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► To cite this version:

Dominique Combe. Derrida and Khatibi: A Franco-Maghrebian Dialogue. Hiddleston, Jane; Lyam-lahy, Khalid. Abdelkebir Khatibi - Postcolonialism, Transnationalism and Culture in the Maghreb and Beyond, Liverpool University Press, pp.197-218, 2020, 978-1789622331. hal-03210196

HAL Id: hal-03210196

<https://ens.hal.science/hal-03210196>

Submitted on 12 May 2021

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Khatibi and Derrida: A 'Franco-Maghrebian' Dialogue

Dominique Combe, translated by Jane Hiddleston

In the three volumes published posthumously by Editions de la Différence, Khatibi's works are classified according to their genre. The first volume, 'Romans et récits', includes *Le Livre du sang* (1979), *Amour bilingue* (1983), *Un Été à Stockholm* (1990), and also *La Mémoire tatouée* (1971), with its subtitle 'autobiographie d'un décolonisé'. The second volume brings together Khatibi's poetic works, starting with *Le Lutteur de classe à la manière taoïste* (1976) and the play *Le Prophète voilé* (1979). The third volume comprises a thematic anthology of various critical and theoretical essays on Islam, identity and art, together with extracts from *Maghreb pluriel* (1983) and *Figures de l'étranger* (1987). Although useful to the reader discovering Khatibi in all his diversity, this division by genre is misleading because it artificially separates his theoretical reflection from his literary production. The separation of genres does not account for the constant interaction in Khatibi's novelistic, poetic, and critical works between his creative imagination and his theoretical reflection, his work as a social scientist. Beyond the works clearly identified as essays, including *La Blessure du nom propre* and *Maghreb pluriel*, Khatibi's thought is also developed in the 'novel' *Amour bilingue*, in the 'autobiography' *La Mémoire tatouée* and the 'poems' of *Le Lutteur de classe*.

Born in Morocco in 1938, Khatibi studied sociology at the Sorbonne during the 1960s. He also learned structural linguistics, semiology and poetics, which were then on the rise, at the Ecole pratique des hautes études. His work can also be seen in the context of the theoretical avant-garde, of 'ensembles' theory and structuralism. It is during this period that he met Roland Barthes, who wrote a short article about him entitled 'Ce que je dois à Khatibi' in 1979, which serves as a preface to the volume of Khatibi's essays mentioned above. In 1965, Khatibi defended his first thesis, on the genre of the Maghrebian novel, which was then published by Editions Maspéro in 1969, before going back to teach in Morocco, where he became involved in the university union. In 1966, together with Abdellatif Laâbi, Tahar Ben Jelloun and Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine he contributed to the founding of the review *Souffles*. *Souffles* focused on literature, art, and socio-political reflection, and was deeply marked by the French avant-garde and by Marxist-Leninist thought, mobilised in opposition to Hassan II and in support of the 'third-worldist' struggle, which led to its being suspended in 1972.

Having attended Barthes's seminar, and as a result of his close relationship with artists, Khatibi maintained a totalising conception of 'writing', based for him on the graphic sign in all its Eastern and Western forms – tattoo, drawing, calligraphy, letters, the trace. He defended Barthes's idea of the 'Text', transcending distinctions between genres. Barthes also underlines his proximity with Khatibi in what he called his 'entreprise sociologique' ['sociological enterprise']: 'Khatibi et moi, nous nous intéressons aux mêmes choses: aux images, aux signes, aux traces, aux lettres, aux marques' ['Khatibi and I are interested in the same things: images, signs, traces, letters, and marks'].¹ In *Figures de l'étranger*, published in 1987, Khatibi wrote a long essay on Barthes's Japan, on the questions raised by *L'Empire des signes*.² Japanese culture and particularly calligraphy are the subject of a profound reflection in his essays, for example in his reading of *Eloge de l'ombre* by Tanizaki in French translation.³

The Meeting between Khatibi and Derrida

The editors of the first volume of Khatibi's *Œuvres* published by Editions de la Différence in 2008 included a short text by Derrida as a preface, where he writes: 'ce que Khatibi fait de la langue française, ce qu'il lui donne en lui imprimant sa marque, est inséparable de ce qu'il analyse de cette situation dans ses dimensions linguistiques, certes, mais aussi culturelles, religieuses, anthropologiques, politiques' ['what Khatibi does with the French language, what he gives to it by leaving his mark on it, cannot be dissociated from what he analyses in this situation in all its linguistic but also its cultural, religious, anthropological and political dimensions'].⁴ Khatibi's relationship with Derrida, as with Barthes, is in all respects essential for the development of his work. It was with the intellectuals of the Latin Quarter in Paris that Khatibi first met the philosopher, in 1974, at the time of the publication of *La Blessure du nom propre* and his anti-Zionist pamphlet *Vomito blanco*. They belonged to the same generation born between the wars (Derrida in 1936 and Khatibi in 1938), and they frequented the same intellectual circles. Above all, they were both born on the other side of the Mediterranean in the colonial context, Khatibi in Morocco and Derrida in Algeria, and were students during the Algerian War of Independence. Their meeting gave rise to an unfailing

¹ Roland Barthes, 'Ce que je dois à Khatibi', in Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Œuvres III: Essais* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2008) p. 7.

² Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française* (Paris: Denoël, 1987) pp. 57-85.

³ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Ombres japonaises*, *Œuvres III*, pp. 208-232.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Exergue', in Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Œuvres I: Romans et récits* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2008) p. 7.

friendship which lasted until Derrida died in 2004. A reader also of Frantz Fanon and engaged in anticolonial critique, Khatibi explicitly refers to Derrida in his article ‘Décolonisation et sociologie’ published in 1974 and reprinted in *Maghreb pluriel* in 1983. He makes the necessary connection between decolonisation and deconstruction, working against ‘logocentrism’ and ethnocentrism. Several years before the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, Khatibi calls us to ‘décentrer en nous le savoir oriental’ [‘decenter in us Western knowledge’] and to ‘nous dé-centrer par rapport à ce centre, à cette origine que se donne l’occident’ [‘to decenter ourselves with respect to this center, this origin that the West gives itself’].⁵

The dialogue between Khatibi and Derrida is pursued from one article and one book to another, from the gathering that formed *Du bilinguisme* to the Cérisy conference of 1992, up to ‘Variations sur l’amitié’ published in the *Cahier de l’Herne* in 2004. From 2001 onwards, Derrida regularly visited Khatibi in Morocco. Khatibi enters into dialogue with Derrida in a series of four texts: ‘Le point de non-retour’, ‘Lettre ouverte à Jacques Derrida’, ‘Le nom et le pseudonyme’ and ‘Variations sur l’amitié’, published together in *Jacques Derrida, en effet* in 2007. Again the two thinkers find themselves concerned with the same questions of language, writing, the ‘trace’, and ‘la différence intraitable’ [‘intractable difference’]. It is through his dialogue with Barthes and Derrida that Khatibi conceptualises the difference between East and West. *Maghreb pluriel* invents a ‘pensée autre’ [‘other-thought’]. At the same time, it is through these dialogues about the Maghreb that Derrida comes to propose the idea of ‘le monolinguisme de l’autre’ [‘the monolingualism of the other’]. Algeria was an omnipresent reality in Derrida’s thinking from his first texts, though mostly implicitly, as is testified by a long unpublished letter to Pierre Nora in 1961 about Algerian Jews. Here Derrida defends Camus against Nora himself and against Sartre.⁶ Having left Algiers in 1949 to study in Paris, he went back to carry out his military service as a teacher in 1957-1959, during the war. After that, he did not go back to Algeria until 1971. This did not prevent Algeria from playing a decisive role in the development of his thought, as he recounts with strong feeling in an interview with Mustapha Chérif: ‘l’héritage que j’ai reçu de l’Algérie est quelque chose qui a inspiré mon travail philosophique, tout le travail que j’ai poursuivi à l’égard de la pensée occidentale. Les questions que j’ai été amené à lui poser

⁵ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983) p. 54; *Plural Maghreb: Writings on Postcolonialism*, trans. P. Burcu Yalim (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) p. 30.

⁶ The letter was published with the re-edition of Pierre Nora’s *Les Français d’Algérie* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1961), pp. 271-299.

depuis une certaine marge n'auraient pas été possibles si, dans mon histoire personnelle, je n'avais été Algérien' ['the heritage I received from Algeria inspired my philosophical work, all the work I did on Western thought. The questions I asked about it would not have been possible if my personal history had not been Algerian'].⁷ Derrida finds in his dialogue with Khatibi an opportunity to demonstrate the role of the Maghreb, and of his native Algeria, in the deconstruction of Western metaphysics.

The Conference at Bâton-Rouge and the Genesis of *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*

The dialogue between Khatibi and Derrida continued in Bâton-Rouge in 1998, this time in a transatlantic context. Both of them participated in the bilingual conference *Renvois de l'ailleurs/Echoes from Elsewhere* organised at the State University of Louisiana by Patrick Mensah and David Wills. Edouard Glissant presided over this conference devoted to literary 'francophonie' outside of France. It brought together both writers and critics of francophone literature, among whom one of the most important was Khatibi. Derrida gave a long presentation subsequently published in 1996 with the title *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*. The two texts he cites in an epigraph help anchor the question of language in literature, under the aegis of a 'politique de l'amitié' ['politics of friendship']. Alongside a citation from Glissant's *Le Discours antillais* of 1981, Derrida reproduces an extract from Khatibi's *Amour bilingue*, a philosophical fiction where the 'bilangue' is the central figure.

At the conference, Derrida tested some of the hypotheses he had already articulated at the Sorbonne at a meeting of the Collège International de Philosophie, and in Montreal. These hypotheses were published in Quebec in 1982 under the title *L'Oreille de l'autre*. *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* brings together these works fuelled by his exchanges with Glissant and above all Khatibi, to whom the essay is dedicated. Attentive reading of *Le Monolinguisme* reveals in this way the hidden presence of Khatibi's thinking on language. Around French and Arabic, and languages in general, he raises questions of the difference between East and West, and the relationship between Derrida and Khatibi and the Maghreb, Algeria, and Morocco. The philosophical question of language is always broached through the singular and historically and geographically situated experience of these two French speakers originating from the Maghreb. This emblematic cultural situation – Khatibi was born in El Jadida to a Muslim, Arabic-speaking family and Derrida was born in Algiers to a Jewish, French-speaking family – is the object of a theoretical reflection that also extends

⁷ Mustapha Chérif, *Derrida à Alger, un regard sur le monde* (Alger, Arles: Barzakh, Actes Sud, 2008) p. 16.

further into ‘francophonie’ and writing more broadly. Derrida’s remarks, like those of Khatibi, in this way take on a general, even universal and paradigmatic significance relating to literature and philosophy as such.

The Search for a Genealogy of an Exemplary Franco-Maghrebian

Albert Memmi argues that, ‘le colonisé semble condamné à perdre progressivement la mémoire’ [‘the colonized seems condemned to lose his memory’].⁸ In order to understand the stakes of the dialogue between Derrida and Khatibi on language, it is necessary to take into account the death of Derrida’s mother in Nice, and with that the death of his memory of Algeria. At the end of her life, Georgette was aphasic and amnesiac. The ‘autobiographical’ project of ‘anamnesis’ undertaken in ‘Circonfession’, a text written between January 1989 and April 1990 and published in 1991, continued in *Le Monolinguisme*, attempts to respond to this aphasia-amnesia by means of the ‘témoignage’ [‘testimony’] and ‘attestation’ of a ‘franco-maghrébin exemplaire’ [‘exemplary franco-Maghrebian’], to his mother ‘qui mourait en perdant la mémoire, la parole et le pouvoir de nommer’ [‘who was dying while losing her memory, her speech, and her power of naming’].⁹ With the amnesia and the death of his mother, which followed that of his father Aimé, Derrida’s personal memory of Algeria seems threatened. This text is then the metaphysical attempt to return by means of voluntary memory to his inaccessible Algerian origins, of which the autobiographical narrative can only ever be a ‘prosthesis’. In this way Derrida attributes the ‘pulsion généalogique’ [‘search for a genealogy’] and his ‘mouvement compulsif vers l’anamnèse’ [‘compulsive movement towards anamnesia’] at work in his autobiography to his situation as a ‘franco-maghrébin’, as an Algerian Jew who speaks French and has no stable model of identification. *Le Monolinguisme* in this way retraces the genealogy of the ‘metaphysical’ desire for autobiography against the background of cultural amnesia. This problem also affects native Muslims. But, as a result of the interdependence between coloniser and colonised in the system described by Memmi in *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur*, amnesia affects all Algerians.

From the second chapter of *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre*, the paradox ‘on ne parle jamais qu’une seule langue’ and ‘on ne parle jamais une seule langue’ [‘we only ever speak

⁸ Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du Portrait du colonisateur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008) p. 121; *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, trans. Howard Greenfeld (London: Earthscan, 2003) p. 147.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre, ou, le prothèse de l’origine* (Paris: Galilée, 1996) p. 117; *The Monolingualism of the Other, or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) p. 60.

one language' and 'we never speak only one language'] raises the question of memory.¹⁰ Writing is a form of anamnesia: 'on se rappelle, on s'inquiète, on se met en quête d'histoire et de filiation' ['one recollects, one troubles oneself, one goes in search of history and filiation'].¹¹ Derrida's approach here also echoes, as if in counterpoint, Khatibi's first great narrative, *La Mémoire tatouée*, with its subtitle 'autobiographie d'un décolonisé'. Khatibi paints a fictional portrait of the relationship between a high school boy and French language and culture – a central issue in the first narratives in French published in the Maghreb in the 1950s: Albert Memmi's *La Statue de sel*, Mouloud Feraoun's *Le Fils du pauvre*, and Driss Chraïbi's *Le Passé simple*. This autobiography can be coupled with the theoretical essays brought together by Khatibi in *Maghreb pluriel* in 1983. *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* and *La Mémoire tatouée* can moreover be associated with the 'autobiographical turn' taken by French literature between 1970 and 1990, along the lines of Roland Barthes in *Roland Barthes par lui-même* (1975) and above all in *La Chambre claire* (1980). Khatibi and Derrida participate in the same philosophical tradition that stretches from Augustin to Descartes and Nietzsche, revisited by Derrida in *Otobiographies: l'enseignement de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre* in 1984. If it was until then only implicitly present, Algeria returns, in Derrida's pursuit of anamnesia, in the fifty-nine digressive, elliptical fragments of 'Circonfession'.

Anamnesia is not just the effect of a 'nostalgérie' revived by the death of Derrida's mother and the anguish of forgetting. It also responds urgently to political circumstances. Hélène Cixous affirms that, just as she would not have written *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage* 'avant de s'être sentie autorisée et sollicitée par [s]es amis algériens' ['before feeling authorised and invited to do so by her Algerian friends'], Derrida would not have undertaken to write *Le Monolinguisme* if he had not opened again the dialogue with his native Algeria and Algerians during the civil war of the 1990s.¹² *Le Monolinguisme* is anchored in the tragic moment of the Black Decade which followed the victory of the Front Islamique du Salut in the elections, the military coup d'état of 1991, the deposition of President Chadli Benjedid and the appointment of Mohammed Boudiaf, which triggered the civil war and Islamist terrorism. The singular, personal and familial history of the 'franco-maghrébin exemplaire' meets the history of the Algerian people, who play out again the scene of the armed conflict

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 21; p. 7.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 22; p. 8.

¹² See Mustapha Chérif, *Derrida à Alger, un regard sur le monde*, p. 53.

for independence. This situation, which Derrida followed closely, again opens in him the Algerian wound which will not heal.

The 'linguistic drama': Monolingualism, Bilingualism, Diglossia

As in *La Mémoire tatouée*, in *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre* 'le personnage principal est le français' ['the main character is the French language'], as Hélène Cixous puts it in her *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif* published in 1991. The French Algeria in which Derrida was brought up, like Khatibi's Morocco under the protectorate, was the setting for a colonial drama of domination *of* and *by* language. This was a drama that Memmi analysed in 1957 in *Portrait du colonisé*, on the basis of his own Tunisian experience as an Arabic-speaking Jew educated in the French school. Derrida no doubt read the *Portrait*, with its preface by Sartre. In what was supposed to be 'colonial bilingualism' and turned out in reality to be a 'linguistic duality', the 'indigenous' language, dominated by French in Morocco, Tunisia and *a fortiori* in Algeria, was systematically devalued even by those who spoke it, fascinated by the prestige of the language of the Other:

Dans le conflit linguistique qui habite le colonisé, sa langue maternelle est l'humiliée, l'écrasée. Et ce mépris, objectivement fondé, il finit par le faire sien. De lui-même, il se met à écarter cette langue infirme, à la cacher aux yeux des étrangers, à ne paraître à l'aise que dans la langue du colonisateur. En bref, le bilinguisme colonial n'est ni une diglossie, ou coexistent un idiome populaire et une langue de puriste, appartenant tous les deux au même univers affectif, ni une simple richesse polyglotte, qui bénéficie d'un clavier supplémentaire mais relativement neutre; c'est un drame linguistique.¹³

[In the linguistic conflict within the colonized, his mother tongue is that which is crushed. He himself sets about discarding this infirm language, hiding it from the sight of strangers. In short, colonial bilingualism is neither a purely bilingual situation in which an indigenous tongue coexists with a purist's language (both belonging to the same world of feeling), nor a simple polyglot richness benefitting from an extra but relatively neutral alphabet; it is a linguistic drama.]¹⁴

¹³ Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, p. 125.

¹⁴ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, pp. 151.-2.

This drama, which makes of the colonised ‘un étranger dans son propre pays’ [‘a stranger in his own land’] is completely different from the virtuosic and fertile plurilingualism of Central European Jewish writers such as Freud, Kafka, and Elias Canetti, who have an equal mastery of German, sometimes Yiddish, and often other languages.¹⁵ Georges Steiner described this polyglot situation:

I have no recollection whatever of a first language. So far as I am aware, I possess equal currency in English, French, and German. [...] My natural situation was polyglot, as is that of children in the Val d’Aosta, in the Basque country, in parts of Flanders, or among speakers of Guarani and Spanish in Paraguay. It was habitual, unnoticed practice for my mother to start a sentence in one language and finish it in another. At home, conversations were interlinguistic not only inside the same sentence or speech segment, but as between speakers. Only a sudden wedge of interruption or roused consciousness would make me realise I was replying in French to a question put in German or English or vice versa. [...] This polyglot matrix was far more than a hazard of private condition. It organized, it imprinted on my grasp of personal identity, the formidably complex, resourceful cast of feeling of Central European and Judaic humanism.¹⁶

Sent by his family to the franco-Moroccan school, Khatibi was certainly like Steiner educated between languages. But he mastered those languages to unequal levels: ‘à l’école, un enseignement laïc, imposé à ma religion; je devins triglotte, lisant le français sans le parler, jouant avec quelques bribes de l’arabe écrit, et parlant le dialecte comme quotidien. Où, dans ce chassé-croisé, la cohérence et la continuité?’¹⁷ [] ‘Linguistic dualism’ gave primacy to French as the language of culture and writing, to the detriment of Arabic. Of course, Khatibi speaks Moroccan Arabic, and reads and writes classical Arabic, unlike many Maghrebian intellectuals of his generation, but he thinks, writes, and publishes in French.

As a result of this bilingualism, which is really a ‘dualism’, Khatibi’s relationship with French is profoundly different from that of Derrida who was irremediably monolingual, and this is what was discussed at Baton-Rouge. This difference is not only because the history of Algeria as a French ‘département’, comparable to other ‘départements’ of

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¹⁵ Ibid., p. 124.

¹⁶ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) pp. 115-6.

¹⁷ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *La Mémoire tatouée, Œuvres I* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2008) p. 40.

metropolitan France, is not the same as that of the Moroccan protectorate (nor of Tunisia, moreover), where classical Arabic was still taught. It is also because the Jewish community to which Derrida belongs, despite his ‘retranchement hors de toute communauté’ [‘exclusion from every community’], did not have the same status in Morocco or in Tunisia.¹⁸ Algerian Jews who, since the Crémieux decree of 1870, benefited from having French nationality, found themselves separated by the colonial power from local Muslims, Arabs or Berbers alongside whom they lived, often for centuries.¹⁹ They became assimilated as ‘French Algerians’. As the language of the coloniser, taught in schools and imposed by the administration, French was to become their language, and soon their only language. Gradually they lost contact with the Arabic-speaking milieu in which they had previously been fully integrated, to the point of working as interpreters and translators. This assimilation was also accompanied by a secularisation leading to a drop in the use of Hebrew, which was reserved for worship, as well as the Judeo-Spanish of their ancestors. The zealous application of anti-Semitic Vichy laws during the war, as a result of which Derrida was excluded from his French school, nevertheless demonstrated the limits of that assimilation. Having lived on the Algerian land for much longer than the colonisers, Jews then became immigrants from within, ‘étrangers dans leur propre pays’ [‘strangers in their own land’], to use Memmi’s phrase.²⁰

The ‘French Algerians’ were not a homogeneous community, not even on a linguistic level, despite their assimilation by the colonial schools. Christians of French, Spanish, Italian or Maltese origin, Berber Jews, Sephardis of Spanish origin, Ashkanizis from Central Europe, the ‘French Algerians’ in their diversity found themselves at the centre of the colonial ‘linguistic drama’. Even though French was often not their mother tongue, French Algerians had to make it their reference point. In any case, beyond the Arabic-speaking Jews, those working high up in the colonial administration educated at the *Ecole des langues orientales*, white priests and several teachers and scholars, few mastered classical Arabic. In Algeria, Arabic and Berber were taught as foreign languages; in Morocco, this was only the case in

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Le Dernier des justes* (Paris: Galilée, 2014) p. 96.

¹⁹ Arabs and Berbers had to be twenty-one before they could apply for naturalisation, which was rarely given.

²⁰ The situation described by Derrida needs to be further nuanced. In addition to the fact that the Sephardi Jews driven out of Spain (often via Morocco, where they could study) have a different history from the Berber Jews who had lived in Algeria since Antiquity, there was in colonial Algeria, especially in the South and far from the big urban centres, an Arabic-speaking Jewish community, often despised by the Westernised Jews of Oran or Algiers (see Joëlle Allouche-Benyoum and Doris Bensimon, *Juifs d’Algérie hier et aujourd’hui: mémoires et identités* (Paris: Privat, 1989) and Benjamin Stora, *Les trois exils: Juifs d’Algérie* (Paris: Stock, 2006).

the French lycées, not in the Franco-Moroccan schools like the one Khatibi attended. Hélène Cixous for this reason regrets that she was forbidden access to Arabic:

Grandir dans un pays dont on ne parle pas la langue! Vous me direz – ça arrive mais pas ainsi: on grandissait dans un pays insensé. Où la langue natale, celle qu'on disait l'arabe, est déclarée comme morte, reléguée, abaissée, minorisée sur tous les marchés économiques politiques culturels, il y a de quoi rendre différemment fou chacun des peuples qui « habitent » cet inhabitable. On est à jamais blessé et révolté par cette scène : voir de nos oreilles hommes et femmes non francophones être mutilés diminués, leur langue rendue vaine devant la langue dominante.²¹

[To grow up in a country whose language you do not speak! You'll tell me that happens, but not in that way: we grew up in a senseless country. Where the native language, Arabic, was declared dead, relegated, denigrated and made into a minor language on an economic, political and cultural level. It is enough to drive those who live in this unliveable context mad. We were constantly wounded and revolted by this drama: we would see non-francophone men and women mutilated, diminished, their language made useless by the dominant language.]

Derrida affirms that this situation of linguistic domination resulted in refusing to some access to language. Deprived of the languages of his origins – Arabic, Berber, Judeo-Spanish, even Hebrew – the Algerian Jew²² is subject to 'l'interdit fondamental, l'interdiction absolue, l'interdiction de la diction et du dire': 'on interdit l'accès au dire, voilà tout, à un certain dire' ['the fundamental interdiction, the absolute interdiction, the interdiction of diction and speech'; 'one forbids access to speech [*au dire*], that is all, a certain kind of speech'].²³ Derrida sees himself in this way as condemned to live in French, his only language, which is nevertheless not his own. 'Il s'est jeté dans la traduction absolue' ['he is thrown into absolute translation'], because, 'il n'y a pour lui que des langues d'arrivée' ['there are only target languages'] in the absence of an original, and originary, language.²⁴ The 'prosthesis of

²¹ Hélène Cixous, *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en jeune saint juif* (Paris: Galilée, 1991) p. 56.

²² The use of the capital letter and the singular recalls Sartre's style in *Réflexions sur la question juive*, with which Derrida enters into dialogue in his paper 'Abraham l'autre' in 2000, reprinted posthumously in *Le Dernier des Juifs* (Paris: Galilée, 2014) p. 98, with a preface by Jean-Luc Nancy.

²³ Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, p. 58; p. 32.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 117; p. 61.

origin', the subtitle of *Le Monolinguisme*, makes the French language a substitute for this originary language that the Algerian Jew lacks, as he mourns for Berber, Arabic, Hebrew and the Judeo-Spanish of his ancestors.

A Franco-Maghrebian Writer or a Francophone Maghrebian Writer?

Chapter Eight of *Le Monolinguisme* questions the categories of Western thought used to describe the situation of the 'franco-maghrébin': 'tous ces mots: vérité, aliénation, appropriation, «chez soi», ipséité, place du sujet, loi, etc., demeurent à mes yeux problématiques. Sans exception. Ils portent le sceau de cette métaphysique qui s'est imposée' ['all these words: *truth, alienation, appropriation, habitation, one's-home* [chez soi], *ipseity, place of the subject, law*, and so on remain, in my eyes, problematic. Without exception. They bear the stamp of the metaphysics that imposed itself'].²⁵ But after listing the metaphysical vocabulary used during his previous chapters, Derrida comes to the heart of his singular situation, with the deictics in italics:

A travers, justement, *cette* langue de l'autre, *ce* monolinguisme de l'autre. Si bien que ce débat avec le monolinguisme n'aura pas été autre chose qu'une écriture deconstructive. Celle-ci toujours s'en prend au corps de cette langue, ma seule langue, et de ce qu'elle porte le plus ou le mieux, à savoir cette tradition philosophique qui nous fournit la réserve des concepts dont je dois bien me servir'.²⁶

This language of the other, *this* monolingualism of the other. So much so that this debate with monolingualism will have been nothing other than a piece of *deconstructive* writing [*écriture*]. Such writing always attacks the body of this language, my only language, and what it bears the most or in the best way, namely, the philosophical tradition that supplies us with the reservoir of concepts I definitely have to use.²⁷

The complex process of anamnesia at work in *Le Monolinguisme* makes language the stakes and the principle of deconstruction. The virtuosic usage of a language 'endeuillée du deuil', 'le deuil de ce qu'on n'a jamais eu' ['the bereaved language of bereavement', 'a mourning for

²⁵ Ibid., p. 115; p. 59.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 115.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 59.

what one never had’]²⁸ is mingled with the very experience of deconstruction, which is defined ‘à plus d’une langue’ [‘in more than one language’].²⁹ In this way the autobiographical narrative – because it is a narrative, however digressive and elliptical it might be – reveals the genesis of Derrida’s philosophy, since his introduction to *L’Origine de la géométrie*. The autobiography of the ‘franco-Maghrébin exemplaire’ or indeed of the ‘Juif Algérien’, by throwing into question that forbidden language, brings deconstruction into being. It is a question of thinking about language and writing in the general, even universal sense, on the basis of an absolutely experience that the exchange with Khatibi sets out to describe.

This contradictory relationship with language defines the condition of the ‘franco-maghrébin’, itself a new expression and apparently unique to Derrida. In their dialogue, Derrida and Khatibi’s relationship is one of both imitation and rivalry, not to say jealousy (a word often used about language itself), against the background of a friendly complicity. In *Le Monolinguisme*, playing in a virtuoso manner with the use of an address in the second person, Derrida names and reflects on his friend Khatibi, with whom he shares ‘un certain destin’ [‘a certain destiny’] which is to be ‘franco-maghrébin’, while also distinguishing himself from him in his relationship with language. Derrida presents Khatibi as ‘un écrivain maghrébin francophone’ [‘francophone Maghrebian writer’] rather than ‘franco-maghrébin’ [‘franco-Maghrebian’].³⁰ Since Khatibi is fundamentally French neither by his nationality nor by his language, Derrida sees himself as more franco-maghrébin than him. Pursuing his reflection he cites the ‘franco-Tunisian’ writer Abdelwahab Meddeb and his novel *Talismano*, a novel also analysed by Khatibi in ‘Incipits’ in *Du bilinguisme*, reprinted and developed in *Maghreb pluriel*. Derrida quotes Khatibi, who in turn quotes Meddeb, with a few allusions to Frantz Fanon and Kateb Yacine. At the end of *Le Polygone étoilé*, Kateb describes the ‘seconde rupture du cordon ombilical’ [‘second rupture of the umbilical chord’]. His father, literate in Arabic, but anxious that his sons should succeed in life, decides to send him to the French school, cutting him off in this way from his origins:

Jamais je n’ai cessé, même aux jours de succès près de l’institutrice, de ressentir au fond de moi cette seconde rupture du lien ombilical, cet exil intérieur qui ne rapprochait plus l’écopier de sa mère que pour les arracher, chaque fois un peu plus, au murmure du sang,

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre*, pp. 60-61; *The Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 33.

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires, pour Paul de Man* (Paris: Galilée, 1988) p. 38.

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre*, p. 119; p. 62.

aux frémissements réprobateurs d'une langue bannie, secrètement, d'un même accord, aussitôt brisé que conclu... Ainsi avais-je perdu tout à la fois ma mère et son langage, les seuls trésors inaliénables et pourtant aliénés!³¹

Even on days when the teacher was pleased with me, I never stopped feeling deep inside that second rupture of the umbilical cord, that internal exile which did not bring the schoolboy closer to the mother but tore them apart, each time a little more, against the background of the murmuring of blood, of the disapproving tremblings of a banished language, secretly, broken as soon as concluded.. In this way I lost at once my mother and my language, the only inalienable treasures and yet alienated!]

The child is cruelly separated from the Arabophone culture of the mother. Leïla Sebbar, also brought up in Algeria in the French school, also evokes this 'dispossession' in a deeply moving autobiographical narrative. In *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* (2003), she in turn stages the tragic rupture of the family. The daughter of an Algerian schoolteacher married to a Frenchwoman, and a *fellagha* [resistance fighter], Sebbar has a complex and ambivalent relationship with the French language – a language that her father, an indigenous Muslim schoolteacher teaches at the Republican school, a language which is no more her own than it is for the Jewish boy Jacques Derrida. The little girl, brought up in the French school where Arabic is prohibited, 'ne parle pas la langue de son père' ['does not speak her father's language'].

However, the situation of the franco-Tunisian writer Abdelwahab Meddeb, culturally Muslim and perfectly bilingual, descended from a family literate in Arabic, is again different. Perhaps Derrida is fundamentally, as he suggests, 'le seul franco-maghrébin' ['the only franco-Maghrebian'], if we can describe in this way a writer devoted to the 'monolinguisme de l'autre' by the circumstances of History – Algeria, Judaism, French nationality, the exclusion from citizenship and from school by Vichy laws, settling in Paris.

Khatibi responds to Derrida's thesis in *Le Monolinguisme* with his beautiful 'Lettre ouverte à Jacques Derrida', printed in the journal *Europe* in 2004. He underlines the difference between the Algerian Jew, who speaks French but has had his citizenship taken away by the Vichy government, and the Moroccan Jew who 'ne perd ni sa citoyenneté, ni sa nationalité et son passeport' ['who has lost neither his citizenship nor his nationality and

³¹ Kateb Yacine, *Le Polygone étoilé* (Paris: Seuil, 1997) pp. 181-2.

passport’].³² Khatibi is no doubt thinking of his friend Edmond Amran El Maleh (who died in 2010), a communist, reader of Jean Genet, and author of the magnificent autobiographical narratives *Parcours immobile* (1980) and *Aïlen ou la nuit du récit* (1983), which conjure up memories of Jewish-Arabic Morocco. But above all, Khatibi deepens Derrida’s reflection on the identity of the ‘franco-Maghrebian’. Derrida objects to Khatibi that, even without being able to write in Arabic, the Moroccan writer at least possesses a language of his own, one that he can consider as his mother tongue, even if dialectal Arabic to a large extent mixes Arabic and French, making the writer’s linguistic identity unstable. Khatibi accepts the contrast between his own personal situation as an ‘écrivain maghrébin francophone’ [‘francophone Maghrebian writer’], of the sort he studied in his thesis on *Le Roman maghrébin*, and that of the ‘franco-Maghrebian’ Derrida. The francophone Maghrebian writer, who has never been and never will be French, is not monolingual but bilingual, even trilingual, even if this is his mastery of his languages is not equal. Having adopted the French language as the language of his writing for better or for worse, Khatibi symbolically maintains access to his mother tongue, Arabic, which, even if it was denigrated by colonial history, remains incontestably ‘la sienne’ [‘his’]: ‘cette langue silencieuse me tenait la main, au-delà de toute aphasie, de toute amnésie’ [‘that silent language held my hand, beyond all aphasia, all amnesia’].³³ Whilst Derrida is condemned to monolingualism, Khatibi can pride himself on his diglossia – French, the language of his writing, and the Arabic spoken at home: ‘en ce sens, ce n’est pas une substitution de la langue maternelle, mais une langue d’écriture en une diglossie incroyable, car il s’agissait de parler dans une langue et d’écrire dans une autre’ [‘it is in this sense not a substitution of the mother tongue, but a language of writing in an incredible diglossia, because it was a question of speaking one language and writing in another’].³⁴ It is no doubt true that diglossia puts the francophone Maghrebian writer’s mother tongue in an inferior position, but it nevertheless does maintain its usage.

However, the diglossia between French and Arabic at work in *Amour bilingue* is in the end perhaps no less conflictual or paradoxical as the monolingualism of the franco-maghrebian Jew, given the dissymmetry and the unequal power relation between languages in the colonial context. In the essay on Meddeb’s *Talismano*, also quoted by Derrida, Khatibi shows that the situation of the francophone Arabic writer is also untenable because it reveals what Memmi called the alienation of colonial bilingualism. Khatibi describes the ‘chiasme

³² Abdelkebir Khatibi, ‘Lettre ouverte à Jacques Derrida’, *Europe* 901 (2004): 201-211 (p. 205).

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

entre aliénation et inaliénation’ [‘the chasm between alienation and inalienation’] as a ‘schize’ [‘split’].³⁵ Transcribing into French his ‘nom propre transformé’ [‘transformed proper name’], which also becomes a pseudonym, the francophone author ‘ne peut rien posséder (si tant soit peu on s’approprie une langue), il ne possède ni son parler maternel qui ne s’écrit pas, ni la langue écrite aliénée et donnée à une substitution, ni cette autre langue apprise et qui lui fait signe de se désapproprier en elle et de s’y effacer’ [‘he cannot possess anything (if ever one appropriates a language), he possesses neither his maternal speech that is not written nor the written Arabic language that is alienated and given to a substitution, nor this other learned language that signals him to disappropriate and erase himself therein’].³⁶

Khatibi, Derrida, and Mallarmé

The linguistic alienation created by the separation and hierarchy of languages in the colonial context, experienced in a heightened manner by Derrida and Khatibi, can nevertheless turn out to be creative, it inspires poetry, the invention of a language of one’s own. Building on the central thesis of *Le Monolinguisme* as on his own experience of bilingualism in Morocco, emblematic of a sort of ontological bilingualism, Khatibi makes of writing, of all writing, in any language, an experience of ‘désappropriation’ [‘disappropriation’]: ‘quand j’écris, je le fais dans la langue de l’autre. Cette langue n’est pas une propriété’ [‘when I write, it is in the language of the other. This language is not a property’].³⁷ This is very close to Derrida’s remarks on the French language as not ‘la sienne’ [‘his own’]. As a writer, Khatibi ‘possesses’ French no more than any other language:

J’ai toujours senti que la langue en général, et le français en particulier, m’a été prêtée. Je ne suis pas l’héritier direct de cette langue, ni de sa tradition; je n’ai pas l’illusion de parler en son nom, ni avec une autorité qui m’aurait été octroyée de génération en génération, mais elle m’a adopté comme je l’ai adoptée en tant qu’étranger professionnel.³⁸

[I have always felt that language in general, and French in particular, was lent to me. I did not directly inherit that language, nor its tradition: I do not feel that I speak in its name,

³⁵ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel*, p. 201; *Plural Maghreb*, p. 135.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 201; pp. 134-5.

³⁷ Abdelkebir Khatibi, ‘La Langue de l’autre’, *Œuvres III*, p. 119.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 133.

nor with an authority that would have been bestowed upon me from one generation to another, but rather it adopted me as I have adopted it as a professional stranger.]

In *Portrait du colonisé*, Memmi described the French language as a ‘prêt qui, d’ailleurs, ne sera jamais qu’un prêt’ [‘a loan which can only ever be a loan’].³⁹ Khatibi conceptualises bilingualism in a broad sense, not in fact unrelated to monolingualism in that it too makes him a foreigner in language.

This foreignness in language is not unique to the Maghreb, nor to francophone countries outside France. Khatibi also suggests it describes Mallarmé’s situation, as he cites the critic Albert Thibaudet: ‘il conviendrait de chercher la mesure dans laquelle fut ou non française l’œuvre de Mallarmé’ [‘we need to discover how far Mallarmé’s work was French’]. This comparison allows Khatibi to consider himself an ‘otage dans la langue française et sa littérature’ [‘a hostage in the French language and its literature’].⁴⁰ The intractable difference between writing in French and speaking in dialectal Arabic is comparable to Mallarmé’s separation between the ‘brut’ [‘raw’] and ‘essentiel’ [‘essential’] forms of speech. In ‘La Langue de l’autre’, with its Derridean subtitle ‘Exercice de témoignage’, Khatibi compares speaking in one language and writing in another to Mallarmé’s distinction, as it is analysed by Maurice Blanchot, which defines poetry:

Parler dans une langue et écrire dans une autre est une expérience étrange et peut-être radicale. Je me demande maintenant si Maurice Blanchot n’a pas visé juste: « Par une division violente, Mallarmé a séparé le langage en deux formes presque sans rapport, l’une la langue brute, l’autre le langage essentiel. Voilà peut-être le véritable bilinguisme ». ⁴¹

[Speaking in one language and writing in another is a strange and perhaps radical experience. I wonder if Maurice Blanchot got it right: “in a violent division, Mallarmé separated language into two forms with no connection, one was raw language, the other essential language. Perhaps this is true bilingualism.”]

Derrida in the same way borrows from Mallarmé the term ‘idiom’. In ‘Crise de vers’ (1895), observing ‘la diversité, sur terre, d’idiomes’ [‘the diversity of idioms in the world’],

³⁹ Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé*, p. 127.

⁴⁰ Abdelkebir Khatibi, ‘La Langue de l’autre’, *Œuvres III*, p. 120.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 115.

Mallarmé asserts of languages that: ‘imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême’] [‘many are imperfect, and there is no supreme language’].⁴² Derrida’s reference to Mallarmé is nevertheless based on a mystical interpretation of the ‘défaut des langues’ [‘lack of languages’] related to the dream of a ‘pure langue’ or ‘reine Sprache’ [‘pure language’] formulated by Walter Benjamin, who interpreted ‘Crise de vers’ in ‘The Task of the Translator’.⁴³ This reading owes much to the Jewish mystical tradition of the name. Derrida locates himself not only in Benjamin’s genealogy but also that of Franz Rosenzweig and Gershom Scholem. The theory of the ‘double état de la parole’ [‘the dual state of language’] and the ‘rémunération du défaut des langues’ [‘paying the debt of languages’] as it was conceived by Mallarmé remains on the horizon of Derrida and Khatibi’s dialogue.

From Algeria to Morocco, which is in some sense the *maghreb* of the Maghreb, from one East to the other, it is always literature in a broad sense, including philosophy, that lies at the heart of the dialogue between Derrida and Khatibi, whether or not they refer directly to Mallarmé, Benjamin, Glissant or Meddeb. Beyond the singular condition of the ‘franco-maghrébin exemplaire’ and the ‘maghrébin francophone’, the main stakes of their argument is writing. For Derrida as for Khatibi, it is not just a question of describing the condition of the Maghrebian or franco-Maghrebian, or even the French or francophone writer, the subject of the conference in 1992. Based on the singularity of his own situation and his ‘destin’, which he considers to be ‘exemplaire d’une structure universelle’ [‘exemplary of a universal structure’], Derrida like Khatibi endeavours to think through the situation of *all* writers, including novelists, poets, and philosophers, in relation to language. He argues, ‘il en est toujours ainsi a priori – et pour quiconque. La langue dite maternelle ne’st jamais purement naturelle, ni propre ni habitable’ [‘it is *always that way a priori* – and for everyone else. The language called maternal is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable’].⁴⁴ At the same time, ‘la non identité à soi de toute langue’ [‘non-identity of itself of all language’] means that there is not one language, nor the language, nor ‘l’idiome ni le dialecte’ [‘nor the idiom nor the dialect’].⁴⁵ The paradox of the franco-Maghrebian’s situation, which Khatibi also finds in that of the francophone Maghrebian, defines the condition of the writer towards

⁴² Stéphane Mallarmé, *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dès* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003) p. 244.

⁴³ Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’ is translated by Harry Zohn in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000) pp. 15-25.

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre*, p. 112; p. 58.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 123; p. 65.

language. On the basis of the ‘aliénation originaire’ [‘originary alienation’] of all language, it is necessary to write ‘à l’intérieur’ [‘within’] the given language and invent one’s own idiom ‘en vue de l’idiome absolu’ [‘with a view to an absolute idiom’].⁴⁶ The situation of the franco-Maghrebian in *Le Monolinguisme* allows Derrida, in *Paraages* to reinterpret Proust’s famous statement: ‘on n’écrit jamais ni dans sa propre langue ni dans, une langue étrangère’ [‘we write neither in our own language nor in a foreign language’], also quoted by Khatibi. In this way the historical and empirical question – Khatibi as a Muslim writer born in Morocco and Derrida, a Jewish writer born in Algeria, two French colonies – and its impact on the linguistic dimensions of monolingualism and bilingualism opens up the question of the philosophical scope of writing in the most general sense, conceived through the paradox of the franco-Maghrebian. The writer has only one language, and that language is not his own. For Khatibi as for Derrida, the writer can only ever be a professional stranger, ‘en deuil de l’origine’, as Régine Robin beautifully puts it in her discussion of Yiddish as a language that has irremediably disappeared from but continues to haunt the work of Georges Perec, for example. The loss of Yiddish, like that of Ladino for Elias Canetti, which Régine Robin conceives in terms Benjaminian terms, is emblematic of the lack which founds the very act of writing, in any language:

Langue perdue, langue méconnue, langue inconnue, langue en lieu et place d’une autre, troisième langue, langue pure, langue fondamentale, langue de fond, langue maternelle, simplement quelque chose des « lointains fabuleux » qui s’inscrit dans l’oeuvre, dans un travail d’écriture toujours à côté de, pas tout à fait sur le trait, décalé, décentré. Que l’écrivain se trouve au carrefour de plusieurs langues, polyglotte, multilingue, cela s’inscrit que dans une langue, langue d’amour ou langue d’emprunt, une langue pour opérer le travail du deuil. C’est LA LANGUE qui fait défaut. Une langue en trop, LA LANGUE en moins. On n’habite jamais sa langue.⁴⁷

[A lost language, misrecognised language, unknown language, a language in the place of another, third language, a pure language, a fundamental language, foundational language, mother tongue, simply something from a distant elsewhere inscribed in the work, in the work of writing always alongside, not quite on the line, displaced, decentred. If the writer

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 126; p. 67.

⁴⁷ Régine Robin, *Le Deuil de l’origine, une langue en trop, une langue en moins* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2003) p. 197.

finds themselves on the crossroads of several languages, polyglot or multilingual, this is recorded in a language, a language of love or borrowed language, to accomplish a work of mourning. It is LANGUAGE which is lacking. A language too much, LANGUAGE itself too little. We do not live in language.]

In this way every writer can say, in their way, that they are a 'franco-maghrébin exemplaire'.