truth be told, neither of whom expresses emotion of any kind. For these two survivors, nothing has really changed.

In Djébar's world of supposed re-birth, positive images must be manufactured and/or aesthetically constructed from the remnants of despair. Images of horror, the screams of the tortured, are transformed into melodious refrains:

Quand l'homme ensuite se tait, une peur l'envahit; elle s'applique à attendre, attendre un nouveau cri, un nouveau signe de vie et d'horreur à la fois. «Le chant de mon pays», reprend-elle, tandis que l'homme reprend aussi, râles d'abord saccadés, brefs, puis qui se gonflent de nouveau en un seul cri ample, immense que Salima suit de toute sa volonté parce qu'il lui semble qu'au bout il ouvrira une porte vers l'azur²⁷.

Beauty becomes synonymous with the vulgar excesses of the Chicou brothers, «poets» who know the beauty of mad intoxication: «“Mais non, proteste l'interlocuteur, ce sont nos poètes!” et peut-être en effet est-ce la seule beauté qu'il connaisse, celle de l'ivresse folle»²⁸. For Bachir, too, beauty is negatively tinged: «“Que la beauté est cruelle”, cette phrase danse en lui; intuition, angoisse?»²⁹. Thoughts of the future are expressed via ambiguous oxymorons: «...le foyer de la Révolution se trouvait vraiment là, dans cet enivrement presque triste»³⁰. In this context, liberation itself takes on the antithetical imprecision of indecipherability. Even the presumably omniscient narrator is obliged to speculate: «Peut-être est-ce ce que se dit Chérifa; peut-être se prend-elle pour une personne familière de la pénombre...»³¹.

What then is at stake here? In the fear-constrained social network represented in the text, how is the reader to confront the significance of shadowy clues that misdirect, if not confound outright? From the opening passages, images of imprecision abound. The indistinguishable houses surrounded by indistinguishable sounds and murmurs confound travelers caught in «un dédale de ruelles». Although the fighting on the distant mountain is a focal point for the townspeople, that spectacle too, is shrouded in mystery. Spectators are unable to decipher the meaning of the «arabesques éphémères que le hasard semble tracer, comme une écriture mystéri-

(26) *Ibid.*, p. 194.

(27) *Ibid.*, p. 182.

(28) *Ibid.*, p. 141.

(29) *Ibid.*, p. 222.

(30) *Ibid.*, p. 105.

(31) *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

euse mais qui tue»³². Compounding this visual fog of war, the narrator moves from subject to subject, from past to present, from reality to recollection without transition. In any universe so contrived, sequentiality is barred, development is blocked, closure is banned.

The structural disarray is too blatant to be accidental or unintentional, and one is led to ponder the function of the chaotic, the theory of chaos, subjacent and operative, and how it proscribes integrality³³. It has been theorized, and not without reason, that reading is an incremental process, each paragraph, page or chapter reshaping and, in a sense, transforming all that precedes it while, at the same time, anticipatorily preparing the stage for the segments to follow. Such theoretical stance is awkwardly forefronted by Djébar's third work, wherein each parcel of text, anchored in chaos, structured of chaos, dismantled by chaos fails to bring to bear the «incrementality» we seek and which, ostensibly, would lend sense to an otherwise senseless narrative. Neither poetics nor hermeneutics comes to the reader's rescue, who remains adrift to and beyond the novel's end. Even the deconstructionist framework fails to adduce a plurality of contradictions, which would, in their own way, provide some brand of cognitive dissonance.

The vestigial matter of *Les Enfants du nouveau monde*, therefore, engages us to explore the quintessence of otherness, to construct possible signifieds for all the missing signifiers. The lack of closure leaves readers with more questions than conclusions about the characters they meet. Will Lila and Salima be tortured in prison? Does Bob quest revenge for Touma's death? Do Mahmoud, Ali and Youssef survive? What becomes of Hassiba? In a sense abandoned by the narrator, readers are left with the stragglings bits and pieces that punctuate the pages in a continuum of covert conundrums. The shadows angling along the walls of Djébar's narrative never come fully into view; whatever truths the narrative is harboring emerge only as scattered remnants jettisoned by the vortex of cultural conflict, social upheaval and the violence of war. In the end, we are left with no indication of a clear victory for either side, just the textual documentation of a country, a culture and a novel at war with itself.

One is then left to ponder, not the singular events or tales of the day recounted, but the totality of that which is told and that which is untold (le non-dit, l'innommable, l'indicible). In point of fact, it is the very quintessence of the unsayable that relentlessly hovers above the text and compels its condition of baleful wantingness, its allure of vacuity. To be sure, the war, peripherally referenced in the work, allusions de-centered and untold, resides at the center of an account that, amidst the ongoing turmoil and the uncertainty of triumph, defies telling. And thus we are confronted with the pre-emptive, the prefacial sketch of an event and a national destiny that cannot yet be spoken, that summons silence, via circumlocution. The prosaic, accessory evocations can but harbingers, without concretization, the final destination, not yet textually reached. The novel is, in a sense, inversely anachronistic, in that it sets out to poeticize, before its time, an aftermath it knows not, couched in the yet unfulfilled hopes of a title and a dream of liberation. It is perhaps for this reason that from the very wellspring of the muddled, the faltering,

(32) *Ibid.*, p. 14.

(33) Alternatively, K. LACHMAN, *The Allure of Counterpoint: History and Reconciliation in the Writing of Edward Said and Assia Djébar*, «Research in African Literatures», 41, 4, 2010, p. 164, uses Said's theory of counterpoint, a musical term that places equal emphasis on the horizontal and

vertical juxtaposition between voices to justify the lack of synthesis in this work: «The relationship of the part to the whole is thus complex and highly regulated. Each voice must be fully realized on its own and able to stand independently. All voices are considered of equal importance; no voice dominates, except momentarily».

the indeterminate grasp for that which is not yet, and might never be, that which language can at best jaggedly bestride, we sense the quivering soul of a work whose vision, in all its intensity, can only grope toward actualization³⁴.

MARY JO MURATORE

(34) DJEBAR's disappointment with the war's failure to improve the lives of women is well-documented. For a brief review of some of these issues, consult D. AMRANE-MINNE, *Les Femmes algériennes dans la guerre*, Paris, Plon, 1991; M. COOK, *Arab Women Arab Wars*, «Cultural Critique», 29, 1994-1995, pp. 5-29; H. GAFAITI, *The Blood of Writing: Assia Djebar's Unveiling of Women and*

History, «World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma», 70, 4, 1996, pp. 813-822; and C. ZIMRA, *Not So Far From Medina: Assia Djebar Charts Islam's «insupportable» feminist revolution*, «World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma», 70, 4, 1996, pp. 823-834.