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**“Ce monde qui s’écroule en nous”: Abdellatif Laâbi’s
Apocalyptic Consciousness**

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Abstract

“Ce monde qui s’écroule en nous”: Abdellatif Laâbi’s Apocalyptic Consciousness

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This report examines how francophone Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi constructs an apocalyptic worldview in three of his poems from the early 1990s. These poems (“Éloge de la défaite,” “Le soleil se meurt,” and “Les écroulements”) rely on a double register of the word “apocalypse” that incorporates both its religious and secular connotations, which allows Laâbi to engage with questions of redemption and futility. The apocalypse manifests itself in imagery of both the disintegrating human body and the polluted environment, emphasizing the ecological interconnectedness of humanity and the non-human environment, as well as the role of the human in the planet’s destruction. I argue that this reading of Laâbi’s apocalyptic poems opens up a new understanding of his political engagement and humanism as he interrogates the possibility of a reformed humanity.

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Introduction

In a 1989 interview with Tahar Djaout, Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi condemned the current political landscape as “une vraie apocalypse politique, sociale, culturelle, et morale, où la dignité de l’homme se trouve au plus bas” (a real political, social, cultural, and moral apocalypse, in which human dignity is at its lowest) (“Entretien”)¹. These nationalisms—in Djaout’s Algeria, in Morocco, and in Laâbi’s adopted home of France—formed only a part of the perceived apocalypse in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The intellectual mood was saturated with disappointment caused by the prevalence of postcolonial regimes that reproduced the violence of their colonial predecessors, as well as the profusion of civil wars in formerly colonized nations. The Gulf War, the First Intifada, white nationalist violence in France, the mishandled AIDS crisis, and other large-scale violent incidents, as well as environmental crises like the catastrophic nuclear accident at Chernobyl and the increase in natural disasters due to anthropogenic climate change seemed to demonstrate the fundamentally self-destructive nature of humanity. Intellectuals—including Djaout, who was assassinated in 1993, four years after interviewing Laâbi—were being targeted both by repressive governments and violent dissidents. The only chance of undoing this apocalypse, Laâbi suggests in the interview, lies in “l’approfondissement du plus universel des valeurs que sont la démocratie, les droits des individus et des peuples, le pluralisme, la libre expression” (deepening the most universal of values, which are democracy, the rights of individuals

¹ A note on translation: All translations are mine except for those of the poems, which are by Anne George (“Les écroulements”) and Victor Reinking (“Éloge de la défaite,” “Le soleil se meurt”). Quotations and translations from the bilingual edition of *The World’s Embrace* are cited with the French page number first, followed by the English (i.e., 2/3).

and peoples, pluralism, and free expression) (“Entretien”). Nevertheless, over the next few years Laâbi produced a series of poems that seem to abandon the dream of these “valeurs universels” and instead take up apocalyptic themes and a prophetic tone in order to explore questions of violence, destruction, and the (im)possibility of redemption.

Laâbi’s career as a writer and activist spans over fifty years. With a group of friends, he founded the literary journal *Souffles* in 1966 in Rabat, followed by its Arabic-language counterpart *Anfās* in 1971. The journal challenged both the French cultural hegemony maintained in Morocco after independence and the repressive regime of Hassan II, whom many saw as reproducing the injustices of the colonial system. *Souffles/Anfās* created a space for the Moroccan avant-garde, not only pushing boundaries artistically and socially, but also engaging in transnational solidarity movements with groups like the Black Panthers. Laâbi wrote poetry and editorials for both versions of the journal, and encouraged the cultivation of Moroccan expression in Arabic and French. The magazine’s seven-year run ended tragically in 1972 with the arrest and torture of Laâbi and his co-editor Abraham Serfaty (Harrison and Villa-Ignacio 1-3). Laâbi remained in prison for eight years, and the experience haunts his later writings. In 1985, five years after his release, he moved to France with his wife and children in self-imposed exile. The early 1990s saw Laâbi thinking deeply about exile, the state of his home country, and the possibility of return. In fact, he moved briefly back to Morocco in 1994, only to return to France, disillusioned by the political repression and widespread inequality he still found there (Alessandra 134-135). The three apocalyptic poems that I analyze here—“Éloge de la défaite” (1992), “Le soleil se meurt” (1992), and

“Les écroulements” (1993)—were all written during this uncertain time. Many critics have rightly read Laâbi’s work as encouraging political engagement and reform (Babana-Hampton, Cavness); certainly, his work as an activist and his statements in interviews support such an understanding. However, these apocalyptic poems resist a straightforward political reading. While they condemn certain political acts (war, deregulation leading to environmental pollution, wrongful imprisonments, torture), they put into question the possibility of political resolutions to these human crises.

Instead, these poems step outside of the realm of political solutions and portray humanity as irrevocably fallen. Laâbi relies on the double valence of the word “apocalypse”—as both religious revelation and in its contemporary sense, as civilization-ending catastrophe—in order to construct an apocalyptic poetic consciousness that neither confirms nor denies the potential for revelatory meaning in the destructive action of the poems. This consciousness occupies an island of calm in the midst of a collapsing world, a liminal space that holds hope and despair in delicate tension. The poems never fully cede to either impulse; although their pessimism is palpable, moments of hope consistently break through. The spoken or written word, Laâbi’s defiled *parole*, offers a glimpse of hope, sometimes sustained and sometimes undercut. These intimate violations of language are reflected in parallel violences inflicted upon the body and the planet, as the apocalyptic consciousness of the poet extends outward to incorporate both the human body and the non-human environment. Laâbi links planetary destruction by environmental catastrophe to the intimate dissolution of the body, questioning the borders of the human and emphasizing a global, ecological interconnectedness. Humanity’s role

in the apocalypse remains in the foreground, as human moral corruption contaminates the planet, emerging as environmental pollution and bodily putrefaction. Where religious apocalypses promise a separation of the good from the wicked, with punishment for the latter and eternal reward for the former, Laâbi offers no such distinction; instead, he implicates all of humanity in this crisis. On this point, the poems maintain an element of irresolution as Laâbi questions the possibility—or even desirability—of redemption.

In the first section of this report, I examine the ways in which Laâbi engages with both religious and secular traditions of apocalyptic literature to construct an apocalyptic consciousness in between the religious model of redemption and the secular model of meaningless annihilation. From there, I turn to Laâbi's representations of the dissolution of the human body and the environment as the result or reflection of the corrupted human spirit, situating him in an eco-poetic context that challenges the primacy of the human. Finally, I show how Laâbi locates apocalypse as both destruction and restoration in the figure of the spoken word, *parole*. Although I conclude on this potential for restoration, I do not mean to suggest that the poems have an underlying optimistic message; rather, I would emphasize the tension that Laâbi maintains consistently throughout the work between tentative optimism and utter nihilism. While I believe it is important to read Laâbi in terms of his political activism, in this report I showcase the complex poetics he develops in response to a moment of both personal and global precarity. This apocalyptic poetic consciousness interrogates political promises of reform, and opens up a new, darker dimension to Laâbi's work as a poet and as an activist.

Apocalyptic Consciousness and the Doubled Apocalypse

Two understandings of apocalypse inform Laâbi's project in these three poems: the Abrahamic² religious apocalypses as represented in the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, and the Qur'an and a newer strain of post-apocalyptic literature and film. These models engage differently with questions of revelation and senselessness, and the interplay between the two lends Laâbi's apocalypses their emotional weight and prophetic resonance. Through his rethinking of both types of apocalypse, I argue that Laâbi as prophet-poet develops what Tony Triglio has called an "apocalyptic consciousness," a mode of thought that is "paradoxically redemptive and self-annihilating" (16). Apocalyptic consciousness is, in and of itself, a paradox—apocalypse representing the ending of all things, including consciousness—but Triglio argues that it is a productive one. Triglio's work on Anglophone poets William Blake, H.D., and Allen Ginsberg suggests that these writers of "modern prophecy" hold open a space between "'empire' (Logos) and 'asylum' (divine madness)" (14) that offers redemption while announcing destruction. The term "apocalyptic consciousness" also suggests that the devastation of apocalypse plays out as much internally as globally, as we will see in Laâbi's tortured mental landscapes. While Laâbi concerns himself less with reason and unreason, his poetic prophecy creates a similarly liminal space. The poems balance on verge of collapse—of apocalypse—but the poetic voice deters the end of all things and offers moments of love, hope, and redemption without giving way to sentimentality or

² I use this term because Laâbi does not particularly stress Islam and uses imagery common to all three Abrahamic religious texts. This may be incidental, but might also be a conscious choice on his part to downplay the differences among the religions given the thematic concerns of the poems.

suggesting that destruction can be fully prevented.

The difficulty of defining apocalyptic literature has been well documented (Collins 2-5). A lack of consensus on the generic conventions of the apocalyptic genre (or even what constitutes an apocalypse) has resulted in a somewhat loose understanding of the term ‘apocalyptic’ that varies widely from critic to critic. The modern French word *apocalypse* and its English cognate derive from the Greek *ἀποκάλυψις*, to uncover or disclose, describing the revelation granted to St. John of the end of time and the Day of Judgment. Although the revelatory aspect of apocalypse initially referred to its prophetic delivery, for certain critics it has become integral to the social function of apocalypse. James Berger asserts that “The apocalyptic event, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end” (*After the End* 5). The apocalypse reveals as it destroys, retroactively providing sense as it engenders chaos. The apocalypses found in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim holy texts are also deeply concerned with eschatology, which includes both the end of time and the final divine judgment of the dead (Collins 5). Cleansing and purification also appear as recurring themes; although presented as an end, the apocalypse represents the beginning of a new existence purged of sin and the sinful (Inbari 392).

As many have noted, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked a shift in Euro-American rhetoric around the apocalypse as events unfolded more horrific than apocalyptic literature could have foreseen (Buell, Berger). As Berger evocatively puts it, “We know what the end of the world looks like[...]The images of Nazi death camps, of

mushroom clouds and human silhouettes burned onto pavements, of not just massacres but genocides in a dozen places, of urban wastelands and ecological devastation are all part of our cultural heritage. Apocalypse is our history” (“Twentieth Century Apocalypse” 388). This experience of “apocalypse within history” gives rise to a secularized genre of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, in which human-caused devastation rather than divine judgment the cause the catastrophic end. For the purposes of this report I will rely on an understanding of the apocalyptic that encompasses both its historical religious and contemporary secular connotations. Laâbi presents a vision of the apocalyptic that vacillates between divine presence and absence, the hope of order out of chaos or despair rooted in a lack of meaning. Justice is not the inevitable outcome of these crises, and the righteous die alongside the wicked. Humanity as a whole becomes both cause and victim of cataclysmic violence. In Laâbi’s poems, the apocalypse is an ongoing process of world-ending that is both pointless and laden with meaning, mundanely human and cryptically divine.

As such, Laâbi draws on a double register of religious and secularized apocalyptic imagery, often combining the two. In the opening stanza of “Les écroulements,” the speaker asks his beloved what she sees of the crumbling world, wondering:

Les étoiles contaminées tombent-elles
de l’arbre de la connaissance
Le nuage toxique des idées
nous submergera-t-il bientôt ? (66)

Are contaminated stars falling
from the tree of knowledge
Will the toxic cloud of ideas
engulf us, soon? (67)

In this passage, the “*étoiles contaminées*” suggest a planet so polluted that the contamination has spread to the stars. The idea of a solar apocalypse appears in the title and opening lines of “*Le soleil se meurt*” as well. While the death of a star might appear out of the realm of human influence, in both poems Laâbi emphasizes human involvement. The stars of “*Les écroulements*” are contaminated by both ecological and moral pollution, while the sun of “*Le soleil se meurt*” dies with “*une rumeur de l’homme à la bouche*” (a rumor of man on its lips) (30/31). In both cases, humanity is inextricably implicated in the present catastrophe. Laâbi combines this imagery of stellar collapse with the Abrahamic symbol of the first human-caused disaster, the Fall of Man. Here, the tree of knowledge bears the consequences of human intellectual progress, environmental pollution and destruction, rather than the fruit of its inception. The speaker cements his perception of thought as contaminated in the following lines when he describes “*le nuage toxique des idées.*” Ideas are associated with toxic waste—the by-product of scientific advancement—but the ideas themselves also possess a moral toxicity. Human thought has led to increasingly creative and destructive modes of violence that will result in this apocalyptic scenario. The speaker does not only condemn an abstract humanity, however—he locates this same pollution in his own body. He describes his mind as a “*gros abcès des idées*” (swollen abscess of ideas) that “*crèvera*” (will burst) (68/69), embodying the same contamination of thought that manifests itself in environmental pollution. This self-implication is a thread that runs throughout the poems; Laâbi’s speaker both condemns and represents humanity, a fact that complicates his moral

judgments and the narrative of victim and victimizer. Laâbi connects religious apocalyptic imagery to images of environmental, bodily, and moral decay in order to express concerns about the excesses of human thought but never exempts himself from scrutiny. The incorporation of a religious apocalyptic tone lends the poet the rhetorical weight of a prophet, while the contemporary apocalyptic imagery allows him to engage in a concrete way with the issues of his time—political repression, war, human rights abuses, and environmental pollution.

In some ways, Laâbi's poetry falls very much in line with the project of Abrahamic apocalyptic literature. Critics have noted that the Book of Revelation serves as a scathing critique of imperial Rome while drawing on the imagery of an older religious text, the Hebrew Bible, in order to make its veiled denunciation (Kealy 201). Similarly, the apocalyptic prophecies in the Book of Daniel demonstrate a strong resistance to empire (Collins 6). Muslim apocalyptic tradition in both the Qur'an and the hadith also reflect political conflicts of the first few centuries of Islam (Cook 8). Laâbi's condemnation of violence and environmental destruction in his own time using the prophetic language of religious apocalypse certainly resonates with those texts. Veiled and not-so-veiled references to Hassan II's regime in Morocco, as well as the repeated invocations of toxic waste and nuclear missiles, show Laâbi critiquing both the situation in Morocco and the more global abuses of capitalism and the military-industrial complex. Still, Laâbi's poems deviate significantly from the commonly established function of the Abrahamic apocalypses. Most, although not all, religious apocalyptic literature has served to "comfort and exhort a group in crisis" (Collins 6). Despite violent and

destructive subject matter, religious apocalypses offer the comfort of knowing that traumatic events follow a divine plan and therefore elude human control. Furthermore, the religious apocalypse offers a promise of salvation for the good and destruction of the wicked; violence is ultimately exercised in the service of divine justice.

Rather than offering comfort, Laâbi's apocalyptic poems hold open the space between hope and despair. Despite frequent religious allusions, God functions as an absent presence in these poems, invoked but unable to stop the destruction. In "Le soleil se meurt," the speaker implores,

O dieu
si tu es homme
frère de l'homme
renonce à tes mystères
sors de ta grotte
Dis à tes partisans
la vanité de leurs temples (30)

O god
if you are man
brother of man
give up your mysteries
come out of your cave
Tell your partisans
the vanity of their temples (31)

The boundary between divine and human dissolves as the speaker paradoxically appeals to God's humanity. By referring to the deity as "homme/frère de l'homme" in the passage above, he attempts to create an intimate bond of familial sympathy, while simultaneously stripping God of divine power, a move reflected in the lack of capital letter for "dieu." The speaker calls on God to emerge from his "grotte" (language that will be used later in the poem to describe the last human survivor of a nuclear holocaust) and to settle the

conflicts fought in the name of religion. Like that last survivor, who “décide d’entamer/la grève de la vie” (decides to go/on a life strike) (36/37), God does not appear. Divine salvation is no longer a possibility, and divine wrath appears only in the form of echoes, as human-caused devastation. This is a familiar motif in contemporary post-apocalyptic literature, in which “[c]atastrophic narrations[...]are bereft of redemption and revelation” (Heffernan 6), although the extent of their hopelessness has been debated. While the promise of divine intention no longer exists, these narratives often emphasize human resilience in the wake of catastrophe and reveal something fundamental about the society that has been lost (Hicks 7). Laâbi’s poems vacillate between a sense of post-apocalyptic meaninglessness and apocalyptic revelation. While God is absent or powerless, humanity steps in as both cause of destruction and hope of salvation.

In his apocalyptic poems, Laâbi sustains a powerful tension between redemption and annihilation while never fully ceding to either. This tension emerges most tangibly in the figure of the island or raft, a motif that Laâbi employs in all three poems. The island and raft represent spaces of calm in the midst of chaos and dissolution, but they are insecure, always on the verge of flooding or capsizing. The speaker voices this uncertainty when he asks in “Les écroulements”: “Sommes-nous sur une île flottante/ou voguons-nous sur une torpille” (Are we on a floating island/or drifting on a torpedo) (66/67)? The conflation of the natural formation of the island and a man-made weapon collapses the distance between an ecological habitat and the explosive destruction of human violence. The torpedo, capable of exploding at any moment, emphasizes the dangerous situation of the speaker and his interlocutor—at this moment, both the beloved

and the reader. The speaker of “Le soleil se meurt” explicitly connects the space of the floating raft to the precarious balance between faith and despair, life and death:

Avec cependant ce doute
qui donne à l’espoir
l’amertume tonique de son ivresse
Avec cependant cet espoir
qui donne au doute
le lyrisme de sa méthode[...]
Nous avons tenu autant que possible
dans ce radeau de fortune (46-48)

With yet this doubt
that lends hope
the bracing bitterness of its rapture
With yet this hope
that lends doubt
the lyricism of its method[...]
We have held as steady as possible
in this makeshift raft (47-49)

In this passage, Laâbi constructs hope and doubt as mutually constitutive, both contained in the “radeau de fortune” that carries humanity towards the end. The choice of “radeau de fortune” as opposed to simply “radeau” is significant here. The term often refers to the lifeboats taken by clandestine immigrants who cross the Mediterranean from Morocco attempting to reach Europe. Tragically, many migrants drown making the crossing, while those who do make it are often arrested on the beach and sent back (Carling 329).

Symbolically, the “radeau de fortune” represents a liminal space of both hope and death.

Laâbi posits humanity as clandestine immigrants huddled in a lifeboat, having “tenu autant que possible” to avoid capsizing. This balance is fundamental to Laâbi’s apocalyptic consciousness, as he holds off the inevitable collapse through his writing.

Indeed, hope and doubt represent crucial elements, not only of the human experience, but

of the writing process. Hope gives “le lyrisme de sa méthode,” while doubt offers its “amertume tonique”—their constant tension maintains the balance of the poem. We will see this tension unfold in Laâbi’s representations of environmental, bodily, and verbal dissolution throughout the poems, counterbalanced by moments of their restoration.

Human, Body, Environment

Abdellatif Laâbi’s work is often discussed in terms of its commitment to human rights and its humanist vision, but the apocalyptic scope of these poems complicates this reading as Laâbi questions the desirability of being human. The poems represent humanity as the cause of the apocalyptic events described, by means of war, environmental pollution, political corruption, and moral failure. Laâbi not only condemns those in power, but the human race as a whole, including himself as speaker. Humanity appears irredeemable. The relationship between literature and human rights—one that Laâbi himself has articulated—becomes muddied in this apocalyptic landscape. Through his apocalyptic imagery, Laâbi expresses disillusionment with the humanist dream he espoused as a younger man. This renunciation of the human makes itself felt in two recurring motifs: the disintegrating human body and the polluted environment. Imagery of bodily corruption and environmental pollution reflects the profound moral corruption present in humanity as it destroys itself (the body) and its environment (the earth). Concurrently, the disintegration imagery often represents the poet’s desire to abandon his own humanity as a result of his complicity in this destruction, although this ultimately proves impossible. Human rights are transposed into the rights of all living things; the

human is not separate from these entities, but ecologically connected to them. Laâbi's message here aligns with that of many representations of eco-apocalypses: "[W]e are not aloof from our biosphere, however great our power to alter it; we are enmeshed within it. The decimation of plant and animal life entails the potential destruction of humanity" (Hughes and Wheeler 4). The disintegrating body of the poet mirrors the scarred and polluted surface of the earth, but Laâbi does not suggest that either can be saved, a dramatic deviation from the humanist project of many of his other works.

Jacques Alessandra describes Laâbi's oeuvre as "consacrée à l'écriture comme tentative ultime de restituer à l'homme ses parts inaliénables de liberté et d'espoir" (dedicated to writing as a final attempt to restore to humanity its inalienable shares of freedom and hope) (9). Literature serves a redemptive function, restoring what has been lost to a troubled humanity. Alessandra employs the language of democratic humanism and human rights to describe Laâbi's work, with words like "parts inaliénables," "liberté," and "espoir," and Laâbi himself supports such connections in reading his work. In a 1987 article, he emphasized the inextricability of literature from human rights: "Oui, la littérature est inséparable des droits de l'homme. Car l'humain, dans son intégrité et son intégralité physique et morale, dans la sauvegarde de son esprit[...]c'est cela qui mobilise et légitime la littérature" (Yes, literature is inseparable from human rights. Because the human, in its physical and moral integrity and integrality, in the protection of its spirit[...]that's what mobilizes and legitimizes literature) ("Droits de l'homme" 51). The condition and preservation of the human subject serves as the driving force behind literature; divorced from this purpose, literature becomes delegitimized. This assertion

seems to put him closely in line with the “littérature engagée” movement. While Laâbi accepts the term “poésie engagée” to describe his work, he insists that the aesthetic is fundamental, rather than subordinate, to the political project of literature (Alessandra, “Abdellatif Laâbi”). In the article, Laâbi explicitly links the poetic to the political in his dual focus on the body and the spirit. However, in the apocalyptic poems Laâbi represents a struggle between a humanist impulse and a dark disillusionment. The “intégrité physique et morale” of the human utterly disintegrates as Laâbi portrays spiritual disillusionment, the dissolution of the human body, and the devastation of the environment—all caused by the moral collapse of society. These devastations form an ecosystem as each reflects and feeds the others. Laâbi’s speaker shifts between mourning and righteous anger, disgust and desire, as he witnesses, experiences, and perpetrates acts of destruction.

Laâbi stages the contradiction between poetry as spiritual nourishment and the failure of the human spirit in a long, wrenching passage from “Les écroulements.” The poet wonders how he arrived at this apocalyptic moment, figuring himself as “l’artisan fils de l’artisan[...]tisserand de l’espérance” (the artisan son of the artisan[...]weaver of hope) (74/75). He represents poetry as an artisanal craft passed down in genealogical fashion. Its purpose is to provide hope, to ensure “la sauvegarde de [l’]esprit.” Laâbi’s speaker extends the metaphor to turn poetry into women’s work as he gathers words:

dans la marmite en cuivre de ma génitrice
comme autant d’épices rares
destinées aux joies humaines
au partage d’un repas qui ne devient licite
que si les pauvres le bénissent et l’honorent (74)

in the copper pot of my mother
like so many rare spices
meant for human pleasures
at a shared meal which becomes legitimate
only if the poor bless and honor it (75)

Once again, poetry becomes a bridge between generations, a sacred inheritance expressed in terms of the everyday ritual of preparing a meal. The poet's words are "destinées aux joies humaines," designed to uplift and nourish the human spirit, just as food nourishes the body. Laâbi characterizes the shared meal—the poem—in terms that reflect his assertion that a preoccupation with human rights "légitime la littérature"; here, the poem "ne devient licite/que si les pauvres le bénissent." The poet gives the power of approval to the disenfranchised, and only with their participation can his creation hold any artistic or political merit. This depiction falls very much in line with Laâbi's stated beliefs about the role and function of literature.

Crucially, however, this utopic imagining of the poem is located in a lost past. The present offers a much darker vision of the poet and his role. "Comment-aurais je peux croire/que j'exercerais un jour/le métier reprouvé du corbeau?" (How could I have believed/that one day I would practice/the scorned craft of the crow?) (74/75), he asks. Now, rather than an artisan or a cook, the poet has abandoned his humanity to become a crow, feeding off the corpses of the dead. Instead of sustaining others, he now sustains himself on their remains. His idyllic vision of poems as "domaines de rencontre, de dialogue, de croisement et de production de l'altérité" (spaces of encounter, of dialogue, of crossing and of the production of alterity) (Babana-Hampton 130) dissolves as the

apocalyptic reality sets in. The poem transforms into a cannibalistic site of mourning. The speaker expresses his disillusionment with humanity even more explicitly when he wonders how “ce rêve qui m’a converti à l’homme” (this dream which converted me to humanity) could become “un cauchemar” (a nightmare) (74/75). The humanist dream—of peace, of hospitality, of inalienable human rights—has twisted under the weight of the current historical moment. Repressive political regimes (both in Morocco and more globally) silence poets and commit human rights abuses against their people. Laâbi’s apocalyptic poems evince disillusionment with the possibility of reform, and the apocalypses he describes merely show the hellish environment that many already live through. Literature has lost its power to protect the spirit, if it ever had such a power; certainly it cannot protect human bodies and lives. Laâbi extends this spiritual failure to his representations of the body as he continues the process of transformation that turns him from a man to a crow, and de-converts him from humanity again.

The human body represents a key site of ambivalence towards the human race in these poems as Laâbi describes it dissolving, merging, and transforming. The speaker of “Éloge de la défaite” expresses his troubled relationship with his own humanity through images of his body dissolving and taking on other forms. “Je démissionne du genre humain” (I resign from the human race) (8/9), he announces, before suggesting a series of alternative forms: dog, magnolia, ant, and finally merging with a divine being, crossing to a place where “je me confondrai/avec un corps aimant-aimé” (I will merge/with a beloved-loving body) (10/11). The borders of the body become fluid as the speaker attempts to re-forged severed links with other species who inhabit the planet. Each form

offers lessons that humans have ignored or forgotten, but each ultimately rejects the speaker, who retains enough of his humanity to be recognized as a threat. The final border crossing, to “l’autre côté” (the other side) (10/11), suggests the speaker’s death, but also an ultimate liberation from the weight of his humanity. This desire to merge with another is framed in terms of a loving relationship, and recurs in “Les écroulements.” There, the speaker asks his lover to “ouvre ton ventre et accueille-moi” (open your womb and welcome me) (66/67) in a reverse birth that intimately unites their bodies, once more offering an escape for the speaker. In both cases, love dissolves the boundaries of the human body and releases the subject (temporarily) from his moral culpability.

Concurrently, the body can also represent a site of horror as merging with another takes on cannibalistic form. These recurrent images of cannibalism refuse the speaker’s attempts to deflect his own responsibility for the apocalyptic destruction that surrounds him. The speaker of “Éloge de la défaite” describes his self-cannibalism in stark terms:

Je suis
la proie
de moi-même[...]
A croire
qu’un géant masochiste et paresseux
a choisi de m’habiter
pour que je fasse à sa place
cette triste besogne (18)

I am
the prey
of myself[...]
As though
a masochistic, lazy giant
decided to inhabit me
so I’d do this sad work
for him (19)

There are many layers to this process of self-consumption. The division and ingestion of the self complicates the narrative of victim and victimized, solidifying the speaker's complicity in the violence perpetrated against other humans and against the environment. The speaker stands in for the human race here, consuming itself and its environment unendingly, but he is also an individual, a writer who cannibalizes his own experiences for his poetry. Cannibalism comes up again in "Éloge de la défaite" in one of the many descriptions of war. ("La guerre/vous dites/quelle guerre?" (The war/you say/What war?) (22/23) emerges as a refrain in the second half of the poem.) "Ah quand l'ennemi se découvrit/dans la matière cannibale" (Ah when the enemy found/the cannibal within) (20/21) precedes descriptions of mythic struggles, of the earth fighting itself and gods and goddesses struggling for power. This passage depicts a perversion of the sensual encounter described by the speaker earlier in the poem. A spiritual merging facilitated by the dissolving of the body transforms into an act of monstrous consumption in which the speaker is both eater and eaten, and the divine being becomes a squabbling horde of "dieux jaloux" (jealous gods) and "déesses perverses" (perverse goddesses) (20/21). Respite is not easily achieved in these poems, and fantasies often have dark undersides. These violent, cannibalistic encounters undermine the initial escape of the mystically dissolving body.

Representations of the human body find parallels in images of ecological catastrophe and the polluted body of the earth. Laâbi writes of a wounded planet that is both representative of humanity and destroyed by it. The poems are rife with imagery of

man-made ecological crises: acid rains, nuclear catastrophe, floods, a cataclysmic storm described as a “clameur toxique” (toxic uproar) (24/25) and a “bourrasque délétère” (pernicious squall) (25/26). These global catastrophes are the result of environmental pollution, which in Laâbi’s imaginary corresponds to humanity’s moral pollution. Human greed and war lead to practices that actively destroy the planet (bombing, mining, burning fossil fuels, etc.) and destroy the ecological relationship between humans and the environment. Laâbi gives the sense that only global extinction can save the planet from the damage that humans have inflicted, proclaiming: “On crèvera de rire/jusqu’au dernier/si cela peut soulager la terre” (We’ll die laughing/to the last one/if that will soothe the earth) (4/5). In the midst of world-ending cataclysm, such an ending feels both futile and inevitable—the planet is beyond saving, and humanity will die with it.

In “A Short History of Environmental Apocalypse,” Frederick Buell argues that the contemporary ecological crisis has been represented in literature as “a revelation of an apocalypse human beings created for themselves; that revelation, moreover, might not be a saving one.” Without large-scale change, the environmental apocalypse will “releas[e] forces that will come, if not in wrath, then in withering or tragic irony to deny salvation to all” (16). This conception of apocalypse as ironically deserved resonates with Laâbi’s descriptions of the polluted earth: humans’ moral failings and wanton destruction have destroyed their habitat and will destroy them too, eventually. Buell concludes that, rather than a headlong rush towards destruction, we have learned to live in an apocalyptic state of risk which slowly leads us to our ending (30). Laâbi’s poems envision just such a state of being; apocalypse as way of life. “Qui parle/de refaire le monde?” (Who’s speaking/of

remaking the world?) his speaker asks. “On voudrait simplement/le supporter” (We would simply like to endure it) (30/31). This pessimistic outlook takes up the language of acceptance rather than change, as Laâbi details an earth too devastated to recover. The apocalypse has come and gone.

Often, Laâbi intertwines environmental and bodily imagery in order to emphasize the ecological interconnectedness of all life, and the damage caused by humans when they ignore that connection. “Le soleil se meurt” finds a violated planet who “à la nausée” (is nauseated), and cannot continue to sustain the beauty of the natural world.

Mille riens invisibles
qui font lianes
autour du sexe écartelé
où éclot le nouveau-né
Sûr qu’elle n’a plus envie
d’être lyrique (44)

A thousand invisible nothings
that grow into lianas
around the torn sex
where the newborn blossoms
Certain that she no longer wants
to be lyrical (45)

Here, Laâbi plays with the idea of earth as giving mother. The planet is embodied as a pregnant woman whose nausea is not a natural side effect of pregnancy, but profoundly unnatural, caused by the toxic pollution poisoning her body. The passage invokes Sartre’s existential nausea, but here the earth, rather than the human, realizes the absurdity of her existence. In the past she has labored to produce the natural world, which damaged her body (the “sexe écartelé”) but also restored her in a natural process of destruction and regrowth. Following this pattern, the anthropomorphized “nouveau-né” then transforms

back into a part of the environment as it blossoms like a flower. Anthropogenic pollution has intervened in this cycle, and the planet can no longer repair her wounded body.

Instead, she is nauseated and sick, unable and unwilling to give birth to the life that will inhabit her. The process becomes absurd when humanity ceaselessly destroys the environment that supports it. The body-as-earth completely breaks down.

Laabi does not only represent this collapse as bodily and environmental, but as *linguistic*. In the passage above, we see that the planet “n’a plus envie/d’être lyrique.” The act of creation is portrayed here as verbal, a lyric poem constantly being written. The silencing of the planet mirrors the silencing of dissidents under repressive regimes, including Laâbi’s own. As I will demonstrate, words and language suffer similar damages due to human failings: deceit, corruption, war, greed. The resonances between word, body, and environment connect the planet-wide catastrophe to individual human experience, the global implications of environmental pollution to personal violations of the body and the word. The apocalyptic destruction of the planet is figured here as encompassing nature, the human body, and communication, a breakdown on multiple levels that is both intimate and universal. In the remainder of this report, I will show how this linguistic breakdown plays out, and how the poet’s *parole* emerges as a possible—yet still ambiguous—site of redemption.

Parole and Restoration

Communication breakdown is a key feature of Laâbi’s apocalyptic consciousness.

Silence, gibberish, and aphasia plague his apocalyptic poems. Language failure features

frequently in literary representations of a catastrophic event, as the enormity of the circumstance exceeds the descriptive capabilities of language (Qader 9). In these poems, however, the collapse of language often precedes the apocalypse, rather than resulting from it. The grave misuse of language is one of the sins that characterize the pre-apocalyptic age and demand punishment. Following Derrida, Laâbi represents language as a quasi-mystical entity that exists independently from humanity (*Le monolinguisme de l'autre*). As such, words can be abused by the same proponents of violence and destruction who pollute nature and destroy the body through greed and war. Words have been “souillés” (defiled) (Laâbi 2/3, 68/69), stained, morally polluted by the use to which they have been ascribed. Laâbi reminds us that words are also agents of violence, that they can be used to deceive and to fuel corruption, and suggests that these uses have lasting effects on language. Like the environment and the body, words suffer the contamination of human corruption. Crucially, however, words also represent the hope of linguistic, environmental, and bodily restoration. In these poems, Laâbi stages both language breakdown and the resurgence of the spoken word, *parole*, either as embodied, vengeful deity or site of subversive resistance. Following Saussure, *parole* here refers to speech utterances as opposed to *langue*, the abstract system of language. Laâbi’s emphasis on embodied experience is reflected in his choice of *parole*—the embodied expression of language—as the agent of resistance and possible redemption. Laâbi frames the return of the word as possible, not inevitable, and the end of each poem maintains the threat of linguistic annihilation. Still, if there is a hope of restoring the environment, the body, and humanity, it lies in language.

Laâbi links these three elements—body, environment, and word—in the opening lines of “Éloge de la défaite”: “Les bourgeons s’enhardissent/pas les mots/encore blessés/souillés” (The buds grow bolder/not words/still wounded/defiled) (2/3). These lines, reminiscent of modernist poet T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*,³ suggest a regrowth after a violent incident. Eliot’s painful reawakening comes after the devastation of World War I, but many critics have noted the apocalyptic valences of his long poem (Cook, Cole), a feature that connects him to Laâbi. These opening lines of *The Waste Land* cast violence as “enchanted,” to borrow Sarah Cole’s term. Enchanted violence, for Cole, is violence that is full of regenerative possibility and indeed necessary for the regrowth of the coming spring. Cole identifies both enchanted and disenchanting violence in *The Waste Land*; “disenchanted” violence has no productive potential and represents a brutal ending of life and meaning. Like Eliot, Laâbi’s apocalypses shift between enchanted and disenchanting, revelatory and annihilating. In this passage from Laâbi, violence is crucially *disenchanted*, an ending devoid of meaning rather than a site for production. While nature makes a tentative return, words cannot do the same, suggesting perhaps in this poem that nature is more resilient than the human spirit. Words, the bearers of meaning, are too damaged to return. They are “blessés,” like the human body, and “souillés,” a word that Laâbi also uses to describe words in “Les écroulements” (68) and that evokes putrescence and pollution. Laâbi directly connects the violations of language to those of the human body and the non-human environment with his language choices

³ “April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and desire, stirring/Dull roots with spring rain.”

and imagery. The apocalyptic consciousness of these poems equates bodily putrescence with environmental pollution, as we have seen, but also with moral corruption vocalized in verbal dissolution. Ultimately, the emboldened buds will die with the human race on a “planète/qui si refroidit/et s’êteint” (planet/which is growing cold/and dark) (28/29). The excesses of humanity inflict similar damage upon body, environment, and word—on the entirety of the planet—causing each to dissolve or extinguish in the apocalyptic vision.

“Le soleil se meurt” offers one such vision, as the poet tries and fails to restore language to the aphasic planet. The poem is the most traditionally apocalyptic in tone, as the speaker self-consciously adopts the language of Biblical-Qur’anic prophecy to describe the world’s current state. He describes a “grande attente” (long wait) before the “dite résurrection” (heralded resurrection) in which “le fils de l’homme” (son of man) and “les anges/peseurs de bien et du mal” (the angels/with their scales of good and evil) (36/37) have a circular discussion, posing questions with no answer. This parodies the language of the Book of Revelation and Sūrat Al-Qiyāmah, which both describe the Day of Judgment. In this prophetic vision, “Personne ne parlera/dans la langue archaïque de l’âme” (No one will speak/in the archaic tongue of the soul) (38/39), suggesting loss of connection to a truer, deeper, language. This “langue archaïque de l’âme” is reminiscent of Derrida’s “avant-première langue,” the lost pre-Babelian language that must be invented in order to be accessed and that carries the messianic potential of true communication (Derrida 122). Laâbi’s “langue archaïque” bears no messianic promise, however; the speaker merely laments its loss before commenting on the insufficient nature of his own project. Here, the speaker is trapped in this “siècle qui n’en finit pas”

(endless century) from which position he demands: “Mais où sont les prophètes d’antan?[...]Mais où sont les apocalypses d’antan?” (But where are the prophets of old?[...]But where are the apocalypses of old?) (38/39). The messianic capability of language is undermined by the stasis of time: a “siècle qui n’en finit pas.” The frustrated possibility of a future time belies the potential of the speaker’s prophetic future tense. “Le soleil se meurt” also plays with tense, as when the speaker uses the past tense to describe his foiled dreams for the future, cementing the feeling of loss caused by humanity’s failures. In the passage above, he is powerless, reciting prophecies that will never come to pass—yet another breakdown between word and meaning. The invocation of the “prophètes” and “apocalypses d’antan” expresses a desire for those types of regenerative, enchanted violence—and the enchanted capability of the word to shape the future—that remains unfulfilled.

A similar frustration emerges later in the poem, when Laâbi describes the act of *écriture* as a process of painful and fruitless creation. In a familiar metaphor, the desert becomes a blank page waiting for writing. The speaker instructs:

Etends tes doigts sur la flamme
et supporte
Puis écris la vague qui te tourmente
vocalise-là[...]
Déjà le vent apocryphe
s’acharne sur la trace
et le désert lave sa planche (40-42)

Hold your fingers over the flame
and endure
Then write the wave that torments you
Give it voice[...]
Already the apocryphal wind

furiously attacks the traces
and the desert cleans its slate⁴ (41-43)

Writing is figured as a process of self-inflicted torture, in which the poet suffers bodily in order to produce. In the apocalyptic world of the poem, language can only emerge in expressions of pain. Here, unlike other moments in the poems, the written and the oral merge as the writer translates “la vague qui [le] tourmente” into words. This fusion gives the sense that words must be expressed by any means in this desperate moment characterized by silence. This dolorous act is not without value; the speaker describes the movement of the hand writing as a “migration amoureuse” (loving migration) (40/41) amidst silence. This migration resists the stasis of time that characterizes the apocalypse, in that the mere attempt at writing briefly allays the silence and the apocalyptic end. The respite concludes when the writing is undone and the “vent apocryphe” erases the writer’s prophetic truth, replacing it with apocrypha, another instance of language failing to express meaning. Like the “mots souillés,” the written words here are mangled, erased, polluted, and used for deceit. The words in the desert stand in for the poem itself, a brief and painful attempt to forestall the inevitable end. “Le soleil se meurt” ends with the poet’s ultimate apocalyptic fears: an eternity characterized by “manque à écrire” (lack of writing) (48/49). The writing hand no longer migrates, and becomes static, like the apocalyptic time. More than any other element, the tragedy of the apocalypse resides in the absence of the written word.

Silence dominates the first half of “Les écroulements,” which shifts the focus on

⁴ I have modified Reinking’s translation to keep the integrity of the line breaks—the original reads “Then write the wave/that torments you” and “and the desert cleans/its slate.”

the word from written to oral. The refrain of the poem, “Pourquoi ce silence mon aimée” (Why are you silent, my beloved) (70/71), emphasizes the impossibility of communication amidst the apocalyptic “crumblings” of the title. The speaker repeatedly asks his beloved to tell him what she sees, filling in the silence with his own speculations when she proves unable or unwilling to respond. The poem grapples thematically and stylistically with the question of how to speak in the face of horror through the excess of interrogation points without the relief of a declarative statement. The speaker’s unanswered questions accumulate and he begins to doubt the validity of his own words, demanding:

Pourquoi ce silence
Crois-tu aussi que les mots sont si souillés
qu’ils ne servent même plus à demander son chemin
Crois-tu qu’il n’y a plus rien à dire
et que mes pauvres versets
ne sont que dérision sur dérision (68)

Why are you silent
Do you believe that words are so defiled
they can no longer be used to even ask one’s way
Do you believe that there is nothing more to say
and that my poor verses
are just derision heaped upon derision (69)

Here he repeats “souillés” as a descriptor for words, reestablishing the connection between their defilement and the environmental and bodily pollution discussed above. Humans have so corrupted their language with lies and violence that it can no longer serve a communicative function. The speaker’s poetry is only a cruel mockery of language when “il n’y a plus rien à dire.” He wonders if the beloved prefers “la dignité de silence” (the dignity of silence) (68/69), but continues speaking despite his doubt—by its

nature, the poem demands his speech. The poem resists silence even as it ascribes it to the beloved, dramatizing the interplay between silence and speech that underlies the tension of Laâbi's apocalyptic consciousness. As in "Le soleil se meurt," the poem constructs a space—an island—that temporarily withstands the disintegration of the world around it. While in "Le soleil se meurt" that space collapses with the conclusion of the poem, "Les écroulements" finds a way to sustain it through the agency and violent resurgence of the spoken word.

The questions slowly build to a climax as the beloved's lack of response, rather than driving the poet to silent despair, incites him to more and more frenzied speech. He wonders if she intentionally spurs him on when he asks, "veux-tu attiser encore plus en moi la parole/me faire vaticiner, blasphémer?" (do you want to fan the flames of words in me/to make me prophecy, blaspheme?) (76/77). Silence creates speech here, particularly speech that is supercharged with meaning (prophecy, blasphemy) and possibility. The comma between these two extremes functions as a rapprochement, undermining their difference. For the poet driven to desperation, any type of language will serve to break the oppressive silence, whether sacred or profane. Unlike with the frustrated prophecy of "Le soleil se meurt," here the poet-as-prophet will "refaire avec les mots ce que les hommes/ont défait avec les mots" (do again with words what men/have undone with words) and "retrouver sens à ce qui s'est ligué contre le sens" (discover again meaning in what has joined forces against meaning) (76/77). Words become the double agents of the poet's resistance, turned away from their destructive purposes for a project of restoration. "Refaire," translated here as "do again," could also be translated as "remake," a process

not just of re-action but of re-creation. Humanity has used words to tear down and destroy and has destroyed them in the process, resulting in the dissolution of language and complete breakdown of communication. Now, words take on agency to rebuild language. This process plays on the double meaning of “sens” as both meaning and feeling, extending restoration beyond language to the sensing body and the sensed environment. As the poem continues, word, body, and environment merge in the figure of *parole*, the autonomous speech of the poet.

After the turning point in which silence motivates speech, the poem becomes a ritualized invocation of the poet’s *parole*. He instructs it to go, to burn, to wash words “traînés dans la boue” (dragged through the muck) (76/77) in a reimagining of the Abrahamic flood. Here, apocalypse resumes its enchanted meaning as a location of regeneration and redemption. The return of *parole* constitutes a sort of counter-apocalypse to the environmental and humanitarian catastrophes that the speaker has witnessed, a cleansing flood with the potential to redeem humanity. Laâbi figures *parole* as a vengeful and beneficent god who purifies language and allows the speaker to speak “corps entier” (with my whole body) (78/79), in contrast with the images of bodily violation and dissolution seen elsewhere in the poems. The speaker commands his *parole* to “délie-moi/délire-moi/rends à ma langue ses langues perdues” (untie me/unleash me/give back to my tongue its lost tongues) (76/77). Speech is the liberating force that, in circular fashion, allows the poet to speak. Laâbi plays with the pun of “délire”— translated here as unleash—which can mean to become delirious, to rave, or to un-read. *Parole* restores meaning, but it is not orderly or tidy, and involves a process of un-

reading, or un-learning, the dominant discourse. Through his *parole* the speaker accesses the deeper, originary meanings of the “langues perdues,” reminiscent of the “langue archaïque de l’âme” (38). The verbal and the bodily unite in the double use of the word “langue” as both the organ and the language. *Parole* restores both to the speaker.

In other poems, *parole* offers a fainter, but still palpable, resistance to the silencing impulse of the apocalypse. “Éloge de la défaite” concludes with an address to “les vaincus de tous les temps” (the vanquished of all times) (26/27), encouraging them: “N’écoutez rien/racontez” (Write nothing/tell) and to leave the writing to the conquerors. Instead, “Parlez au-dessus de la haine/de la rancœur/Couvrez les de vos voix prophétiques” (Speak above hatred/above rancor/Cover them with your prophetic voices) (28/29). Here, Laâbi creates the possibility of redemption for at least some of humanity: the oppressed and vanquished. Rather than the poet, the masses become prophets instead, imbued with the power to restore meaning to the shattered language. Again, Laâbi connects *parole* to the body and nature, pronouncing: “Qu’elle se déverse de vos lèvres/tantôt miel/tantôt coloquinte” (Let it flow from your lips/now honey/now colocynth) (28/29). Words fill the mouth like honey—a religious image of plenty—or drape from it like a climbing vine. Laâbi represents a union of body, environment, and word, facilitated by the speech of the oppressed. This harmony, though, remains fleeting, and the poem concludes with the image of planetary extinction “faute d’amour” (for lack of love) (28/29). The potential of words to redeem humanity is always tentative, and Laâbi offers many reasons why the human race should not be saved.

Conclusion

“Les écroulements” ends with a utopic vision that unites language, nature, and the human body in the ambiguous space of the island. The delirious, raging return of the speaker’s *parole* ends with “un rêve[...]menu” ([...]a tiny/dream) (12/13) that finds the speaker and his beloved reveling in the sensation of their bodies:

nos pouls qui battent paisiblement[...]
sur l’empan de notre île
avec une nouvelle provision de mots
un peu d’eau douce
quelques fruits
en sachant que notre esquif est de ce monde
qui s’écroule autour de nous
en nous (89)

our pulses peacefully beating[...]
on the span of our island
with a new supply of words
a little fresh water
some fruits
knowing that our skiff is of this world
crumbling around us
within us (89)

Each of the previously polluted elements is purified here: the “pouls” of the human body, the “eau douce” and “fruits” of the environment, and the “nouvelle provision de mots” to replace the beloved’s silence. The speaker reclaims his renounced humanity, both in the restitution of his body and in his acknowledgment that the world is crumbling “autour de nous/en nous”—he is in the world and of the world. This conclusion does not completely abandon the despair that characterizes the earlier part of the poem, but it does offer a sense of holistic acceptance.

This moment functions as a microcosm of these three poems and the ways in

which they evoke Laâbi's apocalyptic consciousness. The island, like the poem, is a liminal space where despair and hope co-exist. The destruction of the environment and the body—as well as the corresponding moral collapse of humanity—are acknowledged, but tentatively restituted by the poet's individual connection with his beloved. Here, we see a new avenue for reform, based not only in political action, but in personal acts of love. Laâbi's poems push us to ask how we can read other works of "poésie engagée" both for their political commitments and for their aesthetic and poetic innovations. In a future project, I hope to examine how other Maghrebi poets engage with this idea of apocalypse and its productive tension between pessimism and optimism, ending and continuation. Laâbi keeps this final moment on the island intentionally ambiguous as to whether it represents a utopic delusion or a realizable future, but the fact of the poet's writing insists on a continued existence, however brief or tenuous. Laâbi makes no claims to redemption for all of humanity, but on the tiny island of the poem, language temporarily forestalls the end.

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