

Abreaction in Alexandria

You are protected by darkness and the desert. But it is no use. You will have to return to the city soon.

Naguib Mahfouz

what cowers behind it begins to seep through.

Samuel Beckett

Eric Van Hove chucks poetry on the broken streets of Alexandria's Turkish district as curious onlookers gather around. Hunched over with a fistful of fresh sticks of cyan colored chalk he writes in French about love, time, death, shadows, sun, dirt, hunger. It is difficult to accurately describe the effect he has on the people who bare witness to a scene they have come across some random Tuesday afternoon in April, but there are a few general categories we might venture to describe.

- 1) Those who ignore the intervention and walk by in a hurry, or at their normal leisurely pace, with plastic bags full of groceries, or with their hands clasped behind their backs, as if they were out for a late afternoon stroll, and glance for only an instant at the European in strange Japanese shoes and his scribbling, or not at all.
- 2) Young children (between the ages of four and six years old) who draw up close to him, just a foot or two away, and peer with keen attention at his face and body, at his hands covered in colored dust, and at the words, which they do not understand, but which seem by the look on their faces to hold some hidden power that is very serious and profound, and which their young throbbing minds are immensely capable and anxious to know.
- 3) Older children who caper in the crowd, one or two of them completely out of control, climbing on each other, and yelling out words in Arabic to the strangely, laughably uncomprehending foreigners that are accompanying him, trailing at various lengths behind, serious at first in the face of the children's admonitions (as if there were something to fear) but at length laughing at the sheer verve of youth, at the absurdity of it, the frolicking, burning energy

4) Smiling and bemused adults who look up from their work or their leisure as he approaches. They are not sure what to make of it at first, but they enjoy the spectacle, and soon they have left what they were doing and stand nearby with their arms folded on their chests, looking with bemused expressions at the strange young man who is working so furiously in the dirt and grime of their streets, speaking amongst themselves, postulating theories, greeting friends who poke their heads out of windows in the apartments above the narrow lane and calling them down to witness a first for the neighborhood. There are many theories among them (he is writing spells to bring bad luck on the street; he is from the water board and planning a new project; he is writing his life story; he is writing to make sure that people notice how bad the streets in Alexandria are; he is writing about the war in Iraq; one group of old women put forward not a theory but the recommendation that he write on the walls of the buildings, because the streets will be cleaned).

5) Perturbed, suspicious adults, who leer at him from a distance, or talk angrily with others but close enough so that he might hear the poison in their voices (we know them! the treasonous—the French is better, la trahison, which carries the sense not only of treason but of betrayal). Eventually, the more courageous will confront him directly, or preferably the translator responsible for taking his case to the people and for defending him in case the authorities should arrive and try to put a stop to the intervention and/or throw him in Jail. That translator, a young art student who speaks excellent English and who was acquired mere hours before, finds himself slowly and carefully explaining the action to his people. "He is not writing on politics" "No, he is not from the water board...there will be no new construction here!" "It is poetry sir, just poetry. The thoughts come to him as he goes along, and he writes them as they come." The young man is nervous at first, glancing around to see if he too might not be a target for the authorities, but he soon comes to enjoy his role, defending the artist with all the relish of a talented public speaker with an eager crowd at his feet. Among the onlookers a few are appeased, even converted, while others grow angrier and more vocal in their complaints, and some (I am sure of it) swallow their anger and await an opportunity to betray us. They impugn his motives and criticize with acid words the great fun being had by certain adults and the gamboling brown children that are everywhere at once and shouting. "What has come of this neighborhood? It used to be ok, it used to be calm." Meanwhile the crowd expands and contracts. A few decide to follow him wherever he goes, but

most just pause for a moment to take it in, smile in a kind of exasperated pleasure, try to read a few words that are leaking out behind him, and then move on, returning into the normal course of their lives.

All the while the artist remains single-minded in his task. One senses that his ears are open, and he hears much of the commotion that has erupted around him, but he has passed beyond the plane of ordinary conscious, careful and accommodating interaction. He is in the midst of the spectacle he has inspired, but only a part of it. One gets the sense he is falling, alongside the crowd, and from this falling place he writes with dirtied hands. Those of us who followed him here speak among ourselves and begin to play with the children, occasionally looking towards him, a little shocked even to find him still bending there in the dusty lane. "It is poetry, just poetry", we keep telling them ("sher, sher!" in Arabic), and one angry young slightly cross-eyed young man spits his reply, which is roughly translated for us by a bald Canadian Egyptologist in town for a few days before returning to a dig deep in the desert near the Libyan border, as "no poetry on earth!", said while pointing his finger accusingly at the ground, traced with chalk scribbles. We will come across this same youth after it is all done as we retrace our path through the district. We will find him busy mopping up the writing. He will look up at us with a sudden angry shame in his eyes, and before he can check himself, move away from the words with a jolt, as if he were caught in some execrable act. We do not stop him, but silently meet his lowered gaze and move on along the trail of chalk through the back allies, now again as they were before, filled with the steady rhythm of a normal Spring afternoon. Perhaps we take some solace in the fact that the line is long, and the young man has only managed to mop up a small portion of it. Besides, the people were more welcoming a few hundred meters further on.

He told me once (in a letter written with a dull pencil across a paper tablemat in Katmandu) that he seeks "to lose what others would collect." And what is that? Socrates and Rebbe Bel Shem ("Master of the Good Name") both offered forceful censures of the written word. It was, they felt, the shadow means by which true knowledge is lost. Another excuse for men to learn, and forget, to distance themselves from the kind of life that those two philosophers espoused. They believed above all else that each life must be lived and lost, but also that in the end nothing lasts save life, though it is not our own. Our minds can only briefly scribble on the streets of time, before a man with a mop, in the full force of history's heavy beat,

washes it away. But what if in our scribbling we should forget the words, and concentrate on the act's effect. Did we not touch each other on those streets of Alexandria? Even the angry and suspicious were brought into the open, emerging from their shadows to spell out their contempt before all. In the streets, with words in the dirt, something gave when a bomb in chalk exploded around corners. This ability to inspire a reaction is the great power of the written word, and it is why, if I might brave such a hazardous assertion, both Socrates and Rebbe Bel Shem were wrong. Because in the last, the power of words lies not in the what they say, for what they say are lies, but in that they are written at all. Like a mind that thinks, the hand that writes. A critic once said that the artist feels "a compulsion to the work." Yes, I too have thought of compulsion. His is the hand that writes, that cannot help but write, transcribing itself on the face of things.

But then we write so much. The world is filled with writing. What then, can one such act mean? What ultimate, lasting significance might it have? That day in Alexandria, there was a reaction—to his words, his person, to the very time and place at which it was all played out. There was a reaction to him, and to all those around him, and each of us was left to make a decision, and none will forget it. It is in fact exactly what we so long for in this age of "too much." For we all know that art must touch us, rile us, push us, to use his term, "tempt" us. It must turn our heads. And why? Because when we turn our heads, we catch a glimpse again of things we are used to seeing, and when we see them anew, the world and everything in it, burns with life.

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